



From the Courtroom to the Court

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Category: LGBT+

Description: After hanging up her professional racket, Leah Walker, with a superficial and long-distance relationship with another tennis player, has built an orderly life running her own tennis club. She doesn't need anything else. Or so she believes until she arrives.

Emily Harris: clumsy, straightforward, and with a contagious smile. Emily is a lawyer who dominates in the courtroom but can't take two steps on a court without tripping.

While the lawyer struggles to overcome the ghosts of a past betrayal, Leah is torn between the comfort of her current relationship and the excitement of her feelings for Emily. What begins as simple tennis lessons soon becomes a game where the rules change at every moment.

In parallel, Mia, Leah's assistant, and Emma, Emily's cousin, maintain a war of egos that hides an undeniable attraction.

When the custody of Mia's brother hangs by a thread, the four women will form an unexpected team, defying expectations and discovering that when love arrives, nothing can be done to stop it.

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The air brushes her cheeks and her hands grow damper. She stops, wipes them vigorously, then runs her right arm across her face, using her wristband to clean the sweat from her forehead. She's been on this court for three hours and twenty-three minutes, her muscles throbbing, fatigue attacking her from all sides.

The roar of the crowd is deafening, but at this moment, as she prepares to serve, everyone maintains silence, expectant. It's the final match of the open tournament being played in Australia at the Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne Park. The tension hangs thick; the blue of the court seems to shine brighter than ever, screaming, perhaps, that this will be the last time she steps on it.

Leah Walker positions herself at the baseline, takes a deep breath, filling her lungs as much as they allow. She focuses on feeling the grip of her racket, every muscle in her body, every scar that tells her story. A story of triumphs and joys, but also of defeats, pain, tears, and tremendous effort. She breathes in again, she can feel it; this will be the last point of her entire career.

Match point.

She serves with that precision she's spent so many years perfecting, for which she's known worldwide. A sliced forehand that forces her opponent, Dana Wilson, to bend with effort and return the shot with power. Leah watches the ball, ready to move. She does so with an elegance worthy of a veteran athlete and with the fierceness of an elite champion. She takes several steps, distributes her body weight on her feet, and returns a drive like a missile, with all her strength, with all her heart.

The ball kisses the line and Dana Wilson isn't there to lose. She runs and reaches it in

the last second, with little strength, the only she can apply, and the ball barely brushes the net.

A faint sound is heard, that of the audience holding their breath.

Leah Walker runs from the back of the court with every muscle screaming in pain. It doesn't matter, it's the last of her career, of that entire story that began when she was just a girl. Of endless training sessions, of coaches giving lessons, of travels, of solitude. Because Leah has loved tennis since she first became aware; her earliest memory is a court, feeling the rough surface with her hands. Then, the dry thud of the ball, the sun on her face, the sweat on her body. That's why she runs as if it were the most important thing in her existence. It is the most important thing in her existence, to leave this place through the front door, to retire as one of the greatest in history.

She hits the ball at an almost impossible angle; her coach turns her neck to understand the play. Leah leaves the ball suspended in the air for a moment, an eternal one, one that would be etched forever before that yellow sphere kisses the doubles line.

Winner. That's what it means. Leah Walker has just won the final.

Her legs lose all strength. Her muscles relax and she falls to her knees. She's no longer exhausted; she has just scored the final point of her story as a tennis player. Melbourne Park goes wild, shaking the court like never before, giving a farewell to the champion, the best. Leah brings her hands to her face and finds it completely soaked; it's not sweat, no. They're tears, it's effort, it's the weight of closing what for her is an entire life.

It's the end. The moment she's been preparing for over the past year has arrived. Leah suffered a most painful meniscus tear followed by a rotator cuff tear. The second she felt the sharp stab in her shoulder, the voice inside screamed that it was time to stop.

She thought about it for weeks. She cried every day when she decided to do it. Anne and Natalie, her mothers, hugged her when Leah went to see them and broke down telling them she would announce her retirement. She couldn't go on, her body was exhausted. She spoke with her coach and together they decided that tennis would never forget her name. She did it well; Leah Walker retired in grand style, defeating one of the best players in the world, Dana Wilson, with a spectacular play, with a court packed with people, with all television cameras focused on her.

It's the end, yes, but also immortality.

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The June sun beats down mercilessly on the Walker Elite Sport Club, the tennis club Leah Walker founded after retiring from a brilliant career at thirty-five.

Located on the outskirts of Charleston, the club sprawls across extensive grounds surrounded by century-old oak trees and meticulously maintained gardens.

Inside, a spacious lobby with high ceilings and wooden floors exudes exclusivity. A black marble counter serves as reception, where the staff, always impeccable and led by her mothers, attends to members with discretion. On one wall, a large display case showcases Leah's trophies and career mementos, along with photographs documenting her journey through the world's most prestigious tournaments.

She now teaches anyone who wants to learn regardless of their level, because Leah believes what's important about tennis, like all sports, is that you enjoy it. For this purpose, the club features eight high-end tennis courts: five clay and three hard surface, all illuminated for night games.

It also has two indoor courts with climate control technology and cushioned floors for training regardless of weather. A training zone with ball machines and video analysis helps players perfect their technique. Plus a spa where members can relax after matches or lessons. In short, the club has everything any tennis enthusiast could desire, and Leah loves continuing to dedicate her life to what she enjoys most.

And there she stands, finishing one of those lessons, the last one of the afternoon. Across the net from her is Alison Young, a fourteen-year-old girl whose parents enrolled her in the club to keep her occupied after school, who's turning out to be a prodigy and potential rising star. The girl started purely for fun and now only wishes

for the moment she can compete.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the humidity this time of year is unbearable. Leah loves living here, but the summer months drag on endlessly. Sweat trickles down her back, soaks the base of her ponytail, and plasters her shirt to her skin, making her feel uncomfortable. Her racquet grip is damp and though she constantly dries it with a towel, it always returns to its sticky state. But none of that matters. The training session isn't over yet, and she focuses solely on Alison's movements.

"Come on, Alison. Two more," she commands with an authoritative voice.

Leah tosses the ball above her head and hits it with a crisp, powerful serve that makes her racquet cut through the air with a hum.

Alison moves sluggishly. Her sneakers squeak on the scorching court as she chases the ball until she reaches it, but the return shot is weak and lackluster, listless. The ball doesn't even clear the net, and Leah twists her mouth into a grimace.

"What was that, Alison? Use your legs. It's not enough to stretch your arm like the racquet is a fishing net."

Alison lets out an exasperated huff and straightens up, panting. She's as red as a traffic light, with sweat dripping from her chin and temples. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand and looks at Leah with a pleading expression.

"I'm dying here," she suddenly says. "It's hellishly hot, Leah. We've been at it for almost two hours, couldn't we call it a day?"

"We have five minutes left," Leah says, unfazed. "Five minutes in which you can make one last effort and use them, or you can waste them. Your choice."

Alison sighs, but positions herself again because her goal is to be like the woman standing before her. Leah sends another ball, this time shorter. The young girl lunges forward and, though she gets there in time, hits a lob that sails over Leah's head and lands deep in the court.

"Knees bent, Alison! Don't just bend over, move your body into it!" Leah shakes her head as she watches, surprised by Alison's continuous mistakes. "If you don't fix that, a good opponent will make you run until your legs shake. And in a real match, you can't call time-out because you're hot."

Alison clicks her tongue and mutters something unintelligible.

"Excuse me?" Leah asks, lowering her racquet with an amused expression.

The young girl sighs with frustration, and Leah wipes her forehead as she approaches the net.

"I'm sorry," Alison apologizes, "I just can't take anymore."

"Okay," Leah concedes, aware that sometimes she's very intense, but knowing that if Alison wants to go far, she must be consistent. "I'll let it slide today because this sun seems determined to finish us off, but you know that in a match, you can't stop because you're tired or feeling weak. Here, drink some water," she says, handing her a bottle.

Alison pours it over herself, and Leah lets out a small laugh. The young girl's expression changes, as if suddenly resurrected, and she starts bouncing on her feet.

"I can keep going, if you want, ten more minutes the five I lost plus five extra."

Leah blinks in bewilderment as she watches her retreat to the back of the court as if

someone wound her up. She empties another bottle of water over herself, but the liquid doesn't have the same effect on her as it did on her student, reviving her energy. She's exhausted; the heat is killing her. Then she reminds herself with a smile spreading across her face as she positions herself on her side of the court that she isn't fourteen like Alison—she's thirty-eight, and doesn't have energy to spare like the girl does.

"You did really well," Leah says when the class finally ends. "See you Tuesday."

She fans her shirt in a desperate attempt to get air flowing over her body as the young girl walks away and Mia Clark approaches, a twenty-five-year-old club employee whom Leah loves like a little sister.

"You look tired," Mia says as she starts collecting the balls scattered across the court.

"I'm wishing for death right now," Leah says, sitting on the bench for a few seconds while packing her racquets in her bag.

"You should build more indoor courts. Those two are always occupied, and training in this heat isn't good," Mia observes while continuing her work.

Leah stretches her toned, sun-bronzed legs while resting her hands on the edge of the bench.

"Yes, you're right. I'll talk to my mothers about handling it. We could build two more in that area, behind the storage shed," the tennis player says, though deep down, she likes these training sessions and knows they're important. In an open tournament, the sun shows no mercy, and you need to train for that too. "Have you talked to Aaron?" she changes the subject, asking about Mia's little brother.

Mia empties the tube full of balls into the cart and continues collecting.

"Last night, to tell him I'll pick him up directly from school this Friday. I spoke with his foster mother and she was fine with it," she says, pressing her lips together in a grimace.

"That's great, Mia," Leah says.

"Yeah," Mia smiles at her. "You should go shower. It's getting late, and if we don't make it on time, Natalie will kill us."

Leah checks the time on her watch and jumps up.

"Damn," she mutters nervously. "I didn't realize it was so late."

Mia laughs and approaches her.

"Go. I'll finish collecting all this. I'll wait for you in the car."

Leah dashes toward the shower while calculating. She knows they have time to get to the restaurant where they're meeting her mothers. It's one of their birthdays, Natalie's, the older of the two. She's turning sixty-five, and her other mother wanted to celebrate at the restaurant where they always go as a family for any important event.

The family has always been the three of them—Anne, Natalie, and Leah, whom they adopted when she was six—until four years ago when she met Mia under somewhat complicated circumstances. Leah not only gave her a job but grew fond of her until she practically became her protégée, and her mothers have welcomed her as another member of the family.

They arrive at the restaurant just in time to find the two women at the door. Leah hugs them both at once, congratulates her mother despite having done so already at the club this morning after stopping by their office to say hello, where they both work

handling management after insisting to Leah that it was better they do it than someone unfamiliar. The tennis player would have preferred her mothers to enjoy a relaxed retirement that they can afford, but they say they'd get bored and prefer to be there, close to her.

"Shall we go in?" Anne asks, putting an arm around Mia's shoulders.

Leah loves this restaurant, located in a historic Victorian-style house with a large terrace and a cozy porch that combines Southern tradition with a modern touch.

Upon entering, the exposed wooden beams and brick walls create a warm, sophisticated atmosphere that makes them feel at home. The hanging lamps emit a soft light, perfect for the family evening they intend to enjoy.

From her seat by a window, Leah can see the cobblestone street illuminated by antique lanterns, with the night breeze gently rustling the oak leaves a breeze she would have appreciated having while training under that merciless sun this afternoon.

"Do you know what you're going to order?" Anne asks, looking at the menu through her thick-framed glasses.

"Leah needs some energy. Alison drained her dry," Mia jokes, eliciting hearty laughter from all the women.

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"I object, Your Honor," attorney Emily Harris says with firmness and a tone that leaves no doubt about what she's about to say. "That statement has no foundation whatsoever. Mr. Robinson is making a claim about my client's intentions without presenting any concrete evidence to support it."

The lawyer assigned to the case, Dan Robinson, lets out an involuntary snort. They've been going down this same path throughout the entire trial, and he's starting to get fed up. From the moment they assigned him the case and told him the defense attorney would be Emily Harris, he knew with certainty that the criminal proceedings would be, literally, a bloodbath. The only daughter of well-known attorneys George and Bilma Harris is one of the best in the country. At thirty-five, she possesses impeccable knowledge of criminal and corporate law, capable of reciting from memory whatever articles of law she wishes to present without missing a single comma. Daniel Mercer, the defendant, is a highly influential businessman from South Carolina accused by the state of fraud and embezzlement. According to the prosecution, the man diverted millions of dollars from the company to buy luxurious yachts and apartments in the Caribbean. Emily has been relentless and, throughout the trial so far, has presented evidence refuting each of the opposing party's complaints.

"Mr. Mercer's mistake was trusting his partners, but is that a crime?" Emily asks. "We've seen documents confirming that my client is nothing more than the victim of partners who manipulated him within his own company."

The attorney straightens some documents on the table.

"The prosecution's task was clear: prove beyond all reasonable doubt that he

committed a crime," says the lawyer, pointing for a tenth of a second at the attorney. "It's clear they've failed. Daniel Mercer legally purchased all his assets with the profits his company has generated year after year. He's paid all his taxes and contributed to society. He's an exemplary citizen, and this is nothing more than a witch hunt."

Emily finishes her closing argument, and attorney Robinson clenches his teeth. He's a seasoned man, and it feels like a kick to the liver for Emily to embarrass him this way. He watches as she takes her seat next to her client, whispers something in his ear, and they both smile discreetly. All that remains is to wait for the judge's decision.

After a brief recess, everyone returns to the courtroom to hear the decision about Daniel Mercer's future. Emily is calm, confident, first because she fully believes in her client and knows he's innocent, and second because the opposing party has done nothing but present absurd evidence without any foundation. She's certain the presiding judge had to restrain himself from suspending this circus on multiple occasions.

"Attorneys, Mr. Mercer, the court has reached its decision. On the charge of corporate fraud and embezzlement, I find the defendant: not guilty."

Emily smiles and stands up. Daniel Mercer shakes her hand emotionally while thanking her for her work. It's been a hellish few months, and thanks to her, it's all over.

"Harris," Robinson spits out without saying anything more. He grabs the folders from the table he occupied and turns around, angry, with a furrowed brow.

Emily leaves the courtroom and walks through the hallways of the Charleston County Courthouse. She can't help but observe it as always, with curiosity. It's an imposing structure that reminds her of those buildings she saw in photos when she was in

college, marble floors so polished you can see your reflection. Everything in that place is solemnity and bureaucracy, with its vaulted ceiling and wooden benches distributed along the wide corridors.

Attorney Harris exits the building, and Charleston's humid air fills her nostrils, carrying with it the briny aroma of the nearby port. She earns glances from some passersby, as Emily doesn't go unnoticed with her military green tailored suit, her black heels, and her leather briefcase of the same color. Her hair is pulled back in a high ponytail, she always styles it the same way when she has a trial, and adorns herself with few pieces of jewelry that give her a sophisticated air.

"Congratulations, counselor," says a tall woman who walks toward her with exquisite elegance. "Looks like you really gave Dan Robinson a run for his money."

Emily smiles and approaches Bilma, her mother and also the owner of Harris for her, sitting still is the closest thing to torture.

"What were you doing at the courthouse?"

"Filing a petition with Judge Ford," Bilma answers and wrinkles her nose. "That woman gives me the creeps."

Emily lets out a laugh.

"Me too. Ever since she kicked Dad out of that trial years ago, it seems the Harrises aren't exactly her favorite people," Emily concludes, certain that Andrea Ford hates them all equally.

They turn down one of the streets; Harris she already knows what's coming. The young attorney positions herself, centers her legs, and visualizes the ball without looking at anything else; she's so focused that she wouldn't turn her head even if there

was an explosion, something very unusual for her. She pulls her foot back slightly and forcefully kicks the ball. The ball shoots off to one side and goes into the road, completely opposite to where it should go. Her heel falls near her mother's legs, and Emily would almost lose her balance if Bilma—accustomed to her daughter's sporting blunders—didn't hold her firmly. She laughs heartily because these little things give Emily life. She hears how the children laugh too, and she continues, infected by their mirth.

"For God's sake, honey," Bilma says as she helps her stabilize and then picks up her shoe.

"I almost got it," Emily replies, breathless but happy.

Her mother says nothing; it's a waste of time. Emily's love for sports is infinite, and she's so bad at them that it generates a kind of tenderness.

"Although soccer is the sport I'm worst at," Emily continues talking as they walk. "You'll see how I'll do better at tennis." She steps forward and makes a gesture as if she had a racket in her hand. She trips again. Her mother holds her steady.

"I hope at least you'll go to a decent club where they teach you properly," her mother huffs at her daughter's energetic face. "Don't even think about going to some dump."

"All clubs are good," Emily corrects her. "It's just that not all teaching methods work for me. I've decided on Walker's; a client who's thrilled with it recommended it to me."

Bilma nods and hopes that this time her daughter will actually learn something. Sometimes her motherly instinct makes her want to shut down all those places that have done nothing but take Emily's money once they realize the poor woman is incapable of coordinating her body with any other instrument. But then she sees her

happy, telling her how it went and what she did, and decides not to interfere in her life. Emily is a relentless attorney, a hopeless klutz at sports, and the most cheerful woman she knows.

The doors of Harris a statement of power and prestige. George and Bilma Harris occupy the first floor along with other more senior partners.

"See you later?" Bilma asks her daughter when she exits the elevator.

"I'll stop by your office before I leave," the younger of the two says as a farewell.

Emily exits the elevator on the second floor, her floor, where attorneys specializing in criminal, corporate, commercial, civil, and labor law share an open space with spacious cubicles, although she has her own office. Additionally, she has a small legal library that Bilma had installed during the last renovation about four years ago. On the next three floors are meeting rooms, comfortable sofas, an entertainment room, and a dining area. Emily Harris loves her job, but above all, her family's firm.

"Look who's gracing us with her presence," a female voice greets with confidence, following Emily to her office. "Here, you've earned it after giving old Dan Robinson such a beating."

Emily's eyes light up, and she extends her arm to receive a large transparent plastic cup with writing on it: the best attorney.

"God, this is so good," the attorney blurts out, closing her eyes after sucking a good amount of her drink through the straw.

The other woman wrinkles her nose and drinks from her chai tea.

"I don't know where you put all that sugar you consume. If I drank that, I'd gain

several pounds before finishing it."

Emily looks at her cousin and rolls her eyes, always exaggerating everything. Emma Harris is like the sister she never had; they're only five years apart, although often Emma seems older. She's obsessed with beauty, a snob who can sometimes be unbearable because, after mingling with South Carolina's wealthiest people, Emma can be a woman who puts appearances before anything else. This doesn't affect Emily—not much—because she knows her cousin and also colleague has an immense heart that barely fits in her chest. She's smart, kind, and a good attorney; that said, unlike Emily, she studied law to follow the family legacy and not out of passion like she did. She doesn't mind practicing, but she's not passionate about it either. She takes simple cases, helps her cousin with the complicated ones, and lives happily in her glass bubble.

"You know I don't count calories, much less limit myself to what I like to eat," Emily answers and goes back to enjoying her shake of coffee, vanilla milk, and salted caramel with a tower of whipped cream on top. "I prefer to exercise and move as much as I can so I can enjoy these delights."

"And that's considering how bad you are at sports," Emma says in a mocking tone, showing off the dark humor they both always have. "If you were at least good at one, you'd have a magazine-cover body."

Emily finishes the shake in one go and runs her tongue over her upper lip, licking the remaining cream. She looks up and gives a crooked smile.

"What I'm really good at is fucking," she says, and Emma opens her eyes in horror before starting to laugh. "That's how I burn calories and stay this gorgeous."

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"Great backhand, Andrew," Leah compliments one of the three children she's teaching that afternoon. "Okay, we're done for today. You can keep practicing on this court until your father comes to pick you up, Oliver," she adds, checking her watch.

The three kids always come together, dropped off and picked up by one of their parents, always taking turns. When it's Oliver's father's turn, he's always late, so Leah usually keeps that court free for an extra hour to keep them entertained while they wait.

Leah leaves the kids on the court, wipes the sweat with her towel and peels her shirt away from her back, feeling relief when a gentle breeze passes between her skin and clothes. She takes a couple gulps of water to cool down, picks up her bag and heads toward the main building to find out which court her next class is on. Anne and Natalie, her mothers, wait for her there, along with what she appreciates most on these summer afternoons—the air conditioning.

"Put this on before you catch a cold," says Anne, approaching her with a thin sports jacket that Leah eyes with horror.

"Give me a break, mom, I'm roasting," she says, sitting in one of the padded reception chairs lined up next to the glass wall, directly in front of the air conditioner.

Leah stretches out her bare legs and slouches as if she's about to faint. Natalie lets out a laugh, but Anne doesn't yield, always excessively worried.

"Put it on, I said," she insists, holding the garment in the air.

Leah sighs and takes it from her hands while sitting up to put it on.

"What do I have now?" she asks, approaching the counter where Natalie checks the schedule on the computer screen.

"A new student. Around your age, her name is Emily. Very nice," her mother notes, pushing up her glasses. "She just wants to learn as a hobby. Apparently, she loves tennis but is terrible at it. When she came to sign up, she mentioned she couldn't return a ball without tripping, and if she did, she'd send it flying off the court."

Her mothers laugh with complicity as they remember.

"I don't know if it's true or if she was exaggerating," Anne adds, "but she told it with such humor that it seemed real."

"Nobody can be that bad at playing," Leah says, checking the time on her sports watch. "Where's Mia?"

"In the storage room checking equipment. You know she can't stand doing nothing, and since Oliver's father hasn't arrived, she can't prep the court yet," Natalie replies.

"Fine." Leah takes off the jacket and hands it to her mother. "I'll go find her and we'll go meet this Emily. Which court is it?"

"Six."

Leah exits the building and heads straight to the storage room. She finds Mia sorting out used tennis balls, placing them in a basket that once a month a guy picks up to distribute to various animal shelters for dogs to play with.

"Let's go, Mia. We have a new student. Apparently she's quite a beginner, so bring a

couple of rackets just in case. I don't know if she'll bring her own," the coach says.

Mia obeys. She selects a couple from those available for clients and leaves with Leah.

"Which court is it?" Mia also asks.

"Six. My moms say she's pretty bad at playing," Leah says, summarizing what they just told her.

"I don't know if she's bad, but she's definitely punctual," Mia says, pointing to court six as they approach.

Leah looks up and sees her. Emily stands on one side of the court holding the racket in one hand while bouncing the ball with the other. She has blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, is tall with pronounced curves, and although she doesn't appear to be in shape, her overall figure is striking because she radiates positive energy that's visible from a distance.

She seems about to serve, but when she raises her racket to hit the ball, the last bounce against the ground hits her shoe and the ball rolls flat across the court as Emily watches in disbelief, drops her racket, and sighs while chasing after it. Mia lets out a soft laugh and Leah holds back her laughter as they continue approaching.

Emily reaches the ball and steps on it to stop it, but instead of bending down to pick it up, she decides to tap it with her racket as she's seen many people do, making the ball bounce until she can catch it with her hand.

"Is she trying to murder it?" Mia says, unable to stop laughing.

Leah elbows her, but a chuckle escapes as they stop right at the court entrance. Emily persists and the ball seems about to rise, so she delivers another hit. When she gathers

momentum for the next swing, she lifts the racket too high and it smacks her in the face, causing her to yelp in pain and fall on her butt.

"Damn, she really is bad," Mia blurts out as Leah stares in disbelief, still processing what just happened.

She drops her bag and runs into the court, crouching next to Emily.

"Are you okay?" she asks, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Emily raises her head and removes her hands from her face. Leah's eyes widen when she sees Emily's face covered in blood. She saw the direct hit but didn't think it was that hard.

"Wow, you've busted your nose," she says and gestures to Mia. "Bring me a clean towel from the bag. Are you dizzy?" she asks while Emily examines her hands.

"I'm fine, but my eyes are watering," Emily laments, blinking. "It hurts..."

Leah can't help smiling as she takes the towel and carefully wipes away the blood.

"It doesn't look serious. Let's go to the first aid room. I'll clean you up and put some cotton in to stop the bleeding."

"What about the training?" Emily asks as Leah and Mia help her stand up.

"I'm afraid we'll have to skip it today. You can't train like this," Leah says and watches Emily's expression transform into a disappointed grimace that seems to hurt her more than the blow.

She walks with Emily to the first aid room while Mia cleans up the blood from the

court and prepares it for the next class. Emily sits in a chair and lets Leah clean her with a damp towel and insert the cotton.

"That's it," the coach says. "Does it hurt a lot? I can get you some ice."

"No, it's fine, thanks," Emily says. "I think we can still train."

Leah raises an eyebrow, amused as she observes Emily with her light blue polo shirt covered in blood stains, her skirt dirty, cotton in her red and slightly swollen nose, and her tearful eyes.

"Let's get something at the bar instead. It'll be good for you to sit for a while, and I have time until my next class. I'm Leah, by the way," she says, extending her hand.

Emily looks at her for the first time. Until now, she's barely noticed her because embarrassment prevented it, but now that they're here face to face, she doesn't hesitate to give her a quick once-over while shaking her hand. Her toned body and tanned skin immediately catch her attention. She also likes her serene expression amid the brown strands escaping from what she's sure was once a perfect ponytail, but what strikes her most is the way Leah looks at her, as if she doesn't care that Emily's a klutz unable to bounce a ball. Leah doesn't judge her, and although Emily cares very little about what others think of her, she's had to get used to always being the target of laughter and jokes, and appreciates not being Leah's.

"Sounds good," she accepts and stands up smiling.

Leah startles at Emily's sudden movement, fearing she might get dizzy, but the lawyer brushes off her skirt and stands tall as if nothing happened, making Leah smile with fascination.

"Have you been working here as a coach for long?" Emily asks as soon as they sit at

one of the terrace tables, under a huge umbrella that protects them from the sun and allows the breeze to cool them.

Leah looks at her, surprised. Although she's a very humble woman, she's used to most people who come to her club recognizing her or even signing up just to meet her in person, but Emily clearly has no idea who she is, and she likes that. She loves being able to present herself to someone as just Leah, not as the accomplished tennis player.

"About three years," the tennis player responds.

Emily leans forward while looking around, and Leah gets the feeling she's about to confess some secret.

"You must earn a good salary with the outrageous membership fee they charge monthly," she says with a little laugh.

Leah catches the humor. Emily seems like the most transparent person she's ever met.

"Well, I can't complain," she says simply. "And you? What do you do?"

"I'm a lawyer. I work at my family's firm, and obviously, I'm much better at that than playing sports," she says with an almost arrogant smile and confidence that fascinates Leah with each new detail she discovers about Emily. "Give me a well-pressed suit and a solid case, and I swear I feel like Roger Federer with a racket in his hand. Precise, unbeatable, and ready to send my opponent across the court with a perfect backhand."

Leah lets out a low whistle that makes Emily laugh and suddenly blush.

"Well, I hope you won't sue the club after that racket hit," Leah says, pointing to her nose while leaning forward.

Emily lets out a small laugh, so genuine that Leah wonders if the woman before her is real or a mirage created to give her some of the most interesting minutes of her life.

"If I had to file lawsuits against every place where my butt has kissed the ground without my permission, the entire county would be bankrupt, and I'd be drinking daiquiris on a private beach, funded by settlements for slips and falls caused by my clumsiness. Though I'm so good at convincing juries, they'd end up believing that in each and every place, there was an oil slick that made me slip."

Leah can't stop laughing. She reclines in her chair while staring at Emily who, infected by what she finds to be musical laughter, gets encouraged and continues exaggerating until Mia feels obliged to interrupt them.

"Sorry, but Alison is waiting for you on court five," she says, looking at Leah.

The tennis player checks the time on her watch and is astonished to realize how quickly time has flown by with Emily.

"Tell her I'll be right there, Mia. Thanks."

"Okay."

"I have to leave you," Leah says, standing up. "Are you feeling well enough to go home? I can ask Mia to drive you."

"Don't worry, I'm perfectly fine," Emily thanks her with a smile as she stands up. "So, we'll see each other at the next class? I promise not to touch the racket until you arrive."

Leah smiles again and says goodbye with a wave of her hand as Emily watches her walk away, thinking she could spend the entire day joking around if it means

continuing to see that smile.

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Mia Clark paces the sidewalk, walking back and forth with her usual nervousness. While waiting, she runs through her mental checklist, the same one as always. Rent paid. Savings transferred to the investment account, and the courthouse signature, completed. Mia is twenty-five, but Leah Walker always tells her she seems much older, constantly worried about everything, trying not to let anything slip through the cracks and keeping her life quite orderly. It has to be that way; Mia hasn't had it easy, and if she wants to keep Aaron by her side, she must maintain control over everything.

The door opens and Mia's heart speeds up, as usual. Through it comes a fourteen-year-old boy, with the same dark hair color as hers and a captivating smile that Mia knows will break many hearts. An older woman raises her hand and waves to the young woman, who returns it warmly, though her gaze quickly returns to the young man. "Hello," she greets the boy and they melt into an endless embrace. Mia feels at home when she has Aaron in her arms. Nothing makes her happier. "I'm glad to see you." "I missed you, Mia," answers Aaron, who remains pressed against his sister's body. "Me too," replies the young woman, who can barely contain her tears. This happens every time they're together, two weekends a month when Mia is the most smiling woman in the universe. "Are we going to the club?" asks Aaron when they separate and start walking. He carries a backpack with a couple changes of clothes to spend two days with his sister. "Yes, we'll eat there, then we have the hockey game."

Aaron stops dead in his tracks and turns his head to focus on his sister. A smile begins to appear on his face until it covers his entire face. Like Mia, he loves all sports, but his favorites are tennis and hockey. They've been trying to attend one of those ice games for a long time without luck. Sometimes tickets sell out the same day they go on sale, or the remaining ones are those typical VIP tickets that cost an arm

and a leg, and one thing Mia knows is how to manage her money, so she doesn't part with it easily. This time, she woke up early and went directly to buy the tickets. She was the first to arrive and secured two tickets to enjoy a game of the Stingrays, Aaron's favorite team. "Are you serious?" asks Aaron excitedly. "Dead serious," Mia replies.

The young boy jumps on her and shouts as if he'd won the lottery. His sister means everything to him, always attentive, loving, and thoughtful with these gestures he enjoys so much. Aaron wishes he could live with her, and every night, with his foster mother, when they pray, he silently asks for his wish to come true.

The siblings walk through the less touristy streets of Charleston, away from the colonial mansions. The area stretches with its mix of modest houses and family businesses that have withstood the test of time. Mia loses herself in her thoughts; she likes the place, the air smells like a combination of sea, freshly brewed coffee, and bread. The houses differ from those in the other part of the city where she lives; here they're a bit dilapidated, some with peeling paint and shutters warped by persistent humidity. Everything is very clean, the neighborhood people are civilized, and she likes that: good manners before money. "What about your car?" asks Aaron when, two blocks later, they get into the vehicle. Mia never manages to park any closer. "It's in the shop, due for maintenance, and they were supposed to deliver it yesterday," she answers and adjusts her seatbelt. She starts the engine and feels the small rumble. She loves that car. "Leah has good taste," points out the boy. The car belongs to the tennis player and, although it's not the typical luxury vehicle that millionaires like her drive, it's high-end, dark, and very comfortable.

Mia drives cautiously—as always—while heading to Walker Elite Sport Club. She's been working there for four years, practically since her life changed. Leah gave her an opportunity that she promised not to waste, and she can't help but ruminate on the question that always appears suddenly in her mind: what would have become of her if she hadn't run into Leah Walker? Though "run into" is a euphemism; her story with

the club owner is more complex. "Can we play today?" asks Aaron when Mia enters the club.

His sister shakes her head and maneuvers to park. "There won't be time, but before you go back home, I promise we'll play a match."

Home, thinks Mia. It should be where she lives and not the foster home where her brother sleeps every day. At least Dalia and Peter are good parents, they love Aaron, care for him, and worry about him, making her feel more at ease. A shiver runs through her as she remembers the previous foster parents. Absolute losers.

While they walk through the club to the bar where they're meeting, Aaron gazes at the different courts. He breathes deeply; he loves the smell of gravel when it impacts with sports shoes. The sound of balls hitting rackets and the shouts of those executing a good backhand. He notices Leah is on one of the courts, and Aaron takes Mia's hand to lead her there. Seeing Leah Walker in action is a fantasy. Despite no longer being active, the tennis player still trains daily and, whenever possible, plays friendly matches with any club member who's up for it. Aaron smiles when Leah bounces the ball against the ground; it's her serve. She tosses the ball and hits it directly to the corner of the service box. Her opponent barely reacts but manages to return the ball with a deep return, forcing her to back up. Leah returns it forcefully, and her opponent changes the rhythm; with a slice backhand, she leaves the ball almost touching the net. Leah sprints with all her might and arrives just in time to respond with a subtle touch, leaving the ball even shorter. "Damn," shouts the man Leah is playing with when he's unable to reach the ball.

Leah smiles, wipes her sweat, and approaches him. "You've improved that move, Josh," she tells him and shakes his hand. "Not enough," the man shakes his head and smiles. "Someday I'll beat you."

The tennis player lets out a laugh. Josh is one of the first members who joined her

club when Leah opened its doors. He could barely hold a racket, but at that moment he promised her that one day he would defeat her. He never has, and always, after losing, he repeats the same phrase. "If you keep improving like this, I assure you you'll win," she answers, and Leah's eyes light up when they meet Aaron's curious eyes outside the court. "My favorite boy," she says when she approaches him.

They greet each other affectionately; if Mia is like a sister to Leah, so is Aaron. "That was awesome, Leah," says Aaron, referring to her last play on the court.

Leah smiles while she puts an arm around Aaron's shoulders; the boy always seems impressed by every play. "You're awesome too."

The boy laughs, and Mia watches him, enchanted. Her brother's happiness is her own. "Aaron," says Anne, and Natalie stands up with her wife. "How handsome you look."

Both women also hug him. Without knowing it, he's a very fortunate boy. "Well, did you bring me what I asked for?" asks Leah, sitting at the table after stopping by the locker room to change.

Aaron smiles and nods. Mia narrows her eyes.

The boy puts his backpack on his knees, opens the dark zipper, and takes out a medium-sized white envelope. He extends his arm and hands it to Leah. The club owner removes the document and, with a concentrated look, reviews it from top to bottom until she tilts her head with a proud smile. She returns the paper to Aaron and stands up to go to the bar. Everyone follows her with their eyes, and when Leah turns around, the boy's eyes open wide. "Almost all A's," says Leah, pointing with her finger at the envelope containing Aaron's grades. "You've fulfilled your part, and I'll fulfill mine."

Leah holds a tennis racket that she gives to the boy, who looks at it, impressed. It's

professional-grade, made of graphite and carbon, with a grip that, by its size, will fit Aaron's hand perfectly, with anti-vibration technology that makes it a jewel. "You spoil him too much," says Mia with a smile as she watches her brother touch his new gift. "He deserves it," Leah concludes.

The five of them relax while enjoying the evening. Anne and Natalie show interest in Aaron's stories while Leah asks him several casual questions. They eat, laugh, and spend hours inside the club bar like any other family, a different one, but a family nonetheless.

Mia doesn't say much; she tends to be quieter in these gatherings because she limits herself to listening to what Aaron says. She wants to be a good sister, to be there for him, for when he needs her. Mia's childhood wasn't bad; she can actually categorize it as good. The problem was that her parents were criminals, involved in all kinds of illegal activities: home burglaries, street thefts, scams, and even drug dealing. Mia wasn't fully aware; she was a happy child who went to school and had everything her parents could offer her. She enjoyed family vacations, visited many beautiful places, and received much love. Aaron arrived suddenly, they weren't expecting him, but her mother was very excited. Mia loved him from the moment they met, and her life started to get better until one day they kicked down the door of their house. The police turned everything upside down, took her parents away in handcuffs, and separated her from Aaron. She kicked, bit, and ran very fast when she managed to escape from the officers who explained they would go to different foster homes due to the age difference between them. Mia was sixteen; it wasn't difficult to find her two days later, but that's when her misfortunes began: Mia attacked the police officer who recognized her, and a bad fall caused the officer considerable harm. That was enough for the judge, along with being the daughter of criminals, to send her straight to a juvenile detention center. Her life hasn't been easy, of course not, and yet she doesn't give up. She works harder than anyone, especially because her goal is to gain custody of Aaron, which they've been denying her for years, forcing her brother to live in foster homes. Mia Clark achieves what she sets out to do, even if it resists her,

and she's going to ensure Aaron grows up by her side.

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"You didn't have to come," Emily tells her cousin Emma as they walk toward court number five, which she was told via message is assigned for her training session that afternoon, "but I'm glad you did," she adds, squeezing her against herself. "Afterward we can go to dinner."

"I had to come. Someone needs to make sure you don't smack yourself in the face with a racket again," Emma jokes with a laugh.

She's still crying from laughter when she remembers the moment her cousin walked into her office the next day with a purple line crossing her face from her nose to her right eye to tell her what had happened the previous afternoon during her first disastrous training session. Emma laughed non-stop for ten minutes, and so did Emily.

"Don't make me laugh," Emily complains, "it pulls and makes my eye water," she says, touching her face.

She's wearing a bit of makeup, but even so, that darkened line on her right side is still visible.

"Look, here comes my instructor. Her name is Leah," Emily says when she sees the tennis player approaching the court from the other side, fluffing her shirt to let some air through.

"Damn, no wonder you signed up at this club. She's hot," Emma whistles under her breath.

"I didn't do it for that, dummy," Emily says, bumping her with her shoulder. "I didn't even know who would be training me, but yeah, she's hot and nice. I really liked her," she adds just before they both reach Leah.

"How are you, Emily?" the coach greets with a smile, narrowing her eyes as she observes her face.

"Very good, you can barely notice it," Emily says, touching her nose. "This is my cousin, Emma. She came because she doesn't trust me, in case she needs to take me to the hospital," she jokes, and Leah lets out a spontaneous little laugh before extending a hand toward Emma to greet her.

"I hope that won't be necessary," Leah says.

"Don't be so confident, my cousin's clumsiness knows no bounds," Emma replies, returning Leah's greeting. "Anyway, I'll wait for you over there," she adds, pointing to a wooden bench.

Leah turns to Emily and finds her opening her bag to take out her racket, as if her cousin's comment was the most natural thing.

"Well, I'm ready. Where do we start?" she asks excitedly.

"Okay, first..." Leah says, but stops and looks down. "Alright, first you need to tie the laces on your right shoe."

"Oh, wow, how absent-minded of me," Emily blushes and bends down to tie them as tight as she can. "I think they won't come undone now," she says playfully and stands up.

"Perfect," Leah says, twisting her lips in a contorted expression to contain her

laughter. "Good, first is the grip," the tennis player continues, holding her racket firmly. "You need to hold it as if you were shaking someone's hand. Firm, but without strangling it. Let's see, try it."

Emily takes the racket and looks at it as if it were an alien object. Then she grips it so hard that her knuckles turn white.

"Like this?" she asks, looking at Leah.

"That's perfect if your plan is to kill someone with the racket," Leah comments, arching an eyebrow. "Loosen up a bit. It's not an iron bar, you just need to feel like you have a good hold on it, nothing more."

Emily loosens her grip and nods.

"Okay, now that we have the grip, let's move on to position," Leah says. "Place your feet apart, exactly shoulder-width, and bend your knees slightly. You need to be ready to move."

Leah positions herself as she explains, and Emily imitates her, but in the process, someone walks by the side of the court and she turns her head, which makes her lose her balance and nearly end up on the ground.

"Oh, God," she says and repositions herself under Leah's perplexed gaze.

"Look, Emily, you need to be focused. Forget about what's happening around you and concentrate on what I'm telling you."

Emily smiles and tries again, but she's gotten so close to Leah that she ends up stepping on her foot.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes, embarrassed, jerking away.

"It's okay, don't worry," Leah responds, wondering if she's ever had this much fun with anyone.

The answer is no, not even with Stella.

"My goodness, you're like a flamingo with a hangover," Emma calls out from the bench.

Leah has to turn around so Emily doesn't see her smile.

"Okay, let's continue," Leah says, more calmly. "Now we're going to try a forehand. Move the racket backward and then forward, it's like drawing an arc in the air."

Emily follows the instructions, but her movement is so forced that Leah feels like she's wielding a medieval sword.

"Like this?" she asks, enthusiastically.

Leah bites her lip and clears her throat.

"No, not like that. Let me show you."

The tennis player positions herself behind Emily as she's done dozens of times with other students, but this time is different. For an instant, both feel as if time freezes and the air becomes heavy, but they don't give it importance. Leah guides her arm gently, making sure the movement is more fluid.

"Like this," she explains, and Emily holds her breath when she feels Leah's voice like a whisper, "the movement has to be smooth," she adds before stepping away and

leaving her alone.

After a couple of attempts, Emily finally manages a decent hit.

"Wow," she says excitedly, raising her racket as if she'd won a tournament.

After practicing the stroke for a while and sweating as if they'd been running for hours, Leah decides it's time to try some light rallying. She positions herself on the other side of the court and prepares to hit a soft ball.

"Just focus on returning it calmly. Don't try to do anything spectacular, just concentrate on hitting it well."

Emily nods, completely determined. She prepares, fixes her gaze on the ball that Leah hits to her... and lets it pass without even moving the racket because her attention wanders and she ends up watching the game on the adjacent court.

Leah looks at her, astonished.

"Emily!" the coach calls her attention.

"Oh, damn," she says and smiles with that spontaneous gesture that Leah finds so sincere.

"Were you planning to return it with your mind or what?" Leah asks, laughing.

"I'm sorry," Emily continues smiling. "I'll focus now."

"On me, Emily. I want you to always focus on me when you're here," Leah says.

The phrase is simple, and Emily understands clearly what Leah means, but her heart

gives a small, unexpected flutter.

"Yes, okay," she says, picking up another ball.

"Damn, this is so entertaining I just need popcorn," Emma says, getting up from the bench to stretch her legs, standing near the fence.

Emily gets distracted again looking at her cousin, and Leah clears her throat.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Emily says, preparing to serve.

She concentrates and hits the ball, but does it so clumsily that she sends it at an impossible angle, where it bounces off the fence and returns toward them like a cursed missile. Leah dodges it by instinct and sighs with relief when she sees the ball pass far from Emily, certain that she wouldn't have avoided it.

Mia enters the court where Leah and Emily are training with her eyes fixed on her phone. She's answering a message from her brother. On Mondays, after having spent weekends together, they usually talk more than any other day because they both feel nostalgic. They don't handle the separation well, especially him, who wishes with all his heart to stay with his sister.

Mia is so focused on the conversation while walking that she doesn't see Emma's body and stumbles into her, nearly making her lose her balance.

"I'm sorry," Mia says, grabbing her arm just in time to prevent her from falling. "Did I hurt you?"

Emma, whose manners shine by their absence in moments like this, looks at her furiously while shaking her hand off.

"No, but you could watch where you're going. You almost knocked me down," she snaps abruptly.

Mia stands still for a moment while observing her. She's pretty, but just another snob, after all, another arrogant woman who thinks she's better than her just because her wallet is full of credit cards.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Emma inquires, as if expecting a bow.

"I've already apologized, I can't do more," Mia retorts and continues walking toward the back of the court.

Indignant, Emma follows her with her gaze and notices her body. She likes it; she has an athletic figure, and in the short time she's been able to observe her features, she's realized she's one of those girls who doesn't need to do anything to be attractive. Suddenly, she feels a gaze on her and turns toward Emily. Her cousin observes her with a furrowed brow, and Emma doesn't need her to say anything to imagine what she's thinking. "You're thirty years old, Emma, not fifteen. Stop behaving like a rude child."

She sighs and looks back at the girl, thinking she could approach her and apologize, and while at it, ask for her phone number to meet one of these days and display all her true charms, but then she sees her pick up a tube to collect balls and stands there openmouthed. Emma looks more closely and sees the girl wearing a maroon polo shirt with the club's logo. She's a worker whose job is limited to collecting balls; she can't ask for the number of someone like that. She turns abruptly and nibbles her lip with her teeth until she finds a piece of skin and tears it off while cursing herself for thinking that way, but she can't help it; appearances have always gotten the better of her.

"Well, I think for today it wasn't bad," Leah says when the training ends, approaching

the net with Emily.

"At least I didn't make myself bleed," Emily sighs.

"You're not doing so badly, Emily," Leah encourages her. "Your problem is that you get distracted too easily. We have to work a lot on that, and on everything else, of course," she adds playfully.

"So, you don't consider me a lost cause?" Emily narrows her eyes.

"Of course not," Leah gives her a squeeze on the shoulder and points to the bench where their things are.

Emily feels a shiver run down her spine, but thinks it's from the gust of wind that just crossed the court, relieving their heat.

"See you Thursday then," Emily says.

"Sure," Leah smiles at her and heads toward the back of the court with Mia.

"What happened with that girl?" Emily asks her cousin.

"People here have no manners," Emma huffs. "Are we leaving? I'm hungry."

"Wait for me to change. You wouldn't want me to go out all sweaty," Emily says, grabbing her things to go to the locker room while her cousin takes out her phone and sits on the bench to wait for her.

Leah picks up another tube and helps Mia collect the remaining balls. She doesn't have more classes after Emily's, so she's free and feels like having a drink with her.

"Shall we go to the bar?" she suggests when they empty the tubes into the cart.

"Yes," Mia responds, fanning herself with her hand.

They arrive at the club's bar and sit on the terrace under one of the umbrellas.

"How was the class with the new girl?" Mia asks.

Leah can't help but have a smile cross her face.

"I've never seen anyone clumsier or more absent-minded than her, but she puts in effort, so for now, I'm going to focus on helping her return a ball without hurting herself. Later I'll see how to progress with her," she jokes, making Mia laugh.

"She seems like a fun person."

"She is," Leah responds. "She radiates an energy that I love, capable of lifting your spirits on a terrible day just by seeing her."

"Just the opposite of the girl who was with her as gorgeous as she is, she's just as idiotic" Mia says, twisting her expression.

Leah lets out a small laugh.

"I saw you had a little run-in. Her name is Emma, she's Emily's cousin."

"She could have inherited some of her friendliness."

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The week has been so long and exhausting that Leah sighs thinking she only has this Sunday to relax at home and prepare for the next day, when her routine returns with full force. She complains in vain—she thinks—because she loves what she does, running her own sports club, teaching all her students, and training to keep up her skills. She remembers those moments in the past when fear threatened to destroy her, when she made the decision to retire from competitions because, although she knew what her next steps would be, she couldn't help thinking about failure. Her mothers supported her more than ever, and thanks to that and dedicating all her time to the new project, Walker Elite Sport Club is now her entire life, and she enjoys every moment she spends there.

"That smells wonderful," Anne says to her wife, who checks the lasagna she put in the oven a few minutes ago through the glass door.

"Your favorite dish," Natalie stands up and gives Anne a gentle caress before kissing her on the lips.

Leah watches her mothers from the corner of her eye while finishing drying some lettuce for a salad. They've been together their whole lives and, despite those years, they still have the same connection they had at the beginning. They met in their twenties, loved each other madly, unleashing their passion in any corner they could find, in that charming apartment that was too small for both when they decided to move in together, and nights eating pizza or Chinese food sitting on the floor because they hadn't yet bought anywhere to sit, ending up making love on the carpet. Years passed, more prosperous times came, and then Leah, the love of their lives. The three of them, just the three of them, and so they were immensely happy. Not everything was always perfect: Leah's tennis career, the passing years, Anne's infidelity that

almost ended everything, but as a family they overcame it all, they were strong, and now they enjoy everything they have, something that goes beyond money: love, well-being, and joy.

"This is ready," Anne announces, taking the dish out of the oven with mitts and placing it on a rack on the table.

The three women sit down, each occupying the chair that almost bears their name. Since Leah bought this house, she made sure to make the living room—to one side of the large open kitchen—a cozy place with a big table to welcome guests, but especially for those days when her mothers visit to eat together. Natalie always sits at the head of the table; Leah to her left, and Anne to her right. That's how it's been all their lives, and they keep it that way.

Leah hasn't finished pouring the wine when her phone starts vibrating on the polished table where the plates rest. She glances over her glass, and the name on the screen makes her feel a wave of emotions. Natalie—the nosier of the two—also leans in a bit and confirms that the person calling at this hour is Stella Moore, her daughter's conceited partner.

"We're about to eat, call her back later," Natalie says casually. Stella isn't her favorite person.

Leah adores her mothers, but there are many occasions when they forget that she, at thirty-eight, is an adult capable of making her own decisions. She knows they don't mean to hurt her, quite the opposite; however, the tennis player has to constantly remind them that she's the one who makes these kinds of decisions.

She raises her gaze and observes Natalie for a fraction of time.

"You know how she gets if I don't answer, she won't stop calling," Leah stands up

and walks out to the backyard of her house.

She walks until she sits in a green hammock she has in a corner—a gift from Mia—and turns her neck to release tension before answering.

"Honey," Stella greets her as soon as she hears her voice, "I thought you wouldn't pick up."

Leah smiles; that sweet tone of voice was the first thing that caught her attention about Stella, although she soon realized that Stella Moore can be many things, but sweet isn't one of them. It doesn't bother her; in fact, it reminds her a bit of herself when she was younger.

"We're about to eat, I'm at home with my mothers," Leah tells her and lies back more in the hammock. "How are you?"

"Give them my regards."

Another thing Stella has in abundance: manners. She knows perfectly well that her in-laws don't hold her in high esteem; even so, she sends her greetings, makes sure to buy them gifts when she travels to Charleston, and, at least one night, dines with them at Tony's restaurant, a southern expert in seafood that's Anne's weakness.

"I'm leaving practice, it was exhausting," Stella continues while Leah listens to the sound of her footsteps in the background. "I finally perfected the Tweener"—a shot where the player hits the ball between their own legs—"I've been practicing it for weeks."

"I want to see it," Leah asks her.

Stella bursts out laughing, knowing that next to her girlfriend, she's nothing but a

novice, and Leah excels at these types of plays, not only executing them but anticipating them to return the shot.

"Maybe we can play together when we see each other," Stella replies. "By the way, I am playing in the local tournament after all, Chris—her coach—says it will give me some extra points. Will you come?"

Leah frowns.

"I've been the one traveling the last three times," the ex-tennis player complains.

When Stella left Charleston because Christian Roberts agreed to coach her as long as she moved to Tennessee, they both agreed that they would alternate trips. Once Stella, once Leah, but lately it's been the latter who has had to get on a plane to visit her girlfriend.

"I know, honey," Stella answers sweetly, "but you know the championship is coming up, I can't move around as much as I'd like. I promise that when all this pressure is over, you and I will go on vacation, and I'll also be able to spend more time in Charleston."

Leah sighs. She understands her, of course she does. When she was at that point as a professional tennis player, she barely had time for outings with friends, sharing with her mothers, or even having a girlfriend. She married tennis from a very young age, and when she turned professional, her life was being on a court. Stella wants to go far, she's thirty, she's well-known, she's won some championships, and she still has several to win. Unlike Leah, she doesn't want to retire so soon; she wants to try to go as far as she can, and that takes a lot of sweat.

"Why don't you come after the tournament?" Leah asks with a glimmer of hope. She wants to see her but doesn't want to get on a plane again so soon.

"Chris has booked me a cabin in Knoxville," Stella replies. "I've been under a lot of stress and I've been losing focus on very basic plays."

Retreats, Leah thinks. It's the typical getaway that a high-competition athlete does when they need to refocus. The idea is to do absolutely nothing for a few days except reconnect with the mind. Phones and technology are set aside. Leah recalls those long mountain walks when her brain collapsed after months of pressure.

"So besides flying to Tennessee, I won't be able to be with you more than two days?"

Stella mutters something unintelligible and clears her throat.

"Leah, you more than anyone should understand me," she says with a tone of slight anger. "You know very well what it costs to reach the top positions: the effort, the fatigue, the stress, and above all, the loneliness. I'd love to be able to come see you instead of you having to come, but this is my current situation and I can't—nor want to—change it."

The tennis player remains quiet for a moment thinking about her words, and the fact is that her girlfriend is right, much as it bothers her to be the one who, most of the time, has to travel across the country to support her in tournaments or see her for at least a few days. Her skin prickles and the dry sound of the ball hitting the court, the roar of the crowd, and the sweat on her forehead crosses her mind. How she misses those moments when her world was just the ball and a racket.

"I'll try to arrange it," she finally responds and softens her voice. "I want to see you destroy that spoiled Angelica Durán, so you better strengthen that backhand."

Though she can't see her, Stella smiles. Leah always supports her, even when certain things are difficult.

"Talk later?" asks the younger of the two.

"Call me when you go to bed," Leah requests and says goodbye to her girlfriend.

When the call ends, the club owner stares at her yard. It's immense, larger than the house itself, because Leah bought it precisely for that land that seemed wonderful to her. There she has a court, her own, where she rallies when she feels like it, remembering her moments of glory. She thinks about her life, her career, and Stella. She likes her, loves her; however, she's clear that what they have is temporary. They've been together for a while because it works well for both of them; in fact, their relationship hasn't broken because the younger one left Charleston, and that distance made what they had flourish. They see each other a couple of times a month, talk several times a week, and each has her own space. Stella is too young for Leah, and they both have different future plans; the only thing that unites them is their passion for tennis, and for them—for now—that's more than enough.

She returns to the house and sees her mothers talking about something in a confidential tone. Natalie smiles and Anne winks at her. Leah would love to have a relationship like theirs, which, despite the adversities they may have experienced, today finds them more in love than ever, so much so that they often look like two teenagers who have just met.

"Everything okay?" Anne asks when she notices her daughter's presence.

Leah nods and smiles.

"Stella sends her regards," she says and sits at the table.

"How is she?" asks Anne, who gets along better with her. Natalie believes she isn't good enough for her daughter.

"Training," says Leah with a grimace. "You know how it goes."

Natalie wants to say nothing, but that's how she is, and if she stays quiet, she might explode into a thousand pieces.

"I don't understand why you're still with that girl, Leah," she blurts out, and Anne shakes her head at her wife's imprudent comment. "Don't get me wrong, Stella is a great person, but she's not for you."

Leah lets out a sigh.

"Mom," she says in a serious tone. "Do I seem unhappy to you?"

Natalie looks at her wife as if asking for help, and Anne, in response, picks up her wine glass to take a sip. She has no intention of helping her out of the hornet's nest she's gotten herself into.

"No," the woman vehemently denies. "I actually think you're happy."

"Then why do you insist that I leave Stella?" inquires Leah. She's not upset, but she fervently wishes her mother would put this topic aside once and for all.

"I don't know, honey, it's just that I'd like you to share your life with a woman who really gives you more time, with whom you could truly have something solid. Stella is at a point that you've already lived through, and as you've said, right now her goal is training and championships."

Leah nods as her mother explains her point of view once again.

"I'm fine this way, and so is Stella. What I want, mother, is for you to put this topic aside. I understand your concern, but this is what I've chosen; when we don't feel

good anymore, we'll end it. Meanwhile, this situation works well for us. We see each other, talk, and share exactly what we want. Okay?"

Natalie doesn't answer immediately, though she knows she'll get a good scolding from Anne, who is tired of asking her not to interfere in Leah's life in that way. She finally nods, smiles, and puts on that look that the family already knows, the one that says she's sorry, although she doesn't really feel completely sorry because she's a woman who can't stop saying what she thinks.

"Topic settled," Anne speaks, looking at Natalie with a gesture in her eyes, "let's eat before it gets cold, and I want to watch that movie you promised me, on the couch with another good glass of wine."

All three smile and start serving their plates. Leah knows Natalie is right and understands clearly that the relationship with her girlfriend has an expiration date that's approaching more and more. She decides to stop thinking about that; she wants to enjoy the family Sunday until, suddenly and out of nowhere, a clumsy girl crosses her mind, like one of those speedboats that travel at a frightening speed cutting through the water, and Leah can't help feeling her heart skip a beat.

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Leah takes one last glance at the threatening sky before entering the main building. The day dawned alternating between clouds and clear skies, but as the hours passed, the clouds gained ground and now, in the late afternoon, the sky is completely covered with dark gray tones that leave no doubt that, at any moment, they'll drench the city with a blanket of rain.

Leah likes days like this because she appreciates not training under the scorching sun when she has to do it on one of the outdoor courts, but the downside is that the stuffiness becomes unbearable and the humidity seems to multiply.

"Did you call Emily?" she asks, leaning her elbows on the counter in front of her mothers.

"Yes," Anne responds, "she says she's not canceling the class."

Leah raises her eyebrows, but a smile escapes her when she hears it. In moments like this, when rain seems imminent, clients who have classes on outdoor courts usually call to cancel them, but Emily hasn't done so, which is why Leah asked her mothers to call and confirm.

"Did you tell her all the indoor courts are occupied?" she asks to make sure.

"Yes," her mother confirms, "but her response was that, as long as not a single drop falls on her, she wants to make the most of it."

"She must really love tennis," Natalie mutters, distracted while reorganizing the week's schedule.

"She sure does, especially considering how clumsy she is," Anne laughs after checking they're alone.

Leah immediately regrets having told her mothers about Emily's awkwardness, but she ends up laughing too.

"Well, she's clumsy at playing, because apparently as a lawyer, she's a lioness," Natalie blurts out.

"And how do you know that?" her wife asks.

Natalie stops what she's doing and removes her glasses.

"I looked her up on Google."

"What?" Leah asks, perplexed.

"What's the problem, honey? I was curious, it's not a crime, after all, the information is out there," she says and shrugs without further explanation.

Leah looks at her other mother and they both burst out laughing.

"Well," Anne says, "since you've snooped around, what else have you found out?"

"And now I'm the gossip," Natalie complains.

Leah says nothing, she just hopes her mother will talk because the truth is she's very intrigued to learn things about Emily despite the fact that Emily herself already told her she was a lawyer.

"Well, I hate to disappoint you, but there isn't much more. Just that she works at a

family law firm, apparently founded by her father and uncle. She's the only daughter of George and Bilma Harris and specializes in corporate law. She was top of her class, graduating with honors. Apparently, she really loves what she does," Natalie points out.

"That doesn't seem like nothing to me," Anne comments.

"Oh, I forgot the most interesting part," Natalie adds, "in an article I read, they linked her to a lawyer named Vanessa Cooper. Apparently, they dated for a while," she says and glances sideways at Leah, whose throat suddenly goes dry upon hearing this.

Emily is a lesbian. That's something she hadn't imagined.

"That lawyer must be really good," Natalie says, and her daughter's eyes open with expectation, not understanding what she means.

"Why?" Anne asks.

"Because the only case Emily has apparently lost was against her. But you know how the press is, maybe it's a lie."

"Maybe they met during that trial, a relationship that started with hate and ended with love, can you imagine?" Anne speculates with a smile.

"You and your imagination," Natalie says. "Stop reading so many romance novels."

Leah no longer listens to them because she can't stop wondering why, of all the things her mother has told about Emily, what seemed most relevant to her was learning that Emily also likes women, although it's also fair to say that each new fact she discovers about the lawyer, she likes. Then she thinks of Stella and mentally scolds herself, claiming that she doesn't like Emily, she just gets along with her, which is very

different.

"Well, I'm heading to the court, Emily must have arrived by now. Let's see if the weather holds and we can train," she comments, grabbing her bag before walking through the door.

She sees Emily from a distance, not because she has hawk vision or because she's the only person walking around the outdoor courts at that moment, but because she's wearing a reflective yellow raincoat that stands out like a beacon. Leah smiles as she approaches her.

"Hi," Emily greets her with a cheerful tone that leaves Leah stunned, finding it hard to imagine the woman in front of her talking about laws in a courtroom.

"Hi, Emily. You're very brave wanting to train today," Leah says, dropping her bag on the bench.

"I don't see why, I came prepared," she says, pointing to her raincoat.

Leah approaches her with narrowed eyes, trying to decipher if the lawyer is pulling her leg.

"You know that if it starts raining we can't train, right? The ball gets wet, heavy, doesn't bounce well, you know..."

"Aaah," Emily says, and her smiling expression vanishes in an instant.

Leah smiles again, fascinated as Emily looks at the sky.

"Then, let's start now," the lawyer says.

"Alright, let's rally a bit to warm up," Leah instructs.

They go to opposite sides of the court. It's already dark and the floodlights are on. Leah positions herself to hit the first ball, but when she focuses on Emily, all she sees is a luminous blur that blinds her.

"Damn," she says, surprised by the effect the lights produce on her reflective vest.

"Aren't you serving?" Emily asks from the other side.

"I'm going to have to ask you to take off the raincoat," Leah says, approaching the net with an amused expression. "When the light hits you I can't see anything, you're like a giant firefly. As a deterrent for an enemy, you must be awesome."

Emily laughs and removes her raincoat, leaving it on the bench before returning to face her covered only by her shorts and a tank top. Leah swallows as she observes the line of her shoulders. She clears her throat and returns to her spot to begin the warm-up.

They rally for a while, though the correct way to describe it is that Leah has to run all over the court to return the balls that Emily hits anywhere except where she is, or watch in horror as they pass by without the lawyer returning them. But she corrects her between laughs, because Emily laughs at herself and infects Leah with her laughter, until halfway through the training, the first drops begin to fall.

"I think we should stop here, Emily," Leah suggests, looking at the sky.

Emily frowns and makes a face of disgust that reminds Leah of a sulking child.

"They're just a few drops, we can continue," the lawyer says.

Leah is about to tell her whatever she wants, that it's no problem for her, however, what a second ago were just a few drops suddenly turns into a downpour that falls mercilessly on them.

"To the locker room!" Leah shouts, grabbing her bag before running off.

Emily follows her, but halfway there she realizes she's left her raincoat with her phone and car keys in the pockets. She stops abruptly and, in doing so, slips on the stone path in such a way that one of her feet remains anchored in place while the other moves forward, leaving her legs split on the ground.

"Oh my God!" Leah exclaims, holding back her laughter. "Even in my best athletic days I couldn't do the splits like that," she adds, turning to Emily, who looks at her from the ground with a strained expression.

"I'm going to have sore groins for the rest of my life," Emily mutters as Leah helps her stand up under the torrential rain that has already soaked them.

Leah is grateful that the water is soaking her face because while she runs to get Emily's raincoat, she cries with laughter. When she returns to her, she takes her hand and runs at Emily's awkward pace until they enter the locker room, drenched to the bone. The place is empty because the few people still at the club are still training, and Leah doesn't know if she's grateful to be alone with Emily or would prefer someone else to be with them.

"How are you feeling?" Leah asks while wringing her ponytail over the sink, letting a thin stream of water fall.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to close my legs again," Emily jokes, walking with her legs apart toward the lockers.

Leah lets out a small laugh, unable to help it. She loves that Emily is always in a good mood, even in moments when others would be hysterical.

"You might have torn a muscle, you should get it checked," Leah suggests.

"No way, it wasn't that bad," Emily downplays it, opening her locker.

Leah walks to hers, located four away from the lawyer's, and opens it to get dry clothes to change into. The first thing she removes is her shirt and she lets it fall to the floor with a dull thud that catches the lawyer's attention. Emily's gaze gets stuck on Leah's body, toned and fit in a way that each muscle is marked with a fine line that she imagines tracing with her fingers. Leah, unaware of the eyes fixed on her, also removes her bottoms, and when Emily sees her in her underwear, she feels her stomach jolt and her sex contracts violently, causing her to let out a choked squeal from the surprise of such arousal.

Leah turns to her with concern drawn on her face.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I just got a cramp in my leg," Emily lies and begins to do some rather abrupt and strange stretches—the first thing that comes to mind—which make Leah smile.

"If you keep stretching like that, you'll end up injuring your back," she says, arching an eyebrow.

Emily stops abruptly while lamenting not being more skillful. She could have just said her groin hurt and Leah would have believed her, but she got so nervous that her clumsiness transferred to her mouth as well.

When they're both changed, Leah opens the door and confirms it's still pouring.

"You can't leave like this," she says, turning to Emily. "Are you hungry? I'll treat you to dinner at the club restaurant."

"Really? Thanks, I'm starving," Emily accepts and follows Leah through one of the interior doors that only club staff have access to and that connect to the main building.

At this hour there are hardly any customers in the restaurant, so Leah takes Emily to her favorite table, the one she usually occupies when she eats with her mothers and Mia or the few times Stella has visited the club. It's the only one in the corner of the room, next to a double window that allows them to see a wooded area on one side and the main entrance on the other.

The conversation flows between them without either daring to ask about the other's private life, but at this moment they don't need to, because between work anecdotes and comments about Emily's training, they're laughing so hard their stomachs hurt.

"Have you ever seen your daughter laugh like that with Stella?" Anne asks her wife when the couple enters the dining room for dinner.

"No. And she certainly doesn't have the chemistry she seems to have with Emily," Natalie replies with a smile.

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Emily Harris walks through the doors of Atrinium restaurant, a huge establishment where her family often gathers. Located very close to the famous Cooper River, it's a typical Southern restaurant with a rustic yet cozy style. The terrace is the most charming part, and at this hour the views offer a golden sunset reflecting on the water, with fishing boats gliding in the distance. The exposed beam ceiling and wrought iron lamps give it a touch of distinction, and what she loves most about this place are the exposed brick walls that the owner has decorated with black and white photographs of Charleston in its earliest years, along with fishing nets and metal lanterns.

The Harris family celebrates signing a million-dollar contract to handle the legal department of a multinational company they've been working with for several months. After proving they were the best option, they reached an agreement, and the firm is now officially the representative of Betters Industry. Emily had nothing to do with it, although she contributed some ideas to secure the deal. It was her mother who led the negotiations; Bilma is fierce and, besides being a good lawyer, she excels at closing agreements.

Emma signals for her to sit beside her; she saved a chair for her when she arrived at the restaurant. The cousins do almost everything together; in fact, many people think they're sisters. Emily always advises her, and Emma is her eternal defender.

"I thought you'd arrive earlier," Emma whispers when her cousin sits down.

"Today's session took longer than expected," she answers, referring to the trial she's handling.

Emily is the defense attorney for a company accused of failing to comply with current legislation, plus they face a complaint from a former employee who alleges she was unfairly dismissed. Unfortunately, the day didn't go as expected; the attorney—who did her homework thoroughly—knew the opposing side barely had evidence against the company. Moreover, Emily has knowledge that the ex-employee attempted to extract confidential documentation, which is why they terminated her contract, but a last-minute change of lawyer on the opposing side completely threw Emily off balance.

"You don't look like you lost today's session," Kevin Harris, Emma's father, teases his niece Emily. "You come in smiling so much I thought the outcome was different."

Emily narrows her eyes. Her uncle, a large man with a wide smile, is the family jokester. He loves to annoy everyone and never misses an opportunity to make any humorous comment, especially to his niece, who has a reputation for getting angry like a child when bothered in this way.

"I'm not worried," Emily answers and waves her hand. "We're just starting; besides, the prosecution has obsessed over something that makes no sense. We've presented all the documentation confirming my client complies with current manufacturing requirements, and still they won't give up."

"Then the reason for your happiness is something else," Kevin pries, raising and lowering his eyebrows while smiling.

Emma huffs. Her father is such a clown.

"I've learned to play tennis," Emily blurts out with gleaming eyes.

Everyone at the table—her parents and her aunt and uncle—except Emma, look at each other without saying anything. It's no secret to anyone how bad Emily is at

sports, and the statement she just made might be far from reality. Emma is bothered by their expressions.

"She's made a lot of progress and she's better than you think," she says and looks at each person at the table. "At the Walker Club, they're teaching her very well."

Everyone nods. This time Kevin Harris sets his jokes aside; while it's true that his clumsy niece has generated many laughs in the family, he knows she's fascinated by sports and has rarely had the luck to find an instructor with the patience she requires.

"It has a very good reputation," Kevin says, nodding as he wipes his hands with a napkin. "They say Leah has a gift for teaching."

When Emily hears that name, a rush runs through her and she quickly remembers how the day before her sex contracted suddenly when she saw her without a shirt in the locker room. She shakes her head, not wanting to have those thoughts during a family meal.

"She's my instructor," the lawyer says and pops a potato in her mouth.

"I thought she only trained semi-professionals," Sandra, Kevin's wife, now says. "I'm glad it's Leah Walker who's training you."

Emily continues eating french fries from a bowl in front of her. Her mother ordered a double portion because her daughter feels an unhealthy weakness for this dish. Suddenly, as if it were a revelation, Emily analyzes what her aunt just told her. Walker. Walker like the name of the club.

"Is it her family?" Emily asks, and her aunt frowns.

"Leah Walker is the owner."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"The owner? Damn," Emily blurts out, covers her face with her hands, then starts laughing.

"Emily, honey, what have you done?" Bilma asks, also laughing.

"I thought she was an employee and told her she must have a good salary considering the exorbitant price of the monthly fees."

Everyone at the table bursts into laughter so loud that those inside the restaurant turn to look at them. Some join in, others shake their heads, judging the commotion.

"I can't believe it," Sandra says, wiping away tears that have sprung up after laughing.

"Well," Kevin says, settling into his chair. "Now you know that Leah Walker is the owner of the club where you train and, as additional information, you should know she was a very recognized tennis player. She won many tournaments; she retired at the top of her game."

Two waiters appear with trays full of food. Atrinium serves exquisite roasted meat that is the weakness of the entire Harris family. Conversations dissipate, giving way to the sound of cutlery and murmurs of pleasure from some as they taste the dishes. Emily reprimands herself; it wasn't necessary to know who ran the Walker Elite Sport Club, but that unfortunate comment shouldn't have left her mouth.

"How are you?" Emma pulls her from her tribulations. Emily knows what she's referring to; she doesn't much feel like talking about it at that moment.

"Fine," she answers and thinks for a few seconds. "I didn't know the attorney assigned to the case had an accident and Vanessa was designated in his place. I

thought I'd find Emilio Johnson in the courtroom, not her."

Vanessa Cooper, Emily thinks and bites her lips. The lawyer she met in a trial about five years ago, a complicated one where her client wasn't entirely guilty, although he had committed some offenses. For Emily, it was an important moment in her career; that's where she became known, and the press started to give her a voice. She was young, daring, and with a vocation that showed for miles. Everything was going well until one night, after a very long session, she ran into Vanessa at a bar near the courthouse. They had a drink, chatted, and got along too well so much so that they ended up tangled in Vanessa's expensive silk sheets. They let it go; the next day, while having coffee, they concluded that what they had was just sex and nothing more. How wrong they were. The nights repeated themselves just as they had begun after that drink. The trial ended, the defense won, and the two of them continued their idyll. Emily fell hopelessly in love; she was the first woman for whom she felt something so strong, and they soon began making plans for the future. A future that went down the drain when a new trial brought them together in court, one that Vanessa didn't want to lose because, with the victory, her career would take off. One morning, after making love, Emily commented something about her client. And why wouldn't she? Vanessa was her partner, they were planning to move in together, and everything between them was fantastic, but Vanessa saw an opportunity to win and took it. The betrayal devastated Emily, and although Vanessa said not to mix their relationship with work, she herself was the one who, in a moment of passion, used her girlfriend for her benefit. Vanessa Cooper rose, and Emily sank. She didn't cry; she swallowed her pain, the piercing kind that burst inside her every time she thought of Vanessa. She didn't even vent to Emma; she simply moved forward, working day and night. After that, Emily was never the same; she hasn't been able to love again, much less trust.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Emma insists.

Emily again disguises her unease. As always.

"Sure," she answers and stretches her lips into an unconvincing smile.

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Leah has just landed in Tennessee, specifically at the Nashville airport, the city where Stella is playing in the local tournament that weekend and also where she resides since Christian Roberts agreed to be her coach. In the end, she has given in and once again it's her who for the third consecutive time, if not more—travels to visit her girlfriend.

She searches among the family members and friends waiting for their loved ones in the arrivals area, but fails to spot her until, instead, she finds a man holding a sign with her name on it. Leah snorts with indignation when she sees that Stella hasn't even had the decency to come pick her up at the airport, but she's relieved that at least her last name isn't on the sign, alerting everyone to her arrival and making her the focus of unwanted attention because, although she's retired, people still recognize her, and there are moments—like this one where she's just put herself in a bad mood—when it feels uncomfortable having to pose with a smile she doesn't feel like flashing.

"I assume you know the address," Leah says to the man after greeting him and getting into the car.

"Yes, ma'am," he responds kindly.

Almost forty minutes later, the man stops the vehicle in front of the house Stella has rented in Nashville. It's an elegant red brick construction with light stone details, a spacious porch with white columns, and a dark wooden door with a large frosted glass window.

Leah says goodbye to the driver, climbs the steps, and rings the doorbell trying not to

make her bad mood too obvious, but it's difficult. Within seconds, the door opens and Stella practically jumps on her, hugging her with an enthusiasm that catches her off guard before kissing her.

"I've been so eager for you to arrive," Stella murmurs against her mouth.

Leah can barely breathe and stumbles into the house while Stella continues babbling things between kisses that gradually erase the tennis player's anger.

"Sorry I didn't come pick you up, but this morning's training was running long and since I didn't want to be late, I decided to play it safe and sent a driver to get you, hope you don't mind."

By the time she finishes apologizing, Stella has already gotten rid of Leah's t-shirt and her hands are struggling with the closure of her jeans. The tennis player, aroused, has completely forgotten about something that now seems trivial to her and lets herself fall onto the sofa when her girlfriend finally pulls down her pants, ready to make up for lost time.

"How I've missed you," Stella says smiling, relaxed at her side.

Leah feels uncomfortable for a brief moment, aware that Stella expects her to say the same, but Leah would be lying if she says she did too, because it's not true. She enjoys spending time with Stella, but not enough to miss her afterward, and both have known this for some time, which is why it partly bothers her that Stella lies by saying she feels that way.

"Next time I promise I'll visit you," Stella says, unfazed when Leah sits up without having responded to her show of affection.

Leah glances at her sideways and stretches her arm to pick up her shirt from the floor.

"You've told me that many times, Stella, and then you don't do it, so I'd prefer if you stopped promising things you can't deliver."

"It's the training, Leah, you know how it goes. If it were up to me, I'd still be in Charleston," Stella says.

Leah clears her throat, smiles, and turns toward her girlfriend.

"You and I both know that's not true, Stella. Tennis is what drives you, and I'm not holding it against you, I did the same for years. How do you see the match against Natalia Fort? I hope you've reviewed her plays well so you can anticipate," Leah changes the subject, not wanting to continue talking about a relationship she knows hangs by a thread.

"Chris and I have been reviewing videos of her matches all week. I'm sick of seeing her," Stella sighs wearily, making Leah laugh, "but the good thing is I think I'll be able to counter her backhand, like I told you, I've been practicing a lot."

"I'm sure you will," Leah gives her thigh a squeeze and Stella smiles. "Shall we eat? I'm starving."

"I forgot sex always makes you hungry," Stella laughs and stands up. "Let's go, I've reserved a table at a place you'll like, plus it's close by, we can take a walk and catch up."

Leah gets up and heads to the bathroom to freshen up while thinking about what catching up with Stella means to her. She shivers from head to toe when she realizes that the only thing she would like to talk about is Emily, the new development in her life that she considers relevant, and that troubles her.

The next day they arrive together at the match Stella must play. It's a local

tournament without much expectation, still, there are some sports journalists covering the news who don't miss the opportunity to photograph Stella as soon as they see her appear with her partner, the established Leah Walker. Although she's more than used to it, Leah doesn't feel entirely comfortable when she notices how Stella sticks close to her and smiles, exhibiting her as if she were another one of her trophies. She tries not to think about it, greets people, answers some questions about her club, and finally sits in the stands, sheltered under her cap and sunglasses to enjoy the match. She has fun, loves watching matches and screaming like a maniac when Stella makes a good shot or returns an impossible ball, and they culminate the morning with her victory, a good meal, and another sex session in her bedroom.

Exhausted after the match and the marathon they've had in bed, Stella has fallen asleep and Leah contemplates her sitting in the armchair her girlfriend has in a corner of the room. She's been there for ten minutes in complete silence while wondering why she continues with her. Until a few weeks ago she didn't mind, she was fine with what they had and defended their relationship to her mothers when they told her it wasn't enough, that her relationship with Stella was very superficial and brought her nothing more than some sex the few times they see each other and some empty conversation occasionally.

Leah sighs. Before that was enough, now she's not sure anymore, and the blame falls on Emily Harris.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" Stella murmurs when she turns around and notices Leah isn't beside her.

"I'm coming now," she answers while still looking at her.

Leah swallows. Tomorrow she has to catch her flight back to Charleston and, instead of being sad about not having more time to spend with Stella, she's counting the hours until she can take the taxi to the airport. Without a doubt, things aren't going

well, and what before seemed like a relationship that suited them both, now seems like something living on borrowed time.

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"When do you plan to actually tell me how you feel seeing Vanessa Cooper as the prosecution attorney in every session?"

The question, formed as a reproach, bursts from Emma Harris' mouth. The fellow attorney has stormed into Emily's office without even knocking. It's not something she typically does; normally she always enters with special care in case her cousin is with a client. She acknowledges she's in a bad mood and it bothers her enormously that Emily isn't being honest with her. Emma knows well that her cousin tends to keep her feelings bottled up, preferring to cry curled up in her bed rather than spill all the shit that corrodes her inside, but not telling her how she felt during that encounter with her ex-partner doesn't sit well with her.

"Good morning to you too," Emily answers without looking up from the folder in her hand. "You need to get laid more."

Emma raises her eyebrows and twists her lips. Emily always tells her the same thing when her darker character surfaces. In most cases she's right, though this time—Emma has gone a while without sex and doesn't deny it—her cousin is wrong.

"Thanks for caring about my sex life," Emma spits sarcastically. "Don't change the subject."

Emily Harris releases an impatient sigh. Right now she's reviewing some notes because the second session of the trial is in an hour. She knows that if she doesn't answer Emma, her cousin won't let her get up from her chair. Her cousin is so protective of her that, sometimes, she becomes a pain in the ass.

"There's not much to tell. I already told you that Emilio Johnson was the opposing lawyer and apparently he had an accident. I didn't know she would be there representing the opposition until I arrived at the courthouse."

Emma runs her hand over her face. In a gesture that tries to disguise her concern, she pretends to wipe her chin and settles comfortably in the chair across from Emily.

"Please, it's me, tell me how you feel about it?" she asks cautiously.

Emily wishes she could say she's fine, that she really doesn't care about unexpectedly running into Vanessa, though she'd be lying. When she saw her ex-partner at the door of the courtroom, talking with a tall, tired-looking man, Emily felt the ground open beneath her feet. They hadn't seen each other since that afternoon when everything ended, and a wave of memories hit her hard. For a few moments, she stood completely lost in front of the woman who had known how to cut her open with a precise movement.

Flashback

"How could you do it, Vanessa?" Emily rages in the middle of her living room. Her eyes are swollen and a look of pain crosses her face.

Vanessa Cooper sits on a stool, looking at her with confusion, not understanding why her girlfriend gives so much importance to something like that.

"Honey, let's not mix our relationship with work," Vanessa's voice sounds calm. "I'm sorry, it wasn't something I planned. It just came out when the judge rejected my plea."

"It just came out?" Emily repeats incredulously and presses her eyes in a gesture of desperation. "You used information I told you after making love that morning, damn

it, Vanessa. And now you say not to mix one thing with the other. You betrayed me."

The other attorney shakes her head and stands up. The sound of her heels echoes on the wooden floor, the one Emily recently restored and that they both love. A shiver runs through Vanessa, a bad omen telling her it will be the last time she walks across this living room.

"I didn't do it to screw you over, Em," Vanessa's voice is now more subdued, fearful. "They were pressuring me at the office, you know that. I was losing, you were literally beating us. And I... I used what I knew without realizing it would cause problems."

Emily Harris, having just turned thirty, feels a hand squeezing her heart. She lets out a hysterical laugh while tears soak her face. She's had many flings in her life, especially during her university days, but she has never felt the love she has for Vanessa. When she met her in court, Emily found her attractive. Vanessa, with her tanned skin and Latin features, was a woman difficult to ignore. However, it wasn't until one night when they met after a trial that their relationship began and, although they thought it would be a one-time thing, they were both wrong. Vanessa was a charming woman; she invited her to dinner several times before they started spending weekends together. Sex with the attorney was spectacular, hot, passionate. Emily had never had such a connection with anyone. They continued dating until they both realized they were in love and decided to take the relationship to the next level. Emily introduced her to the Harris family, Vanessa to the Coopers, and even, after some time together, they traveled to Colombia to visit her country of origin.

It's no secret to Emily that Vanessa's career is very important to her; she has fought hard to get where she is and feels proud that all those sleepless nights have paid off, but what she never thought possible was that her girlfriend—competing with a colleague from her law firm for a promotion—would use crucial information about her client in a trial where they faced each other. It was low, it was underhanded, a

knife in the back. Emily lost, Vanessa got a promotion amid applause and champagne glasses, though it was clear that Attorney Cooper would also end up losing something. Emily.

"Do you have any idea what it feels like to be betrayed like that?" Emily raises both hands when Vanessa approaches her and tries to speak. "Do you know?"

Vanessa still isn't aware—though she's beginning to think that what she believed was a trifle has serious consequences—she notices the sadness in Emily's eyes, the slight trembling of her body warning that she's also furious, and the tears soaking her face scream that the pain she feels is unbearable.

"Please, Em, you have to understand, I..."

Emily laughs again while angrily wiping the moisture from her cheeks.

"Get out of my house, Vanessa," she says and walks to the door. "I'll send your things over."

"Don't do this," Vanessa begs, stunned and with a broken voice.

"I can't and don't want to be with a woman with whom I thought I would share my entire life and who hasn't hesitated to use something to her advantage, bringing me down. It's cruel and underhanded," Emily says calmly, as if Vanessa were a young inexperienced girl who needs everything explained in detail. "If that's your way of handling a relationship, of loving, then I've chosen the wrong woman."

"Emily?" Emma brings her back from that painful place in her memories.

"I won't deny that seeing her shocked me, but I'm better than I thought, I'll be fine," she pauses. "Really," she affirms again in the face of her cousin's distrustful look.

"Promise me that if you need to talk, you'll come to me," Emma Harris asks.

Emily smiles and extends a hand across her desk to reach her cousin's.

"You worry too much about me; I'm supposed to be the older one who takes care of you."

Emma bursts into laughter.

"You already do, but each of us has our role and mine is to try to draw out everything you insist on keeping quiet."

Emily nods; she won't deny the truth to someone who's right. She looks at the time on her watch and realizes that time has flown by and she can no longer continue reviewing her notes. She stands up and puts the folders in her briefcase.

"I have the day off," announces Emma, who has finished the few things she had to do at the firm. "I'll go with you to the courthouse."

"Okay, but afterward I'm heading to the club, I have training this afternoon," Emily explains, and the sparkle in her eyes could light up an entire city.

"I'll go with you and when you finish we'll go to dinner," says Emma, also standing up. "I'm craving a hamburger, though I'll end up having a salad."

Emily sighs and shakes her head in a gesture of incomprehension. She'll never understand how her cousin—and people in general—limit themselves from such pleasurable things for the absurd reason of fitting into a dress two sizes smaller than they need. Emily is very clear that life—at least consciously—is lived once, and she isn't willing to waste it.

"I'll have a double," she states as they leave her office together.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Emily and Emma arrive at the club just in time. They left the courthouse late, forcing them to grab a quick bite before stopping by the law firm and shutting themselves in the older cousin's office to prepare for tomorrow's session. When they realized the time, they were almost late for practice, and Emily jumped from her chair, urging her cousin as if the building were on fire.

"We're not in school, Emily. No one's sending you to the principal for being late," Emma says as she walks quickly behind her cousin after parking the car in the club lot. "Though if Leah Walker were the principal, I'm sure you wouldn't mind being sent to her office," she adds playfully, and Emily nearly trips over her own feet at the comment.

Leah Walker. Lately, she hears that name often, and each time, something stirs in her stomach, preventing her from thinking like a focused, rational person.

"Stop talking like that, you're distracting me," she complains, making her cousin laugh. "Look, she's already on the court. We're late," she says and quickens her pace.

"Speak for yourself. I'm just a spectator who, by the way, needs to pee."

Emily stops and turns to her just as they reach the court.

"Why didn't you go to the bathroom when we were at the office?" she asks while pulling her hair into a high ponytail.

"How could I when you practically dragged me to the elevator?" her cousin counters.

Emily smiles and turns to enter the court, where Leah greets her, racket in hand.

"Hi, sorry I'm late," Emily apologizes with a wide smile that twists Leah's stomach.

"You're not late," the tennis player says, checking the time. "There's still a minute to go."

Emily broadens her smile and opens her bag to take out her racket just as Mia passes by the back of the court.

"By the way," Emily says. "Could my cousin use the locker room restroom? The poor thing couldn't go during the two hours we spent in my office," she adds, glancing sideways at Emma.

Leah laughs and nods.

"I would have if you'd let me breathe," Emma defends herself, rolling her eyes. "Where are the locker rooms?"

Leah is about to answer, but a wicked impulse crosses her mind, and with a mischievous smile, she raises her hand and calls Mia, who approaches slowly when she notices the presence of Emily's rude cousin.

"Would you mind showing Emma where the locker rooms are so she can use the bathroom?" Leah asks, holding back laughter when Mia pierces her with a look.

"It would be my pleasure," she says and signals Emma to follow her.

"So you're the girl for everything," Emma quips as she follows a couple of steps behind, taking the opportunity to check out her butt with a boldness that seems unlike her.

Mia ignores her and continues walking until they reach the building where the women's locker room is located.

"I'll wait here," Mia says, leaning her shoulder against a tree in front of the building while crossing her arms over her chest with a casual air.

Emma finds this strangely sexy, which irritates her.

"I don't need a ball girl to wait for me," she spits venomously.

Mia looks her up and down, unfazed by the comment, and smiles.

"You certainly don't. What you need is some manners and a good lay," Mia retorts, surprising Emma. "Especially the latter it would definitely help with that bad attitude you seem to have in excess. Besides," she adds, straightening up when Emma opens her mouth to protest, "this ball girl here," Mia points to herself while taking a few steps toward her, "could beat you on the court without breaking a sweat."

Anger climbs up Emma's neck, and she gets so close to Mia that there's barely room for air between them.

"We can test that whenever you want," she says with an arrogance that really bothers Mia.

"There's a free court. We can test it right now," she says, maintaining eye contact.

Emma feels like she's about to spit her heart out of her mouth, though she's not sure if it's from anger or something else.

"Get a couple of rackets while I go to the bathroom, ball girl," Emma hisses, pushing her body against Mia's, who flashes a cocky smile while thinking about how much

she'll enjoy making this snob run around the court.

"Great job, Emily!" Leah shouts when her clumsiest student returns the third consecutive shot.

After practicing serves during the first fifteen minutes, forehand shots during the second, and backhand during the third, she's now decided to simply rally with Emily to give her a break at the end of the training session. Besides, she's noticed that this is when Emily seems to enjoy herself the most, as if all she needs is to run after the ball and try to return it.

The tennis player sends another gentle shot, making the ball bounce just a couple of meters away to ensure Emily can return it, and prepares to run because, while Emily might manage to return the ball, the direction she sends it is another matter entirely.

"In the next class, we'll focus on getting all your balls to land on the opposite side," she smiles after running to the net to cut off the ball, aware that it would have gone so high it would have left the court.

"I'd be happy if just a few of them made it in," the lawyer laughs, and Leah stops, placing her racket between her legs to tighten her ponytail.

"You shouldn't settle. You'll improve, I promise. It's just a matter of time. We've managed to get you to focus for more than two minutes at a time now it's every five," Leah jokes, drawing a laugh from Emily, who approaches her, considering the training session over.

"Thanks for being so patient with me," she says, surprising the tennis player, who narrows her eyes.

"It's my job, Emily. You don't need to thank me."

"That's not true. I've had other trainers before," the lawyer explains, shrugging her shoulders as they walk toward the bench, separated by the net. "At first, they have patience, but it runs out quickly when they realize how clumsy I am. You, on the other hand, always treat me the same way—you even seem to enjoy it."

Emily mentions this as if it's normal, but rage gnaws at Leah, and she considers asking who Emily has trained with, but she doesn't want to upset herself. Instead, she turns to Emily and blocks her path just before they reach the bench.

"I do enjoy it, Emily," she confesses in a burst of honesty. "Your class is always the most fun of the day, and it's not just because you're a bit clumsy, though that's part of it," she adds with a wink that shakes the lawyer's insides like an earthquake. "You're a very pleasant and fun woman. It's very difficult to get bored with you."

"Wow, thanks," Emily says, equally stunned and moved. "I have a great time with you too. I love coming here, training, and..." Emily realizes that if she continues down this path, she might say something she shouldn't, so she decides to change the subject. "Where did my cousin go?"

Leah turns toward the fence, grateful that Emily has shifted a conversation that was getting out of hand, and furrows her brow when she realizes she hasn't seen Mia either.

"I'd say they haven't returned from the locker room, though I'm not sure," she says while wiping her neck and arms with a towel.

"I'm not either. I haven't really noticed," Emily laughs, and they look at each other for a moment, aware that they've been so focused on one another that everything around them has disappeared.

"Well, grab your things, and I'll walk with you to find her if you want," Leah

suggests.

The two women head toward the bar, the only place they assume Emma might be, but halfway there, Leah stops when she hears a girl's grunt after a racket strike. She turns because she knows that sound well it's Mia when she returns a shot with fury.

"There they are," says Leah, pointing to one of the courts where the two women watch in perplexity as Emma and Mia run from side to side, hitting the ball as if their lives depended on the match.

"I've never seen Emma run so much," Emily comments, amused. "And those sneakers? Where did she get them?" she asks, surprised to see her without the heels she never parts with.

"Mia must have lent them to her," Leah concludes, crossing her arms while proudly observing her employee's good play.

"Well, looks like I'll have to wait," Emily says, staying beside Leah.

Silence falls between them for a couple of minutes until the tennis player decides to break it, driven by curiosity.

"I've never asked you, Emily, but where does your passion for tennis come from?"

Emily smiles and shrugs her shoulders.

"I'd say from nowhere in particular. I've always liked sports, all of them in general, but tennis is my weakness. Having a racket in my hand and being able to run to return the ball fascinates me, and it seems like something simple to practice as a hobby, I mean," Emily pauses briefly to clear her throat while Leah watches her expectantly, "it's a sport with easy rules, and to have a good time, all you need to do is return the

ball to the other side of the net, but as you can see, even that's hard for me. I'd kill to be able to play a match just for fun."

"You can play a match, Emily," Leah frowns.

Emily laughs and waves her hand as if shooing away a fly.

"Not really. The only one who agrees to play with me is my cousin, but the poor thing gets bored because either I miss the ball completely or I send it out of bounds. So when she asks me to play, I always tell her I can't."

Leah twists her expression.

"We could play doubles," the tennis player says.

"Doubles?" Emily asks.

"In pairs. You and me against Mia and your cousin, to balance things out. The balls you miss, I'll return, and Emma won't have to run all over the court to return them because she'll have Mia's help."

If Leah had known the excitement her proposal would bring to Emily's face, she would have suggested it sooner.

"Would you play with us?" she asks, nearly jumping.

"Of course," Leah smiles.

"And you'd be on my team? I'm terrible, you know..."

"I'll be with you," Leah cuts her off.

"What if they don't want to?" Emily wonders, turning toward the court where Mia scores the point that wins her the match. "Well, Emma will say yes, but Mia might..."

"Mia will play too, don't worry," Leah confirms. "We'll find a slot next week and set it up."

"Like I told you, I beat you," Mia says smugly as she passes by Emma, who's burning with rage.

"That's only because I'm not wearing the right clothes," she argues, looking at her skinny jeans.

"You should have changed them. I offered you clothes, but since you're a stuck-up princess..."

"Don't you call me stuck-up, ball girl," she huffs, running after her.

"I'm not sure they'll want to play together," Emily says as she watches the spectacle with Leah.

"Of course they will," the tennis player replies, unfazed. "Ladies, make peace," she says, approaching the two. "Next week, the four of us will play a match, you two against us, so stop arguing unless you want us to crush you."

"Lose to Emily?" Emma can't contain her laughter as she hugs her cousin. "Sorry, it must be the sun. I don't know what I'm saying," she apologizes and kisses her on the cheek.

Emily couldn't care less about the comment. She's used to hearing things like that. She knows she's bad at tennis, but she's happy because she'll play a match, and she'll be with Leah.

"Well, I'll leave you. I have to teach my last class of the day," Leah says when she sees Alison Young, her most promising student, walking by.

"See you next week then," Emily says goodbye, giving her a broad smile.

"I want a rematch with you," Emma declares, giving Mia a small shoulder bump as she passes by.

"She's hateful," Mia grumbles in Leah's ear.

"Be careful, Mia," Leah smiles mockingly. "You know what they say: there's a thin line between love and hate."

"With her? I'd rather chew glass."

Leah's laughter echoes as she walks away from the court, leaving Mia with the ball tube in her hand and her gaze fixed on Emma Harris's back.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Attorney Emily Harris has counted the hours until this day arrived. The match that Leah organized has been a kind of incentive that made the week pass quickly. On the weekend she went to the mall, which isn't her habit; in fact, Emily hates malls because they're crowded and it's almost impossible to move around comfortably, but she had a mission and was determined to complete it: buy new equipment to face the duo of Emma and Mia. The saleswoman spent two hours with her; the lawyer tried on skirts, dresses, sneakers, and even visors, renewed her sports attire and also took the opportunity to get a couple of new rackets. Most people don't understand Emily's excessive passion for sports, much less why she doesn't give up despite how bad she is at them. She doesn't need to explain herself, only her cousin understands clearly that, besides enjoying running after a ball to return it, constant movement greatly distresses Emily.

She appreciates these lessons with Leah, especially now that she's going through a trial that seems like a pain in the ass where she has all the advantages, but the prosecution keeps filing motions to buy time and gather evidence to incriminate her client. She's experienced many like this before, although this one has that special tinge that makes Emily live between past and present, because seeing her ex-partner almost every day, that woman she once loved so much and who shattered her, isn't exactly what she wants. She has noticed Vanesa's intense gaze on her several times while they're in the courtroom and, when they leave, she feels like the other lawyer wants to talk to her. Emily simply does her job and leaves, but she can't shake that unsettling feeling that one day Vanesa will approach her.

"Be careful, Emily," Emma's hand wraps around her cousin's arm.

As is now completely normal, Emily has tripped on a curb when both women got out

of the car after parking it in the Walker Elite Sport Club lot. The two walk and, although they appear relaxed on the outside, reality is quite different. Emily feels nervous, scared, and excited all at once. She's been waiting for a long time to play a match, though she can't help thinking that maybe the others won't enjoy it as much as she will because it will be difficult to have the typical rallying between opponents on the courts. It's no secret to any of them that the lawyer can barely stay on her feet without falling. Emma, for her part, doesn't know what she feels; the only thing she's sure of is that playing with Leah Walker's employee has cost her sleep the night before, and she isn't clear about the reason. Obviously, there's animosity between them; Emma thinks Mia is haughty, arrogant, presumptuous, and has an ass she could lose herself in for hours. She quickly eliminates that thought; she's Emma Harris and she doesn't date—or like—ball girls.

Leah and Mia Clark are already on the court, they've hit the ball back and forth for a while, but really they've been talking about a little bit of everything. When they're together, that's what happens; despite the age difference, Mia, at twenty-five, has become a confidante for the tennis player. She knows how her relationship with Stella is going, when her mothers drive her crazy, or even how the club is doing financially. The only thing Leah hasn't told her yet is that small tsunami she's been feeling lately in the pit of her stomach when she spends time with Emily Harris. She hasn't shared it because she doesn't know what it means herself, if she just likes her, if her carefree personality attracts her, or if she simply likes her and that's it because she's a woman who has all the ingredients that fascinate Leah. Until she figures out what's happening, she'll keep it to herself.

"Emily looks like a true professional," Mia says when she sees the cousins approaching. Both are dressed impeccably in tennis dresses, light pink for Emma and white for Emily.

"Emma too," Leah blurts out; she loves teasing Mia with these comments.

In reality, Mia hasn't taken her eyes off the prissy Harris. Since she entered the club, she's felt a murmur settle in her ears, like that story where a man attracted animals through his music. The club employee feels irresistibly drawn to that aura and knows clearly there's something dark about someone like Emma catching her attention.

"Hello," Emily greets with her radiant smile when she reaches the court.

Leah gets hooked on that gesture.

"Good afternoon, today it seems less hot than expected," the tennis player answers looking at the sky with her hands on her waist.

"Then let's not waste time," Emily says as she tosses her bag carelessly on the bench and takes out her racket.

Everyone does the same and Emma disguises her gaze. Mia isn't wearing her usual club employee uniform; this time she wears a skirt and a sleeveless shirt that reveal well-toned arms.

"Looks like you like them," says Mia, who has spent a few seconds watching Emma check her out without mercy. The lawyer hadn't realized her error.

"I'd rather die, ball girl," she spits. "I'm playing on this side," she points to the court on her left.

"Fine with me," she replies in a cocky tone. "I'm good at playing on any side of the court."

As said, an arrogant one.

"Alright, girls. Let's rally for a few minutes and then we'll start, okay?" Leah asks,

raising her voice to make sure everyone hears her.

"Roger that!" Emily suddenly shouts, making side-to-side movements with her legs.

Leah lets out a small laugh; Emily Harris is one of a kind.

After the ball travels from one side of the court to the other for a while, Leah Walker announces the start of the match. They're all aware they should play calmly and pass soft balls to Emily so she can return them; after all, the activity has been organized so the lawyer can have some fun. A few hours earlier, Leah realized she planned this match just to make Emily happy.

"Come on, Emily!" Leah shouts, encouraging her.

Emily sprints and reaches the ball, but before she can hit it with the racket, she slips and falls sideways to the ground. She immediately stands up and brushes the dirt off her skirt.

"I'm fine," she confirms when the other three players run over. "Come on, let's go, we're cooling down."

Emily does several small jumps bringing one knee to her chest and then the other.

"Wake up, we're losing," Emma grumbles, unable to stand Mia's amused face.

"Stop being so competitive," Mia replies, positioning herself while waiting for Leah's serve. "We're having fun."

Emma huffs, knowing the match is mere entertainment and her cousin's smile is worth every second she's there, but she can't help contradicting the girl beside her; her crooked smile and mocking expression make her sick.

"Then have fun winning," Emma spits.

Mia ignores her and returns Leah's serve. She softly sets it up for Emily and the lawyer, concentrated with furrowed brow, takes two steps and touches it with her racket. The ball goes to the other side of the court and Emily shouts happily while raising both arms in celebration, at which point Mia reaches the ball again and they score a point because Emily was distracted.

Leah laughs, amused, she can't believe it. She approaches the lawyer; as her coach, she must correct her.

"Emily, when you return the ball, you have to pay attention to the next play."

"Did you see that, Leah? I passed it to Mia," Emily says, happy.

"Yes, I saw, but if you don't stay in position, what happened now occurs: the opponents scored a point."

Emily listens with a unique expression of attention while nodding her head.

"Okay," the lawyer answers, "let's go for it."

The match continues in the same vein. Soft balls and measured movements except from Emily, who jumps like a cricket, throws herself on the court trying to save a ball that's too low, and hits such powerful shots that more than once she sends the ball out of the court. In a movement that's meant to be a play, Emily crosses in front of Leah and she almost crashes into her. The tennis player has good reflexes, so she manages to move aside and then prevent another fall by the lawyer.

"Are you okay?" both are pressed together, sweaty and breathing fast, and Emily thinks it's an incredible moment.

"Perfectly," the attorney answers with a wide, beautiful smile.

Leah nods, nervous, and returns to her position. The duo continues having fun, as does Mia, but Emma is frustrated. She doesn't know why that permanent smile on her partner's face and the way she ignores her bothers her so much, so she starts behaving like a spoiled brat who just wants attention, though she reminds herself she's not trying to do that, much less to make that girl notice her.

"Let's go!" Emma shouts raising a fist; it's the second time she returns one of Leah's plays and scores a point by sending it past Emily's side.

Mia huffs.

"Relax, we're not at the Australian Open."

"This is knowing how to play," Emma responds without looking at her. "The other day you got lucky."

Mia ignores her again and waits a few seconds when Leah calls time to talk with Emily.

"I'm sorry, the ball comes too fast," the lawyer apologizes.

Leah knows it; her cousin is slipping them all past her, that's why she scores the points, and it bothers her that she's using her like that.

"Do you want to win?" Leah asks her without answering that apology because it seems absurd; Emily doesn't have to justify herself.

The lawyer's eyes light up and she smiles.

"Yes, I want to win."

"Then let's win," the tennis player states.

The beatdown is almost hard to watch. Leah has made serves that turned the ball into a missile, has run across the entire court returning balls, both those that come to her side and those that Emily watches pass by her side without being able to do anything, showing her power and humiliating their opponents. She knows it's cheating, but hearing Emily laugh and seeing that excited face makes the tennis player want to cheat many times. What Leah doesn't expect is that, after the last point—the one that proclaims them winners—Emily celebrates in that way.

"Take that!" the lawyer shouts and runs across her side of the court to end up climbing onto Leah Walker's body, giving her a fleeting kiss on the lips and jumping away from her to continue celebrating the victory.

It's a silly thing, a gesture that at first glance isn't of great importance, but Leah remains completely paralyzed. She has felt warmth on her lips, fluttering in her chest, and an exquisite vibration in her belly. It reminds her of those times when they won a big match, that pulsating excitement, the racing heart. She hasn't experienced it for a long time, and a tiny gesture from a woman has made her body feel that burning sensation she missed so much.

"Good match," Emily says politely while extending a hand to her opponents.

Emma narrows her eyes and Mia laughs with happiness.

"You played very well," the club employee answers. "The improvement shows."

Although Emma dislikes this girl—very much, she repeats to herself—she likes that she has this attitude with Emily. It's clear she's not doing it to suck up to her, but to

encourage her to keep training.

"Did you see that backhand?" Emily asks, making such an abrupt movement with the racket that she nearly loses her balance. Mia stretches out an arm and steadies her.

"I saw it," the girl answers. "Try doing it with less force and you'll see how it comes out better."

"How about we get something to refresh ourselves?" Leah proposes and puts an arm around Mia's shoulders. She knows her and she's quite capable of staying to clean up the court instead of joining them; there's more staff for that.

Once seated with drinks ordered at the bar, the three women remain silent. Each one of them mentally thanks Emily for not stopping talking about the match, how good she felt, and the plays they all made. Emma still has her head muddled; there's a force, a magnet that makes her want to be near Mia, but her brain sabotages her by repeating that a Harris has to be with someone of her status. It's absurd because in her family that doesn't exist, those stupid differences between social classes, and despite that, she has mixed with people during part of her life who do give it importance, and it seems that a part of that thinking has tattooed itself to her hippocampus. Mia, however, is clear that she's attracted to the lawyer, a prissy woman with airs of superiority that she could perfectly keep in check. Nevertheless, she feels a slight annoyance thinking that Emma doesn't notice her because she considers her a simple ball girl. Leah tries to control the whirlwind in her head, although she doesn't feel any kind of anguish. She only has her heart so accelerated that she needs a few minutes to calm down; Emily is the cause of her revolution.

"We have to do this again," Emily says, "if you want to, of course."

"I'm in, we could..."

Mia can't continue the sentence because her phone starts ringing. It's a number she doesn't have registered in her contacts, so she gets up from the chair and moves a few meters away from the table after apologizing to her companions.

"But, is he okay?"

The voice of anguish reaches the table and the three women turn to look at her. Mia has gone pale and moves erratically. Leah doesn't hesitate, approaches her and, when she hangs up, they exchange a few words.

"Let's go, I'll drive you," the tennis player offers. "Girls, I'm sorry. Mia's brother has had an accident and we're going to the hospital."

Emma gets scared. Emily turns serious.

"Do you need anything?" the question comes from Emily's mouth.

"Don't worry," Leah says while picking up her phone from the table. "Thank you."

The two women leave hurriedly under the watchful gaze of the cousins who remain silent, knowing that there go two people who don't stop dancing in their thoughts.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

In moments like this, Leah is grateful to be an athlete, because Mia practically drags her running through the hospital until they reach the hallway where they've been told Aaron is being treated.

Elena Morris, Aaron's foster mother, rises from her chair in the waiting area and walks toward her as soon as she spots her.

"What happened?" Mia asks, nearly spitting her heart out of her mouth.

"He fell, but it's not serious, Mia, I'm sorry for scaring you. The blood made me very nervous," Elena explains, visibly agitated. "It looks like he cut his chin. They're giving him some stitches now, we can go in soon."

"Why don't you both sit down?" Leah suggests, pointing to some plastic chairs against the wall.

"How did it happen?" Mia asks when they take their seats.

Elena swallows hard and takes Mia's hand between hers. The woman appears so distressed that Leah, who stands by the door of the treatment room where Aaron is as if she's his guardian, gets the impression that the woman felt genuine panic about the incident.

"He fell down the stairs. They're old and some steps are loose. Tom fixes them when he can, but lately he hasn't been feeling well, and well, he's been putting it off," the woman brings her hand to her mouth and holds back a sob.

"Well, it's okay, it was an accident," Mia says.

"If I had known this was going to happen..." the woman laments, shaking her head.

"You couldn't have predicted it, Elena," Mia tries to calm her, a bit thrown by the woman's reaction.

"I know, but my job is to take care of him," she says, and stops talking when her eyes focus on the end of the hallway.

Mia follows her gaze and opens her eyes wide when she recognizes the figure of the woman walking toward them with a coffee in hand: Tamara Burk, the social worker in charge of Aaron's case.

"What's she doing here?" Mia asks Elena.

"The hospital called her, it's protocol, you know that."

Mia sometimes forgets that everything that happens in her brother's life goes through this woman. She'd like to hate her, but she can't she was the one who interceded on her behalf so she could take him for two weekends a month.

"Here you go, Elena," the woman says when she reaches them. "Drink it slowly, it's very hot. Mia, Leah," she greets the two newcomers.

"Hello, Tamara," they both respond at the same time.

"I assume Elena has already filled you in. It wasn't anything serious, you'll be able to see him soon," Tamara reassures her, and Mia sighs as if she needs confirmation that her brother is okay from someone who projects more calm than his foster mother.

"Thank you," Mia says, and Tamara takes a couple of steps away from Elena.

"I was going to contact you this week to discuss a matter, Mia, but since we're here, I can tell you now."

"What is it?" she asks, feeling the air freeze in her lungs at the woman's serious expression.

Leah puts a hand on her back and walks with her as they move down the hallway to a quiet corner by a window.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morris can no longer take care of Aaron. We have six months to find him a new family."

Mia wants to say something, but the words won't come out and she stumbles backward. Suddenly everything spins and she feels like screaming. Not another new family Aaron can't go through that again, and neither can she. Her brother needs to be with her. Rage begins to climb up her neck, her cheeks flush red, and her eyes well up with tears.

"Why?" she asks, her voice strangled.

"Mr. Morris has been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. He's frequently forgetful, he forgets things; well, you know how terrible that disease is. Elena can't handle everything she can't care for Aaron properly if she needs to watch over her husband, and for us, Aaron's well-being comes first. This time it was a loose step that the poor man forgot to fix, but as the disease progresses, it could be something worse. Aaron can't stay there, so the judge has given us six months to find him another home."

"He can come live with me, Tamara. I'm doing everything the judge required," Mia

pleads, and Leah takes her hand and squeezes it affectionately.

Mia has been fighting for custody of her brother for too long, and the tennis player thinks it's unfair that she hasn't been granted it. When they first met, Mia wasn't at her best, and out of pure desperation, she had done things that didn't help her case at all. After leaving the juvenile center where she was sent following her parents' arrest, they left her on the street with practically nothing. The bank had foreclosed on the house where they had lived, and Mia not only had nowhere to live, but as the daughter of criminals, no one wanted to give her work, so she had no choice but to commit some thefts until one of them landed her in jail for three months.

It was after getting out that she met Leah under somewhat special circumstances that led the tennis player to give her a chance, first working as a gardener at her house and later as a caddie when she retired and opened her own club. The bonds between them strengthened, and Leah paid for the best family lawyer they could find to help her with Aaron, but since Mia had a criminal record, all the man managed to get was a deal with the judge.

"You still have another year to go, Mia," Tamara says. "The judge required you to have a steady job, a home for Aaron, and five years without committing a single crime."

"There must be something you can do, Tamara," Leah interjects with a clenched jaw. "The state protected Aaron, but they basically forced her to break the law by leaving her without support. What was she supposed to do? She's trying her hardest, Tamara. I've never seen anyone more committed than her, and you know perfectly well that Aaron belongs with his sister. You said you have six months to find him a place by then, Mia will only have another six months to fulfill the judge's terms. Are you really going to make Aaron go through this crap again?"

"I'm sorry, Leah, but that's the law. I can speak in your favor if you get a good lawyer

and try again," she tells Mia. "Aaron's case won't go through the normal channels everything has to happen faster because he needs to leave that house as soon as possible. Find a lawyer who can sell you as the best candidate. It'll help if you can testify on her behalf," she says to Leah. "I'll do the same when they ask me, and I don't know, if you have anyone else who can do it, that would be perfect, but don't get your hopes up, Mia. Everything will depend on the decision of the judge handling the case now."

"What about the time I still need?" Mia asks, very nervous.

"Do you think they'll waive it?" Leah asks.

"I don't know. Judges are very strict about these things, Leah," Tamara responds, "but it's all I can think of to keep Aaron from going back into that cycle. All I'm saying is that if you decide to try, I'll testify in Mia's favor."

"Thank you," Mia says, almost voiceless.

"You're welcome. I have to go. I'll call you this week to update you. If you decide to seek custody again, let me know."

Tamara Burk says goodbye to them and walks down the hallway toward Elena Morris.

"Damn," Mia gasps, resting her hands on her knees. "I can't afford an expensive lawyer, Leah," she sobs as Leah grabs her arm to help her stand up straight.

"I'll take care of that, don't worry."

Mia smiles and hugs her, not knowing how to thank her for everything she's done for her and her brother since they met.

"I need to start looking. I don't want you to hire that guy again, he was already about to retire then and..."

"We're not calling him. I'm going to talk to Emily. My mother has been snooping around, and her firm is one of the most prestigious in the county. They must have plenty of lawyers who handle these things. Let me handle bringing it up to her. Now let's go see Aaron," she says, and puts an arm around her shoulders as they start walking down the hallway.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

The day in Charleston is perfect, with radiant sunshine that disappears behind clouds for a while, giving respite before reappearing with force. Despite the heat, the breeze is pleasant, and Emily Harris predicts she'll have a good day. She started her morning at the courthouse; she doesn't have a trial, though she does need to deliver documentation requested by the judge. Then she met with two clients at her office and helped her mother prepare a proposal she wants to present to a company that has requested her services. Now she enjoys what she considers the best moment, her tennis training at the Walker Elite Sport Club. The lawyer observes people playing with enthusiasm; some shout, others curse when a play goes wrong, but overall everyone seems happy to be there. She searches on her phone for her court number and walks toward it with determination. Over the weeks, Emily has gained confidence on the court; she truly feels she has improved this time and, though she knows she'll never reach a high level, as long as she can play and have fun, it's enough.

She frowns when she sees Leah on the court waiting for her. This isn't typical; Emily always arrives early and her trainer comes a few minutes later. She notices Leah lost in thought, staring at a ball bouncing against the ground as she hits it with her racket.

"Hello," Emily greets, and Leah can't help but startle. "Sorry if I scared you."

Leah focuses on her and smiles; Emily always puts her in a good mood.

"I was distracted," the tennis player answers. "How are you?"

"Ready for training," she replies euphorically and approaches the bench to put down her bag. "By the way, how's Mia's brother? I was worried."

"He's fine, it was just a fall. Thanks for asking," she responds without giving many details.

Leah grabs the cart with the balls and drags it to the center of the court. She loosens the elastic tying her hair and redoes it more carefully. Emily watches her and thinks she's a beautiful woman, one whose simplicity enhances her beauty.

"Ready?" Leah asks when she notices Emily standing still.

The attorney snaps out of her daze and, before she starts walking, the racket slips from her hand. She bends down, picks it up, and gives Leah a childlike look. The trainer smiles at her and shakes her head.

"Hey, I want to discuss a personal matter with you. Can we talk when we finish training?" Leah asks as Emily approaches her.

The lawyer makes a face of annoyance because she already has an appointment at the office and considers whether, from Leah's expression, the matter is very urgent. She doesn't think so – or that's what she imagines – because otherwise, the woman would have given more details.

"I have an appointment with a client after this," Emily answers without much enthusiasm. "But I'll be home at eight; if you want, we can meet there and talk."

"I'll adapt to your schedule," Leah smiles, and Emily finds that upward curve of her lips perfect. "I'll be at your house at eight."

"Great. Everything okay?" Emily inquires.

"Yes," she assures her. "I just need some advice from you."

Emily nods and decides to wait for the evening appointment to find out what's happening.

"Well, today we'll warm up as usual and then practice focus," Leah begins explaining to Emily as they both make circular movements with their shoulders. "I want you to start concentrating solely on returning the ball and following it until it's your turn to hit it again. For now, it will be static; you'll stay in the same spot and then start moving a few steps."

Emily agrees and confirms it with an energetic head movement and a radiant smile, one of hers. They stretch their legs, warm up their ankles and arms. They jog a couple of laps, and when they're ready, Leah stands in front of her, a few meters away, and starts hitting soft balls to her. Emily misses the first one because the sound of a woman celebrating her victory makes her turn her head to find the source of the shout.

"Emily," Leah calls her. "Focus on the training."

The lawyer realizes her distraction and grimaces.

"I'm sorry," she answers and widens her stance to position herself.

The trainer manages to get Emily to focus and return the ball most of the time. Leah corrects her to make her stroke softer and avoid sending the ball so far. Minutes pass, and the women start to sweat. The lawyer seems to have taken her task of keeping her eyes on the yellow sphere literally, because her furrowed brow and tight lips give her an air of extreme concentration.

Mia Clark appears on the left path, dragging a cannon-shaped device. She enters the court, and when Leah notices her presence, she checks her wristwatch and realizes that half an hour has passed since the training began. She always has that feeling

when she's with Emily, that time flies; with her, everything seems simpler.

"How's it going, Emily?" asks Mia, who places the device next to where Leah is standing.

The lawyer notices something different about the girl. That usual spark in her eyes is missing, and she wants to ask if she's okay. She doesn't, not wanting to be intrusive because, despite having a good relationship, she feels she doesn't have enough trust.

"I think better," Emily responds to her question and makes one of her exaggerated movements, stepping forward – too far forward – and swinging her racket as if she were about to hit someone.

Mia smiles, but only halfway, and Emily bites her cheeks to keep from asking what's wrong. Leah speaks, and she appreciates it because it prevents her from continuing with that indecisive thought.

"This is a ball launcher," the tennis player begins explaining as she touches the device with one hand. "The exercise we'll do now is very similar to what we were practicing; the difference is that this time you'll have to move a little. Mia will direct it so you can follow the ball, and I'll be behind you giving some instructions, okay?"

Emily's heart gallops forcefully. She knows it's a simple practice, but one that gradually increases in difficulty. She's never minded doing poorly; she focuses on having fun, though for some unknown reason, she wants to excel, wants to show Leah that she has learned and that everything is improving.

"Understood," she answers firmly. "I'm ready."

Leah gives her a gentle pat on the back as if to tell her she'll be there. Emily loves the gesture, and it makes her relax slightly.

"Mia, on my signal," she asks the caddie and then speaks to her student. "Focus on the ball and my voice. When I tell you to move, I'll indicate which direction. Short steps, Mia will make sure the ball comes out with little force."

Leah raises an arm, and Mia activates the ball launcher and moves it a bit.

"Left," Leah whispers, close to Emily's back.

The lawyer, who isn't made of steel, feels such a shiver down her spine that she freezes. The ball rolls to her left, and Leah watches it until it stops.

"You have to move so you can return the ball," the trainer explains again, mistakenly thinking Emily didn't understand her well, ignoring how the lawyer's stomach vibrated at her whisper.

"Sorry, I don't know what came over me," the lawyer lies.

"Come on, are you ready?"

"I am."

The steps repeat: Leah raises her hand, Mia adjusts the machine, the trainer whispers, and this time Emily moves. She takes two steps to the right and manages to hit the ball, though she does it with such force that she sends it off the court. Even so, she celebrates as if she just won a championship.

"Good, good, Emily," Leah congratulates her. "Right now we're not practicing strength, just moving and returning the ball. Although it would be good for you to start thinking that, in many cases, less is more. There are plays that require strength, but others, like this one, don't. Let's go again."

The next thirty minutes pass with the cannon launching balls from left to right and Emily moving across the court with increasing confidence. Some of her shots are soft, and others are missiles. One nearly hits Mia in the head.

"I loved today's training," Emily tells the tennis player once they've finished and both clean off their sweat and drink water.

"Didn't you like the others?" Leah teases her, and Emily narrows her eyes.

"You know I did, but now I feel more confident. I think I've learned more than ever."

Before Leah can answer, Mia approaches to remind her about the training on court three and that she'll wait for her there, says goodbye to Emily, and leaves.

"See you tonight at my house?" the lawyer asks to confirm the appointment.

"Yes, you need to give me your address."

"If you want, you can give me your phone number, and I'll send it to you by message."

Emily feels her feat has been incredible. She has very easily obtained Leah's number and with it the excuse to perhaps invite her to lunch someday. She likes the tennis player and, being true to what she has been feeling lately, is quite sure she feels some attraction toward her. It's been a while since she's asked anyone out. She has dated women and had a good time, but something in her brain tells her Leah isn't one of those, so if she ever decides to meet with her on a more personal level, she needs to be sure of it.

After the exchange, the women say goodbye, and Leah walks to the court where she's scheduled to give her next class. She observes Mia getting everything ready and

knows her friend is truly having a hard time. She can tell even in the way she walks.

"Tonight I'm meeting with Emily to talk about Aaron," Leah explains while looking at the caddy with affection. "You'll see how we manage to solve it."

Mia just approaches her and hugs her. It's gratitude, affection, a sense of sisterhood. Leah is all she has besides Aaron, and she doesn't hesitate to admit that without her, she would be lost.

It's eight minutes past eight in the evening when Leah rings the doorbell at Emily Harris's house. From the outside, it's a beautiful building, typical of Charleston, though with a somewhat more modern touch. From where Leah stands, it seems like a small house compared to others in the neighborhood. It doesn't take long before she hears footsteps, and a few seconds later, the door opens. Leah's breath catches; in front of her, Emily is dressed in dark blue linen pants and a completely white short-sleeved t-shirt. Her hair is down, though on the left side a clip holds it back, while the right side falls across her face. This is Emily, the lawyer, not the woman who loves sports and is a bit – or very – clumsy. Leah loves the contrast, she's fascinated seeing her dressed like this, just as much as in sportswear, ready to use the racket. Her mind collapses when she remembers her sweating on the court at her club and, suddenly, imagines her with a brow beaded with sweat in another scenario.

"Come in," Emily says and steps aside. "Did you find parking?"

Leah realizes it's a typical question she uses to break the ice with clients, because the area where her house is located has plenty of free street parking.

"Yes, right in front," the tennis player answers and enters the living room of her student's house.

The interior of the home is more beautiful than Leah imagined. That combination of

the classic elegance that South Carolina houses have with modern details enhances its charm. The ceilings are high and create a sense of spaciousness, while the floors are made of a material that the tennis player can't quite determine. The living room preserves a marble fireplace that seems to have been there for more than a century, but instead of the heavy furniture of yesteryear, there's a modular sofa in neutral tones with linen cushions and a minimalist wood and metal center table. An industrial design pendant lamp hangs over the dining table, which is a perfect blend between rustic and contemporary: reclaimed wood with black steel legs.

"Your house is impressive, Emily," Leah verbalizes as the lawyer invites her to sit.

Emily smiles and scans her living room with her eyes.

"I'm delighted with the result," she explains. "It belonged to my grandparents; the house is very cozy, but the lot was immense, so I made two divisions and sold them. I kept just enough and also preserved much of its origin."

"I would have loved for mine to be more in this style. Don't misunderstand me, I like it a lot, although perhaps it's too big and modern."

The fleeting thought of being in that house crosses Emily's mind, having dinner one night or breakfast one morning after...

"Must be dinner," the lawyer clears her throat when the doorbell rings and smooths out invisible wrinkles in her pants. "I ordered some food while you tell me what you want to consult me about."

Emily disappears and when she returns to the living room, she does so carrying two bags. She approaches the table and takes out some packages that smell so good that Leah immediately starts salivating.

"I hope you like roast beef sandwiches," Emily says and signals for her to sit at the table. "The ones from Giselle's are my favorite."

"I haven't tried them," the tennis player laughs at Emily's astonished face.

"Prepare yourself to taste a delicacy then," she opens a can of blonde beer, "which we will of course accompany with this elixir."

The sandwich is filled with well-seasoned roast beef cooked in a wood-fired oven for more than twenty-four hours. The result is veal that's like butter, soft and light, melting at the first bite.

"Damn, this is good," says Leah as she chews and closes her eyes. Then she takes a sip of the ice-cold beer.

"Told you," Emily takes pride in her choice.

A few minutes later, the women are back on the sofa. Emily has asked Leah to provide context for what she needs, and the tennis player has begun her account, updating her on everything that's happening with Aaron. She explains Mia's past, though she omits certain details that she believes aren't hers to tell; she shares what's necessary for Emily, as a professional, to advise her.

"The previous lawyer didn't do a bad job, but I think he could have achieved more," Leah concludes.

"In cases like these, the options are few, though there's always some alternative path to take," she tells her. "At my family's firm, we've already handled similar cases, and I can help Mia. First, before telling you anything else, I need to see all the documentation she has on the case. That way, we'll begin to get an idea of which strategy to lean towards and, above all, know what we have against us and in our

favor."

Leah is fascinated. Emily speaks with firmness, with a composure given by experience. Her mother wasn't wrong in assuming the lawyer really likes her job.

"Emma will be the lead attorney," Emily continues, "I'm now handling a somewhat tedious case and can't neglect it, so she'll take care of everything necessary, and I'll help her."

"I'll ask Mia to prepare everything," Leah answers and takes out her phone to note down the details. "We also need to talk about fees; I'll take care of those."

Emily shakes her head.

"We'll talk about that later, don't worry."

The doorbell rings again, and Emily frowns. She apologizes to Leah and gets up to walk to the door. When she opens it, she finds her neighbor, a much older woman who takes excessive care of herself and appears much younger than she is. The woman hands her a pamphlet inviting some of those living in the area to attend a summer barbecue that she and her husband are organizing. Emily smiles at her and accepts the paper; she doesn't read it, she won't attend. Although she doesn't dislike the woman, she knows that her non-liberal position doesn't align with the lawyer's values.

When Emily returns, Leah is standing in front of a piece of furniture where several photographs are displayed; she studies them calmly, and the lawyer can't find her more beautiful. She doesn't know what's happening to her, but something urges her to approach her, to breathe the same oxygen. When she reaches Leah's back, the woman turns, and Emily, in a surge of confidence and desire, passes her hand over the tennis player's neck, raising it in a caress, and presses against her lips to kiss her. At first,

Leah doesn't move, though as soon as she feels the softness of Emily's skin, she takes her by the waist and pulls her close. The kiss lingers, it's slow, exploratory, and both are enjoying it. An annoying and repetitive sound is the only thing that manages to separate them.

"Sorry," Emily says, pulling away from Leah, "it's my work phone, and if it rings at this hour, it's because it's important."

Leah nods, dazed. She touches her lips while watching Emily turn to pick up the device. She reprimands herself many times because she isn't free to go around kissing women; she has a relationship with Stella that, although she's clear they aren't in love, deserves respect.

"Yes, right now, let me open my laptop," Emily says as she turns on the device and covers the earpiece. "It's my father," she whispers, "I'll be with you in a moment."

Leah feels somewhat suffocated and, as best she can, pretends to check her wristwatch.

"I have to go," she answers in the same whisper. "I need to stop by my mothers' house, and it's getting late."

Emily frowns. The excuse seems very implausible to her, and she immediately thinks her action wasn't appropriate. Kissing Leah like that was perhaps hasty; she's assumed something she doesn't know for certain, and now the tennis player might feel uncomfortable.

"Dad, give me a minute," Emily requests and approaches Leah. "I'm sorry, did that bother you?"

It's a silly question for Leah because she loved it; the problem is that her body

language tells the woman in front of her something different. She can't hide it, she doesn't feel good about what she's done; she has a girlfriend.

"I'm fine, don't worry," she answers and tries to sketch a smile that turns out terrible.

Emily still doesn't believe her, but she doesn't want to pressure her; besides, her father is waiting on the other end of the line.

"Tomorrow, Mia will get in touch with you. Thank you very much, Emily."

The lawyer also sketches a half-smile and watches as the woman who has awakened desires that seemed dormant leaves her house with her head down and without looking at her.

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When Emily enters her office the next day, she still feels the trace of Leah's lips on hers and can't stop smiling. She walks quickly through the room where all the attorneys work in their cubicles, greeting everyone until she reaches her cousin's desk.

"Can you come to my office?" she asks and continues walking without stopping.

Emily's mind is on the previous night, on that kiss and Leah's expression afterward. She noticed her confusion and is sure it was her action that prompted Leah to leave so hastily, but she also wants to trust Leah's word when she said everything was fine, convincing herself that was all it was—Leah just hadn't expected it.

"What's up?" Emma asks, entering her office practically right behind her.

Emily turns around, startled because she hadn't even heard her follow her down the hallway.

"Oh, you're already here, please sit down," she requests with a smile that stretches across her entire face.

"I really don't understand how you can be this happy so early," Emma says, thinking how wonderful it would be to rub her sleepy eyes if she hadn't already applied makeup.

"I kissed Leah last night," Emily blurts out as soon as she sits down.

That's not what she called her cousin in for, but it shot out without her meaning to,

and her honest smile doesn't fade.

Emma's mind is very foggy this early, but she doesn't take long to react.

"Again?" she asks and laughs.

"Again?" Emily repeats, confused.

"You kissed her at the club, Emily," Emma reminds her.

Emily blushes when she remembers, and the hair on the back of her neck suddenly stands up.

"Well, but that kiss wasn't important, I mean, it was just the heat of the moment," she justifies.

"Well, in that emotional outburst you could have kissed Mia, even me," Emma narrows her eyes, "but you kissed her. Anyway, that doesn't matter now, tell me about this other kiss, the one from last night."

Emily spreads that all-encompassing smile again, and her cousin feels envious. Even if just once in her life, she wishes she could convey the same sincere joy that Emily does.

"During practice, she asked me to stay afterward because she wanted to discuss something, but I couldn't because I had a meeting with a client here at the office, so I suggested we meet later at my place."

"You never miss an opportunity," Emma points out sarcastically.

Emily smiles and shrugs her shoulders.

"The thing is, she came over, we had dinner, talked, and I kissed her, just like that. And I loved it, Emma. That kiss wasn't like the one I gave her on the court; this one was intentional. I saw her standing there and suddenly realized I'd been wanting to do it since she walked into my house. And she kissed me back, but then my phone rang and interrupted us."

"Aha," says Emma. "And after that?"

"She left. I think she felt uncomfortable. That's the feeling I got, maybe she wasn't expecting it, though she told me everything was fine. Anyway, I don't know, I'll talk to her as soon as I see her," the lawyer concludes.

"And that's it?" Emma asks, perplexed.

"Of course, what do you want me to do?"

"Damn, you make everything seem so easy. I'd be freaking out," Emma admits.

"I'll stress out if I really need to, not before," Emily finishes. "Anyway, I didn't call you in for this, but for the reason Leah came to my house. Mia and her little brother, Aaron."

Emma wishes it hadn't happened, but just hearing Mia's name makes her heart skip a beat.

"What about them?"

Emily tells her in detail everything Leah told her last night.

"Shit, that's awful. I had no idea," says Emma.

"Neither did I. Leah asked me to handle the case, but I can't do it alone, so you'll be the lead attorney and I'll just supervise. Does that work for you?"

"Yes, sure, no problem."

"Are you sure?" Emily insists.

"What do you mean?" Emma asks, offended.

"I don't doubt your ability, but I know you and Mia don't get along very well. I'll understand if you'd prefer me to assign another attorney from the firm."

Emma stays silent for a moment, and doubt creeps in because she's not sure she can handle the ball girl's arrogant character, but on the other hand, she wants to help her. There's a part of her that desperately wants to help Mia get custody of her brother.

"I'll do it, Emily. I'm sure we can both put aside our nonsense to handle this, don't worry."

"Perfect. I told Leah we needed all the documentation they had on the case, so I imagine Mia will stop by to bring it."

"Alright."

"You'll need to talk with her, immerse yourself in her life. We'll need statements in her favor from..."

"Stop right there, Emily," Emma cuts her off with a raised eyebrow, "just because I don't feel the same calling as you do doesn't mean I don't know how to do my job."

"I know, sorry," her cousin smiles, "but keep me updated on any progress, okay?"

After all, Leah hired us, and I need to keep her informed."

"How convenient for you to have another excuse to get close to her," Emma teases.

"It is," Emily laughs. "Anyway," she stands up and grabs her leather briefcase, "I'm heading to court, call me if you need anything."

"Sure, crush Vanessa."

Emily arrives at the courthouse barely twenty minutes later. She's about to enter when Vanessa Cooper walks out, and they nearly bump into each other. Emily, nervous, steps aside and watches her, not understanding why she's leaving the courthouse when their trial starts in just fifteen minutes.

"Hello, Emily," Vanessa greets, moving away from the door to avoid blocking the entrance.

"Hi," she answers dryly.

"The trial has been delayed an hour, they just announced it," the opposing attorney explains.

Emily nods, uncomfortable.

"Okay."

"Wait," Vanessa says when Emily decides to enter the building. "Let me buy you a coffee."

Emily frowns. How long has it been since she and Vanessa had coffee together? She can't remember exactly, but she knows they haven't spoken since they broke up, not

even the times they've crossed paths at the courthouse, though they haven't had to face each other in any trial until now, and it's being very uncomfortable.

"Please," Vanessa insists with that cordiality so characteristic of her that Emily used to adore. "We have time, and don't tell me you're busy because we both know that's not true. One coffee and I'll let you go, I promise."

"Fine," Emily accepts.

They cross the street and walk side by side as they had done so many times before, circling the block across the street and entering the coffee shop where they had shared so many coffees.

"The usual?" Vanessa asks.

Emily nods and looks for an empty table while her ex-partner orders the drinks.

"Here you go," says Vanessa, placing a latte with a swirl of whipped cream and a chocolate bar in front of her.

"Thanks."

"I don't want this to be uncomfortable, Emily," Vanessa begins. "I just wanted to apologize for what I did."

Emily looks up, surprised, and furrows her brow.

"It's a little late for an apology, Vanessa."

"I know, and I don't expect you to forgive me, I just want you to know that at that moment, I wasn't able to understand how much I was risking or the damage my

decision could cause you and our relationship. I didn't think it would bother you that much, honestly. That guy was guilty of fraud and was going to get away with it thanks to you. I even thought you shared that information with me so I would act on it, or at least that's what I wanted to believe so I wouldn't feel guilty, but you were just trusting me, nothing more," Vanessa says.

"Guilty or not, I had been assigned to defend him, and I'm an attorney above all. Now I can afford the luxury of choosing who I defend, but back then I couldn't. I shared that information with you because it made me angry that he was going to get away with it. I knew that, thanks to me, that guy was going to go free and could do the same thing again. I told you because I felt bad, because you were my girlfriend and I needed your support, not for you to use the information I'd given you in court."

"I know, I understood that when I lost you," Vanessa responds, "and I'll regret it for the rest of my life, Emily. Even if you don't believe it, it was incredibly hard for me to get over you. I was very much in love with you," she smiles with a nostalgia that spreads to Emily. "I just want you to know that I'm truly sorry, and if I could turn back time, I would never make that mistake again, not with you or anyone else."

Emily nods and takes a sip of her coffee, smudging her lips with whipped cream.

"I believe you, and I forgive you. I guess I've moved on too," she confesses, wiping her mouth with a napkin, though a small stain remains, making Vanessa smile.

"My God, you're still a mess," she says with wide eyes, and they both burst into laughter.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Emily wakes up this morning with more excitement than usual. She makes herself a latte at home, dresses in a formal suit, and leaves after grabbing the sports bag she prepared the night before. Today she'll see Leah again; they haven't spoken since two nights ago when she went to her house and the lawyer tasted her lips. That flavor has lingered with Emily, a kind of balm that, instead of moisturizing, constantly reminds her of the moment when she found the courage to approach her trainer and kiss her.

She arrives at the law firm and heads to her office. This afternoon she has another court case, a new one that the South Carolina Defense Commission has assigned to the firm and, in principle, should close today. She needs to research; she hasn't had much time, and Emily never appears before a judge with doubts or lack of information. Time passes so quickly that she doesn't even realize it's time to leave. She barely had time to eat something in the cafeteria before diving back into the folders containing all the data she needs to defend.

"Em," Emma Harris calls out when Emily leaves her office. "I talked to Mia, we've arranged to meet and she'll bring all the documentation."

Emily nods and firmly holds the folder in her hand that threatens to spill the papers it contains.

"Great, the sooner we're informed, the better."

"You have to go to court?" asks Emma, who knows that the session for the case she's handling doesn't resume for another two days.

"Claude passed me a case that came in last minute, a worker claiming a higher

amount than what he received as severance after his dismissal."

"How clever of him," Emma complains; she thinks Claude Mangu is a jerk. "He gives you cases that barely have media coverage."

Emily shrugs.

"I appreciate this one, I don't want to get into another complicated one in the meantime," the lawyer explains. "Though Claude knows that if he tries to screw me over, he'll be out the door."

Emma smiles mischievously. Generally, people think her cousin, the girl with the permanent smile, clumsy at sports and naturally kind, is a bit simple. This changes when they see her in court or when they try to pull one over on her. Emily is relentless and doesn't let anyone walk all over her.

"I'm leaving now, you know I like to arrive with time to spare," Emily says goodbye and leaves the office.

She locates her car and gets in. Normally she would walk to the courthouse, which is just a few blocks away, but when she has training at the Walker Elite Sport Club, it's better to take her vehicle because she'll need to drive about twenty minutes afterward.

When she arrives at the courthouse, her client is waiting for her. She notices a nervousness in him that he struggles to hide. He's a young man, though with a tired appearance. He's dressed in a suit that seems to have seen better days. He looks clean, carefully groomed, and with a beard that Emily believes he trimmed that very day.

"Mr. Cruz," Emily Harris says, approaching the man and extending her hand. "I'm your legal representative. I'm very sorry we couldn't meet earlier; your case was a last-minute assignment from the commission."

Ernesto Cruz, an immigrant who has spent half his life living in Charleston, isn't surprised by Emily's words. He couldn't afford a lawyer, so his file has been at the bottom of some dusty box for a good while. He almost had a heart attack when he got a call from Harris he didn't expect his lawyer to have actually immersed herself in his case.

"Yes, I started working there as undocumented, although a few years later, after getting my work permit, I asked for a contract. The boss tried not to do it and when he finally gave in, he kept the same salary I was earning, well below my colleagues, despite the fact that I had more experience," Ernesto explains while letting out a sigh. "A few of us got together and decided to protest. The boss didn't like that and started insulting us, even through text messages. I think he did it because he thought none of us would take action; there are still colleagues who are in the country illegally."

"But you did take action," says Emily.

"Yes, and that's why he fired me, me and three others who also complained. The rest let it go and changed jobs. I decided to sue because it's not fair; I worked my skin off day and night without complaining, only to be paid back like this in the end."

"You did the right thing, Ernesto," says Emily and accompanies the comment with a light touch on the man's arm. "The work you've done gathering all the evidence will help us win."

For the first time in weeks, Ernesto smiles. He's going through a difficult situation and when he had already lost hope, Emily Harris appears to restore it. With that money—if they manage to win—Ernesto will climb out of the hole he's in.

"Let's go, it's time," says Emily, and they walk toward the room where the judge is waiting.

The trial goes faster than Emily had thought. The defendant's representative didn't expect the attorney to present documents clearly showing the actions of the Baker Construction owner. Threats, emails, and even a video that make it quite clear that Mr. Baker is an exploiter who uses people from marginalized groups to increase his wealth. They reached an agreement for Ernesto Cruz to receive an appropriate compensation, not what he deserved, but enough to close the litigation.

"Thank you so much, Emily," the man says with watery eyes once they've left the courthouse.

Emily says goodbye to her client and now, with renewed energy, heads to her tennis training.

It takes her exactly twenty-four minutes to arrive, she parks the car and enters the courts of the Walker Elite Sport Club, where a bustling atmosphere prevails.

"You've arrived just in time today, what a surprise," Leah smiles at Emily's indignant look.

"I stayed talking with a client after a trial and lost track of time a bit."

Leah tilts her head slightly and gives her a nod. She's fascinated by lawyer Emily too.

"Are you ready to learn something new today?" the trainer asks.

"Always," the smile that Emily gives Leah is somewhat different; this one carries a bit of that kiss they shared two days ago.

"Then let's not waste time."

This time, Leah Walker focuses the training on types of serves. She teaches her

student how to position herself, hold the racket, and where to direct the shot. As always, Emily pays close attention, asks a couple of questions, and when she believes she's understood everything, announces she's ready.

"Plant your feet firmly, so you feel secure and balanced," says Leah while touching her leg.

Both women feel a slight prick in the lower part of their body. It's a brief touch, but enough to remind them that between them seems to grow an attraction.

"The continental grip is the most natural and you'll feel comfortable with it," Leah continues, trying to ignore the rapid beating of her heart. "And with this hand hold the ball; you have to lift it at the same time you rotate your torso a bit, as I showed you."

Emily has lost her concentration—and her sanity—when Leah touches her a little above the hip. She hears the soft whisper of a voice, nothing more, and understands that the time she's spent without sleeping with anyone is taking its toll.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," the lawyer answers very unconvincingly.

Amazingly, the practice progresses without major setbacks. Emily does well with the serve, masters the first technique Leah teaches her, and when they finish, they decide to play a short match. The lawyer is ecstatic, returns several balls from one side and the other and even scores some points. She's sure that Leah has let her do it, but Emily is just as delighted.

"You played very well, Emily, if you keep this up, you'll soon notice more changes."

"I thought I would never manage to even return a ball."

When Emily is so happy, her power of distraction seems to grow. While Leah walks carefully, she does so as if the world were prepared for her clumsiness. She steps on a ball and her body falls backward after her leg rises several inches from the ground.

"Emily!" Leah gets scared and kneels by her side.

The lawyer laughs so hard that tears start to come out.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she says and continues laughing.

"You didn't hurt yourself, did you?" asks the tennis player while helping her to her feet.

"No, I don't think so," she cleans the skirt she's wearing, picks up her bag and starts walking. "Do you have a few minutes to talk about Mia's case?"

Leah wanted to ask her, but she felt embarrassed to do so, she didn't want to seem pushy. She appreciates that it's Emily who brings up the topic.

"Yes, let's go to my office and you can tell me."

The two walk into the club and go through a door that apparently only certain staff have access to. Leah stops in front of an office, enters a password on the panel, and they enter the space. The office is a sanctuary: several rackets are framed, signed shirts, medals, and some trophies. There are photos of her playing, from when she was a child to what seems like the present. On one side there's a miniature model of the club, and Emily is fascinated. Leah notices.

"When I bought the land, the architects I hired made it. I liked it so much that I kept it for myself. Here," Leah explains, pointing to an area in the model, "I want to put two more indoor courts and then an Olympic pool in this part," she points to another area.

"Wow, I hope to try both," says Emily.

"I'm sure you will."

Emily stares at her for a second, she wants to kiss her again, but first things first.

"Emma already has all the case details. She talked to Mia and they've arranged to meet at the office so she can bring all the information. When we have that documentation, we'll start with the strategy. As I told you, Emma will handle everything and I'll assist in whatever is necessary."

Leah nods; she likes the way the woman in front of her works. She hasn't wasted time in managing everything.

"I appreciate it," says Leah, and immediately a mocking smile appears on her face. "Did you bring me here just to tell me that?"

Emily stretches one side of her mouth.

"Technically, you brought me," she corrects, "but no, I didn't bring you just for that."

The lawyer takes two confident steps and presses against Leah. She looks at her eyes, then her lips. She launches at her mouth with less subtlety than the previous time and sighs gratefully when Leah doesn't hesitate. The two begin a frantic dance of tongues. Emily bites her lower lip and Leah moans while grabbing her by the waist and sitting her on her desk. The lawyer opens her legs slightly and the tennis player moves forward to press as close as possible to her. Emily lowers her hands, caresses her buttocks skillfully, squeezes them; they're firm, muscular. Leah feels the moisture between her legs appearing, though what also appears is the memory that she has a girlfriend whom she owes respect.

She separates from Emily suddenly. She runs her hand across her forehead and takes several steps back.

"Are you okay?" asks the attorney, completely bewildered.

Leah shakes her head and breathes several times.

"I'm sorry, Emily," she raises her gaze and connects it with the lawyer's. "I don't want it to be this way, I can't allow myself to lie to you. I'm in a relationship. She lives in another state and, although it's complicated, neither she nor you deserve this," she says, almost breathless.

The ceiling falls on Emily. She doesn't know why, but she had become very excited about Leah. It hasn't been easy to find someone who made her feel different again and, although she wasn't looking for anything and at first her trainer just seemed nice, she thought they could start to get to know each other in another sense. Once more, she decides to keep that annoying pinch that rises in her chest to herself; she closes off and doesn't show what she feels.

"It's okay," Emily tells her. "I didn't expect it, but at least you've been honest."

"I really am sorry," Leah repeats anxiously. "I'm not like this."

Emily makes a gesture with her hand, one that feigns unconcern.

"You could have continued with this and you decided to stop because you're not single. That's good, Leah."

Now it's the lawyer's turn to run away. She picks up her bag—forgotten on the floor—and walks to the door.

"See you," Emily forces a smile and leaves with her heart beating slowly, disappointed.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

"Fuck," Mia mutters when she empties a tube of tennis balls into the cart so carelessly that half of them end up scattered across the court floor again.

Leah, sitting on the bench where she just finished a training session with Alison Young, looks up and fixes her concerned gaze on her friend. She knows Mia is nervous about Aaron's situation and today's appointment at Emma's office, which probably has her more frantic, but Leah has been so absorbed all day, unable to get what happened yesterday with Emily in her office out of her head, that she hasn't asked.

She pinches the bridge of her nose while Mia continues collecting the balls, and the image of Emily before leaving her office hits her hard. Her chest tightens and she feels dirty, both toward Emily and Stella, but she feels worse about herself since last night when she realized she fears losing Emily more than losing Stella.

She decides now isn't the time to think about her problems—which she definitely needs to solve—and stands up to approach Mia.

"Hey," she says after grabbing another tube to help her. "Want me to go with you to the office? Frank could cover my next class, his got canceled."

"No, don't worry," Mia responds with a grateful smile, "you're already doing too much for me. Besides, I just need to bring her all the documentation, I don't think she'll tell me anything important today. You know what's the only thing that bothers me about them handling the case?" she says emptying the last tube.

"What?" Leah asks, furrowing her brow.

"That that prissy Emma will know I have a criminal record. She already considers me trash that doesn't measure up to the soles of her shoes just because I work picking up balls, which, by the way, I love," she says with a very wide smile, "but now she'll see me as an insect."

"You're not an insect, Mia," Leah says angrily.

"I know that. I'm just saying that's how she'll see me."

Leah narrows her eyes and puts the tube next to the cart.

"Since when do you care what others think about you?" she asks with an amused smile.

"I don't care what that snob thinks, and now move, I'm in a hurry," Mia says, pushing the cart toward Leah as if trying to run her over.

The tennis player laughs and steps aside as she watches her friend move away along the side of the court, wondering if the Harris surname has some kind of spell that has managed to bewitch both her and Mia.

Mia exits the elevator to the floor where Emma is waiting, sliding the USB drive she carries in her pocket between her fingers. She feels nervous and expectant as she follows an intern who, as she's been told, is taking her to the meeting room where Emma is already waiting.

"It's here," the young woman says, opening the door to let her in and saying goodbye before closing it.

Before she knows it, Mia finds herself inside a small office whose back wall is a large window that illuminates the entire room with natural light. In the center sits a round

mahogany table with four padded chairs that Mia is certain are more comfortable than her couch, and in one of them, Emma finishes jotting something down in a small notebook.

"Hi," Mia says, standing like a statue in front of the table.

Emma still takes a few seconds to look up and answer. She doesn't do it out of rudeness, but because she fears forgetting what she's thinking if she doesn't write it down, but when she finally looks up, she loses her breath at the sight of Mia.

Her pulse races and Emma can't understand why this ball collector, dressed in simple cargo pants and a sleeveless shirt of the most casual kind, seems like the sexiest and most attractive woman she's ever seen. She unconsciously moistens her lips and feels a pang of envy thinking about how easy mornings must be for Mia. Getting up, taking a shower, brushing her hair a bit and heading out because her attractiveness is so natural that she needs nothing more. She, however, spends an hour straightening her hair, applying makeup until she considers herself perfect, then choosing an immaculate suit that stylizes her figure and matches elegant high heels that destroy her feet as the hours pass.

"How are you, Mia?" she finally says, standing up to shake her hand cordially as she does with every client.

Mia finds the gesture surprising but takes a couple of steps toward her and returns the greeting. As soon as their hands press together, both feel the current shoot through their bodies like lightning, and they let go as quickly as they joined.

"Please, sit down," Emma asks, pointing to the chair on her left. "Did you bring the documentation?"

"Yes."

Mia reaches into her pants pocket and places the USB drive on the table before sitting down.

"Perfect," Emma says, opening her laptop.

Mia watches uncomfortably as Emma inserts the drive and opens the folder. She wasn't sure what to expect from this visit, but although Emma seems annoyingly beautiful concentrating as she looks at the screen, she doesn't want to be present when Emma discovers her criminal record.

"Is it necessary for you to read it now?" she asks uneasily.

Emma glances at Mia for a moment and returns to the screen. She immediately senses the reason for her question because of all the files on the drive, one has caught her attention above the rest: Criminal Record Report issued by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, and obviously, that's the one she opened.

"I'm just skimming to get an idea of what we have, but you're right, I'll review it later in more detail, sorry," Emma says. "Now I just need to ask you some questions."

"Okay," Mia sighs with relief as Emma puts aside the laptop and picks up her notebook again.

"How's your relationship with your brother Aaron?"

"What kind of question is that?" Mia frowns.

Emma raises her eyebrows.

"One like any other, Mia. I don't know you or him. Just because you're seeking custody doesn't mean you have to get along. He's younger than you, in the middle of

adolescence, I don't know..."

"We get along very well," she says sharply, "it's always been that way."

"Okay," Emma takes notes. "That's great, because when we file the appeal, the judge will speak with him alone, ask questions about your relationship, whether he really wants to live with you or feels coerced... And don't attack me," she says when she sees Mia frown, "I'm just telling you what might happen."

"It doesn't matter, Aaron and I get along well, I already told you."

"Very good, that works perfectly for us. Emily says Leah Walker can speak in your favor, is there anyone else who can do that? And by anyone else, I mean people with stable lives who can be good examples for Aaron."

Mia clenches her jaw.

"You mean it's better to avoid lower-class people like me?"

"I didn't say that, and this won't work if you're on the defensive all the time," Emma replies.

Mia swallows, feeling stupid. The truth is Emma is a complete snob who behaves with superiority outside the office, but inside she hasn't shown a single behavior that made Mia feel uncomfortable.

"You're right, sorry. Leah's mothers, they'll also speak in my favor if necessary, and they know Aaron, they spend time with him when he's with me."

"Perfect, what are their names?"

"Anne and Natalie Walker."

Emma makes a note in her notebook.

"The judge will likely want to speak with them and with Leah a bit later, but don't worry, we'll meet beforehand and prepare all of you for the questions she'll probably ask," Emma explains.

"All right."

"Also, we're going to request a psychologist evaluate Aaron. According to Emily, Leah told her he doesn't handle changing homes well and that before the Moores took him in, he had a rough time with the previous family."

"Yes, he doesn't adapt well. He doesn't understand why he can't be with me if I'm his family, he struggles to accept it," Mia swallows. "Luckily, the Moores had patience and managed to earn his trust, and thanks to Tamara Burk getting me weekend visits, he relaxed."

"I understand. Tamara Burk is the social worker, right?" Emma asks.

"Yes, she also said she'd testify in my favor," Mia recalls.

"Great," Emma notes again. "When will you see Aaron next?"

"This weekend. I pick him up Friday and take him back Sunday afternoon."

"Would you mind if I join you when you pick him up?" Emma asks, surprising Mia. "We're going to see each other quite a few times, and I'd like to meet him outside of here or the courthouse, so it's not all so formal and he sees me as a more approachable and trustworthy figure."

Mia stares, mouth agape.

"Uh, yes, but I prefer to go get him alone, that moment is very special for us."

"Of course," Emma clears her throat, "sorry."

"We can meet later at the club if that works for you. I always go there when I pick him up, so he can see Leah and her mothers."

"Great, I'll see you at the club then. For my part, I have everything. I'll review all you've brought me and if I need anything else, I'll call you."

They both stand up at the same time, and Emma, despite intuiting she'll get electrocuted again, extends her hand to Mia, unable to understand why she feels so attracted to a ball collector who even has a criminal record.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Emily's hands sweat so much that she has had to get up twice to go to the bathroom, once to dry them with paper towels and once to wash them with soap and water. For a couple of days now, she's been experiencing a feeling she can't quite name. After Leah Walker told her she had a partner, Emily revived feelings she thought she had left in the past.

Now she sits in Dr. Eveline Mitchell's office, waiting for her turn. She's been turning the idea over in her mind for some time, especially after her mother recommended talking to someone else if she didn't feel strong enough to open up to her. Emily Harris has that problem: she's kept the most intense situations she's experienced locked inside herself, and that has ended up taking its toll.

The lobby has warm lighting, though in the back there's a large window that lets in natural light. The furniture seems carefully selected to avoid the coldness of a traditional clinic. A pair of armchairs upholstered in neutral tones rest next to a dark wooden coffee table, decorated with psychology and art magazines. A discreet aromatic diffuser spreads a soft lavender scent, creating a feeling of calm.

"Emily," calls a woman who appears to be about sixty years old. She wears gray linen pants and a white and red Japanese-style shirt. "Come in, please."

Immediately, Emily feels a little more relaxed. The woman makes calculated movements; her tone of voice is low and measured. All rehearsed to exude tranquility and make her patients feel comfortable.

"I'm Dr. Eveline Mitchell, but please call me Eveline," she says with a smile when they both enter the consultation room. "The title is hanging on the wall; I don't need it

attached to my name. Sit wherever you like."

The lawyer stretches her lips and observes a two-seater sofa, a chaise lounge, and an armchair. She chooses the latter; she doesn't yet feel comfortable enough to use either of the other two.

Dr. Mitchell moves her chair—strategically located among the seats mentioned before—and positions herself at a prudent distance from Emily. She opens her notebook, writes something on one of the pages, and looks up.

"How are you, Emily?" she asks in a jovial tone. "What brings you to my office?"

Emily Harris loses all the confidence she had gained. She begins to scan the room without focusing on any specific point. Eveline, a woman seasoned in her profession, grants her a few seconds. She gets up and walks to a table installed in the back and takes out a couple of cups.

"Let's start with coffee. Or would you prefer tea?" asks the older woman.

Emily readjusts herself in the armchair.

"Coffee would be nice."

"With milk?"

"Please," Emily requests.

The psychiatrist inserts some capsules into the coffee machine. After a minute, the machine releases all kinds of sounds, and a delicious smell fills the space.

"This is one of my favorites," Eveline points out. "I admit these encapsulated coffees

are more sugar and chemicals than actual coffee, but these blends—" the doctor sniffs her cup and closes her eyes to sigh, "—are a delight."

Emily feels comfortable again. She blows on her drink and takes a short sip. How right this woman is; it's a vanilla blend with a touch of cinnamon. Emily regrets not bringing a can of whipped cream with her.

"What do you do for a living?" the psychiatrist changes strategy.

Emily takes another sip of her coffee and looks at Eveline.

"I'm a lawyer," she smiles. "I work at the family firm."

"A great challenge," says the older woman, emphasizing with wide-open eyes. "I've always thought that working with family is quite a challenge."

"It is," Emily confirms, "but after so much time, everyone is involved in their own matters. That's made it so we don't have arguments or go through a bad time when we meet outside the office."

"That's good. So I must assume you're not here because of something related to your work," Eveline gets to the point she's been trying to reach from the beginning.

"No," the lawyer agrees. "It's more of a general issue, though I don't know where to start."

"That's the most complicated part, let me help you with that," the doctor replies and opens her notebook again. "You tell me you get along well with your family. Do you have many friends?"

Emily tilts her head slightly.

"Just enough. The truth is I keep some from college, although my cousin Emma is my best friend."

"Are you married?"

Emily shakes her head energetically. It's then that the experienced Dr. Mitchell notices a change in her patient. She has slightly tensed her shoulders and looked at the wall again.

"Well. I might be wrong, but I think I can sense that you've come to the consultation because there's something about love that's affecting your life."

Bingo.

"Yes. Well, it's something that, I don't know..."

Eveline closes the notebook again.

"Emily, this is a safe place," she opens her arms as if to encompass the entire space. "Sometimes it's difficult to explain how we feel, but somehow we have to start, and believe me, this is the right place. I'm not going to judge you; I'm going to listen to you and give you the tools so you can overcome what's happening to you. Say it however it comes out."

Emily puts the cup down on a low table beside her and takes a breath.

"I like a woman, we kissed. Twice," she emphasizes. "And then she told me she had a partner."

Eveline takes notes.

"How did that make you feel?"

The lawyer thinks for a minute, trying to recall everything she has felt since she met Leah Walker up to the day she told her she wasn't single.

"Disappointed," she finds the word.

"Angry?"

"No, not angry. She told me herself, she stopped the situation that was getting a bit out of hand. But yes, a lot of disappointment; I thought I could have a relationship with her, at least the beginning of one."

"I understand. Often, when we have feelings for someone and things don't flow as we want, we feel unhappy and even undeserving, but usually the feeling grows when we carry some event that has somehow marked us."

At that moment, Emily Harris feels her chest open up. It has been hard for her to start talking, but when the doctor mentioned the past, the lawyer felt it was time to let it all out.

She tells her about her college life and the romantic experiences she had there. None too remarkable until a few years later when she met Vanesa Cooper. She explains how their relationship was, her ex's betrayal, and the reunion they had the other day. Emily focuses especially on telling the psychiatrist how she has really been feeling all these years, what she doesn't tell anyone.

"It's very hard for me to verbalize these things. When the thing with Vanesa happened, I wasn't able to cry with anyone, to say that I felt such deep pain that I feared dying of sadness. Everyone assumed I was going through the typical breakup and that I even recovered quite quickly. It wasn't like that; I spent months crying,

locking myself at home to lick my wounds. Alone."

"I understand that something similar happened to you with this woman you kissed; you didn't tell her how you felt after knowing she has a partner. Not to her or anyone else."

"I just left. I didn't say anything, and when I got home, I broke down. I spent hours crying, and I'm sure it wasn't because of her specifically, because I found out she wasn't available; I think what happened was the straw that broke the camel's back," Emily says, and a tear snakes down her face. "The next day I arrived at the office as if nothing had happened; even my cousin told me I looked radiant."

"You've learned to swallow your pain in such a professional way that no one notices you're having a hard time. You're very brave to come to therapy, Emily. Mental health is the most important thing, and many people don't give it the weight it deserves," says the psychiatrist as she offers her a tissue. "You have a lot built up, and what happened to you when you understood that you couldn't start a relationship with someone you like made everything explode, but that's why we're here, to work on it."

Eveline continues asking Emily questions. The lawyer opens up completely, tells her about the difficulty of finding someone who really connects with her, her "talent" for sports—causing several laughs that relax her even more—how much she likes her job, and her more personal tastes. The psychiatrist notes everything down, lets her talk while Emily explains some important aspects of her life, and sometimes interrupts her to make a contribution.

"If you keep going to the club, then you'll see her there, are you okay with that?" Eveline inquires after Emily told her that the woman she likes is her trainer.

"Honestly, I don't know. I wouldn't want to stop going to those classes; it took me a

long time to find someone with the patience she has with me. Besides, we get along very well; the attraction came later."

"You're a very focused woman, Emily. You're able to accept everything that happens to you without fear of facing what you feel, so if you want to keep going to the club, go ahead," the doctor concedes. "The important thing is that you understand that at first, it will be a bit weird. Going back to the friendship box when you've come to like someone is complex. Don't worry, we'll analyze how you feel and take actions from there."

Emily expels the air she had trapped. She feels lighter; it seems that all that weight she decided to carry alone is starting to diminish. Mothers are often right, and hers hasn't been wrong in telling her on several occasions to talk to a professional.

Dr. Mitchell looks up at the clock hanging on the wall, writes down several phrases, and closes the notebook.

"We're running out of time, but I'll give you homework," the woman smiles at Emily's dramatic face. "You've taken a big step, and one of my goals is for you not to go back. First, I'd like to keep seeing you; it's your decision, of course, but I propose that for a month you come to my office once a week. Then, depending on your progress, we can space out the sessions more."

"I agree, Eveline. I don't want to keep feeling this way."

"You shouldn't, Emily. Well, so you can continue to make progress and re-establish a friendship, you need to talk to her. Tell her how you feel, what you experienced when she was honest with you, and your intention to continue with the classes as before, leaving behind that closeness you've had."

"Winning a trial seems easier," Emily complains, and Eveline smiles.

"I know it's a complicated step, but necessary. It's essential that you stop keeping things to yourself. At first, it will be difficult, but little by little, you'll start to let everything out. Then you'll choose who to open up to, and everything will be easier," the doctor explains. "Take your time; maybe you need a few days to talk to her."

Emily is clear that she does. The next class is tomorrow, and she doesn't feel able to see Leah yet.

"I'll do that," Emily says firmly.

"See you next week," the psychiatrist says goodbye once they have both stood up and are walking to the door. "And remember, Emily, you don't have to keep carrying all the weight by yourself."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Leah runs with her eyes fixed on the ball racing at full speed down the right side of the court. She stretches her leg to stop while her right arm rises, ready to strike. Her foot skids a few inches before stopping exactly where she needs it, and her racket cuts through the air just in time to return a missile that crosses the court mere inches above the net.

Alison Young stands at the center of the court, prepared, and runs to position herself to return the cannon shot her coach just launched at her. Leah never loses sight of the ball or Alison's movements. She knows her student is ready to compete, and she feels proud to be her coach. The young woman returns the ball with a clean, short stroke that makes Leah run toward the net. She also touches the ball with a short hit that sends it to the side. It catches Alison off guard, but her agility and energy allow her to reach it in time to return it and send it back. Leah is already waiting and returns another missile. She's exhausted and not as focused as Alison. Her next training session is with Emily, and the lawyer hasn't arrived despite it being five minutes away. She already canceled the previous one, and Leah fears she'll cancel this one too.

She gets distracted for just an instant because she sees a shadow moving on the left court and needs it to be Emily. That distraction costs her as Alison returns another ball with all her strength, and it impacts like a bullet in Leah's stomach, leaving her doubled over and breathless for several seconds.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Alison says after crossing the court to approach her.

Leah still needs a few seconds for air to circulate through her lungs, and a few more for the pain to become bearable enough to straighten up.

"Don't worry," she says, trying to force a smile as she slowly stands up. "It was my fault. I got distracted."

Leah massages the area and then lifts her sweat-soaked shirt, revealing a perfect red circle next to her navel, the size of the ball.

"That's crazy," Alison says, impressed by the clarity of the circumference, leaning in to better see the mark. "It looks like a tattoo."

They both laugh, and Leah lowers her shirt, aware that the redness will soon change to a darker color.

"You played really well, Alison. Are you still thinking about competing professionally?" she asks as they walk toward the bench.

"Yes, though my dad doesn't want me to quit school, so he's looking for alternatives," she responds while drying her sweat with a towel.

"You shouldn't quit. There are alternatives; you can study with private tutors and take the exams. I can advise you about that. Tell your father to call the club and schedule an appointment. We should also think about finding you a coach."

Alison frowns.

"A coach? You're my coach," she protests with a huff.

"If you're going to compete, you need one full-time, Alison. I can't be that. You need to take the next step, and I can't teach you that here, although you can always come whenever you want, and we'll play matches so you can practice. I promise not to let you win," Leah winks at her.

Alison jumps on her and hugs her with the impetuosity typical of her age. Leah holds her breath; the stomach hit burns.

"Don't get dramatic," she says, laughing while returning the hug. "We still have to see each other many times."

After saying goodbye to the young woman, she enters the office and goes straight to her mothers.

"Did Emily cancel again?" she asks, though deep down, she already knows the answer.

"Yes, she called fifteen minutes ago," Anne responds.

Leah can't hide her disappointment and lets out a sigh while looking out the window toward the trees at the club entrance.

"Did something happen with Emily, Leah?" Natalie dares to ask, consumed by curiosity.

Her daughter turns to her and finds both her mothers watching her expectantly.

"I'm asking because this is the second lesson she's canceled, and well, it seems a bit strange considering how enthusiastic she always was," Natalie insists.

Leah considers telling them she has something to do and leaving, but she needs to let it out, so she grabs a chair, drags it behind the desk right next to her mothers, and drops into it, crossing one leg over the other.

"The night I went to Emily's house to tell her about Mia, she kissed me," she explains without preamble, and her mothers' jaws drop almost simultaneously.

The tennis player omits that first kiss the lawyer gave her on the court. Although it left her stunned, she considers it unimportant, just something born from Emily's excitement.

"I kissed her back," she continues, shivering at the memory. "I wasn't expecting it, and I liked it so much that my brain shut down. Then her phone rang, and I took advantage of her answering the call to go home."

"And you haven't talked about it?" asks Anne, very serious.

"I'm not finished," says Leah.

"Of course, honey, I'm sorry," her mother apologizes.

"She came to the next lesson, and we both acted like nothing had happened, but afterward, we went to my office because she had to discuss something about Mia's case, and it happened again. She kissed me again, and although my entire body begged me to continue, I stopped her and told her I was with Stella."

Leah clears her throat and massages her stomach right where Alison's ball hit her.

"I can't define what happened then. She seemed a bit stunned, but she didn't react badly or make a scene. She just said she had to leave, and that's all I know about her."

"She's canceled her lessons since then," Anne completes.

"Yes."

Silence falls between the three of them. Leah prefers it; she needs those seconds of mental peace while her mothers look at each other. Their long relationship allows them to communicate without needing words. Though it seems twisted, they're both

delighted with the situation because neither approves of Leah's relationship with Stella. However, they've perceived the chemistry she has with Emily since day one.

"What are you going to do, Leah?" Natalie probes, affectionately placing a hand on her knee.

Leah looks directly into her eyes, and her mother feels proud seeing determination in them. Leah has always been very level-headed and correct, even in the most complicated moments.

"I need to talk to Stella. I mean, I'm going to break up with her. It's obvious that what we have doesn't work. I've always known that, but I was content with what we had because I didn't need more."

"But Emily has appeared," says Anne.

"Yes. And it doesn't matter that it's Emily, mom. It could have been another woman. The point is that it happened, and I don't want to deceive Stella. One thing is settling for something superficial, and another is this."

"Have you considered that Stella might be cheating on you?" asks Natalie, unable to contain her thoughts.

"Natalie," Anne scolds her.

"Let her, mom," Leah smiles. "Of course I've thought about it. In fact, sometimes I'm convinced of it. I know what it's like to travel constantly, going from tournament to tournament. Women approach you, you meet other colleagues, it's inevitable. And that makes this even worse because I've suspected it many times and don't care. I've always been indifferent to what Stella might do out there as long as I didn't find out. Anyway, that's not the issue. I'm going to leave her. As soon as she returns to

Tennessee, I'll catch a flight and go talk to her."

"You know you have our support whatever you do," says Anne. "And with Emily? What do you plan to do?"

Leah sighs.

"Maybe you should go talk to her," suggests Natalie, seeing the doubt reflected in her daughter's expression.

"I don't think so," rebuts Anne. "If she canceled the lessons, there must be a reason. Maybe she needs her space, a little more time, or it could even be work-related, I don't know. In any case, I'm sure it wasn't pleasant for her to find out you have a girlfriend. It's obvious she likes you; she would have had expectations, would have gotten excited after that other kiss as any of us would have. Give her some space."

"I think I'll wait for the next lesson," says Leah. "If she cancels that one too, I'll figure out what to do."

"Of course," says Anne, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

"Hey," says Natalie with a narrowed gaze. "On a scale of one to ten, how much do you like Emily?"

"For God's sake, Natalie," exclaims Anne, but she can't help laughing when Leah lets out a laugh that echoes throughout the office.

"What? It's maternal curiosity," Natalie complains, frowning.

Leah leans forward and takes one hand from each of them.

"A twelve, mom," she whispers and winks at her, feeling her heart skip a beat when she acknowledges it out loud.

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For Mia Clark, it's one of those happy days where nothing around her matters because her brother is with her and they can share the entire weekend together. As usual, they hug tightly when they meet. Aaron has prepared a backpack separate from the one he usually takes to school, with a couple changes of clothes. They climb into Mia's car and head to Walker Elite Sport Club as they do every time the caddie gets to be with her brother. She knows how much Aaron enjoys being there, talking with Leah and how good the affection from Anna and Natalie is for him.

"Do you think I can play a match today?" Aaron asks enthusiastically when the barrier giving access to the club opens.

Mia looks at him for a few seconds and smiles. She adores her brother; she would do anything for him.

"We have time; I just don't know if Leah will be available."

"And if Leah can't, can't we play, you and me?" he asks again.

Mia shakes her head and turns the steering wheel to park the car.

"I have a meeting, remember?"

Aaron confirms with a nod, not very convinced, though he'll try to enjoy their time at the club. They walk along the stone path that leads to the side of the bar; that's where she's meeting Emma Harris, and Mia feels a jolt throughout her body thinking about the lawyer. There's something behind that smug look that Mia likes, something she believes Emma insists on hiding from the world.

"What a hottie," Aaron blurts out as soon as they enter the bar. The younger Harris lawyer smiles widely when she sees the siblings, stands up from the chair she's sitting in, and takes a couple of steps toward them.

Mia gives her brother a gentle elbow nudge. The boy is right, she doesn't doubt that, but she doesn't like him talking that way. Emma is dressed—as always—formally. She wears a suit, this time a light blue skirt and jacket with heels so high they make you dizzy. Her hair is pulled back, leaving her neck exposed, white, smooth, and Mia wishes in that moment she could be a fictional character so she could lean in and bite it.

"You must be Aaron," Emma says and extends her hand. The boy nods and does the same. "You look a lot like your sister."

That teenage boldness Aaron had when seeing her vanishes and turns to embarrassment. His cheeks flush red and he's unable to say a single word. He's at that point in his youth when girls start to attract him, though he doesn't feel confident enough to take a step forward. Besides, for him, Emma is a lady—an attractive one—but a lady.

Mia is surprised by the lawyer's warmth; she's been gentle and very kind to her brother. The complete opposite of how she usually is with her outside an office.

"Hey, kid," Aaron hears, and turns immediately upon recognizing the voice.

The boy embraces Leah while the tennis player whispers something in his ear.

"Leah invited me to play a match, can I go?" he asks, turning to his sister.

Mia instinctively looks at Emma. The meeting was, basically, for her to meet Aaron and she's not sure if letting him go at that moment is appropriate. The lawyer seems

to guess the caddie's thoughts.

"While Aaron plays, we can review some points, Mia."

Mia nods, and although she should be relaxed because her brother will enjoy a sport he loves, thinking about staying with Emma—who surely has already reviewed the documentation she left at her office—keeps her uneasy.

Emma notices, knows that her now-client has nervousness that's unusual for her. It's true she barely knows her, but that haughty and arrogant attitude she usually has is nowhere to be seen. However, what Emma does notice is how good those pants make her ass look and how well that white polo shirt fits her. She licks her lips discreetly and quickly scolds herself; not with a ball girl.

"Everything okay?" Mia asks in a mocking tone. She's noticed the indiscreet once-over Emma gave her.

The lawyer twists her expression and activates her favorite mask.

"That's what I'm asking you," she shoots back and sits at the table. "You seem so nervous that I'd say I'm the reason you keep drying your hands on your pants."

What a bitch. The mask is the bitch one.

"You wish," Mia counters. "Anyway, what do you need to review? Everything I gave you is all I have."

It's now that Emma realizes what has her client in this state is the content of that documentation.

"Your record is not something I should care about, Mia," Emma says with all the

seriousness her lawyer persona allows. "You must have your reasons for having done all that, and the only thing I need to consider as your legal representative is how this might affect the custody application."

Mia clenches her jaw tightly. Emma has been direct and hasn't shown any judgment, but she can't help feeling a series of the most contradictory emotions.

"Everything I've done, I've done for my brother," she says through gritted teeth.

Emma says nothing; speaking would only add fuel to the fire growing in front of her.

"I'm going to order at the bar, do you want anything?" Mia suddenly says after letting out a sigh; she needs to cut this moment of tension.

"Sparkling water, please," Emma requests.

Mia stands up, walks to the bar to order the drinks and doesn't let the bartender take them to the table. Waiting there for a few minutes gives her the tranquility she needs right now.

"Thank you," Emma says when her client sets down a glass with lots of ice, a slice of lemon, and sparkling water. "I've arranged an appointment for next week with a psychologist who will prepare Aaron's report. This will work in your favor; it's always well-regarded when a professional gives their viewpoint about emotional stability, in this case Aaron's. Then I'll meet with the social worker, Ms. Burk. We spoke yesterday by phone and the appointment is in a few days."

Mia relaxes; it seems Emma has everything planned out.

"As for Leah, her support will give you more credibility," she says and turns on a tablet she had already taken out of her purse. "I need to know more about your

relationship, how did you meet?"

Mia's leg starts bouncing uncontrollably. She doesn't feel comfortable talking about it, though she knows she has to tell it once and for all; there's no use prolonging the moment. She takes a long sip of her soda, grabs a napkin from the table to wipe her lips, and focuses on her lawyer.

"It was when I tried to rob her," Mia notices the tension in Emma's body, but continues speaking. She's already begun and doesn't plan to stop. "Nobody would give me a job, I already had a record and nowhere trusted me. The little money I earned here and there I saved to pay a lawyer and fight for Aaron's custody. It was hard, I slept on the street and barely had enough to survive. That day they took what little I had; some addicts woke me up while I was sleeping in a park and stole everything. I hadn't eaten in two days; I was angry, hungry, disoriented. I saw Leah; she was coming out of a store with a couple of bags in her hands and stopped in front of a car. She had her phone in her back pocket and I didn't think; I went for it."

Mia pauses and lowers her head for a second, ashamed. Although it happened a long time ago, it still stings to remember.

"I wasn't expecting such a strong woman and when she felt me behind her trying to take her phone, she grabbed my wrist and threw me to the ground," Mia smiles for the first time while telling the story. "With her other hand she grabbed my shirt and, no matter how much I moved, she wouldn't let me leave."

Flashback "Don't move, damn it," Leah Walker says while the thief tries to escape. "I swear I'll break your wrist if you keep going."

"Let me go," the girl growls. She looks tired and her face is covered in dirt.

"I'm going to call the police, I won't let you keep stealing," says Leah while looking

her in the eyes. Mia immediately stops moving.

"Please, no, I can't go back to jail," she begs.

"You should have thought of that before," says Leah while releasing her shirt and taking out the phone that thief intended to steal.

"I have a little brother, please, don't do it," Mia continues pleading, her eyes now filled with tears.

Leah thinks it might be a trick, a simple lie so the girl can escape and continue breaking the law. However, there's something about her, a pain reflected in her expression, a fragility she can feel that's almost palpable.

"I wanted your phone to sell it and get some money for food and start saving again for a lawyer," the girl says with a broken voice. "What I had was taken from me this morning; I just want to get my brother back."

Leah Walker's heart stops beating. She feels pity, distrust, sadness, but also an impulse to believe in this young, helpless girl.

"Do you promise not to run away if I assure you I won't call the police?" asks Leah, tightening her grip on Mia's wrist and looking at her with her head tilted.

"I promise," says Mia, and although Leah still has doubts, she lets her go.

When the girl gets up from the ground and stays next to the tennis player, Leah smiles at her. Mia wipes away her tears.

"Come on, let's find something to eat and you can tell me what happened to you."

"And that's how Leah and I became friends. Though I consider her a sister," Mia corrects herself.

Emma feels that the life of the girl in front of her is far from her own. She has lived wrapped in cotton while Mia has even had to steal to eat. How unfair life is.

She decides not to comment, feeling it's unnecessary, so the lawyer finishes taking some notes and moves on to the next question.

"I see you're still on supervised release, which requires you to sign in at court each month, but you haven't missed once or committed any new crimes; that speaks in your favor," Emma comments. "Regarding your house, the report you passed me is old. I'll send an inspector to make a new one. It's to certify that it's prepared for Aaron to live there comfortably and safely."

Mia appreciates that Emma hasn't delved into the story she just told; as much as it had a happy ending, remembering that time in her life isn't pleasant.

Both women talk at length. Emma clarifies some important details and Mia asks questions that come up. They agree on everything—surprisingly—there are no reproaches or out-of-place comments.

"Mia, how are you?"

The purr in the voice of the young woman who has stopped in front of the table puts Emma on alert. She frowns for two reasons: because of what she felt and because she wonders if this girl is stupid and doesn't realize she's interrupting a conversation. Mia's lopsided smile makes her sick; now she wonders if the importance of the meeting they're having has gone out the window because of this porcelain-skinned, blonde-haired, full-lipped girl.

"Hi, Cris," Mia says in a seductive tone without getting up from her chair. "All good, I see in your case too."

"What an idiot," Emma whispers in a very low tone, just for herself, though Mia hears her perfectly.

"I'm in the middle of a meeting right now, Cris," the caddie apologizes. "Can we talk later?"

"Sure," the doll-faced girl smiles. "Is tomorrow still on?"

"Of course," Mia confirms and says goodbye to Cris.

The young woman hasn't taken ten steps when Emma spits her venom.

"Next time we'll have to meet at my office, away from your hook-ups who interrupt meetings."

Mia tries—with effort—not to laugh. Emma's jealousy is obvious, jealousy, yes, she can recognize it in that heated look, even if the lawyer herself refuses to see it.

"We haven't even had our first kiss and you're already jealous," Mia doesn't ask, she states it, and that irritates Emma.

The lawyer is ready to put this shameless woman in her place, but Aaron's excited shouts make her close her mouth.

"I beat Leah," the boy blurts out, coming with a sweaty face. "Well, she let me win."

Mia smiles and hands him a couple of napkins to dry his face. She raises her hand to order a bottle of water and asks her brother to sit down.

"I'm very happy; if she let you win, it's because you're very close to beating her for real."

"Someday," Aaron confirms.

Mia nods and her expression turns serious.

"Aaron, we want to tell you what Emma is doing."

The boy's expression changes from happiness to bewilderment.

"I want to petition for your custody," Aaron smiles again, "and Emma is our lawyer. She's working very quickly to request it before the judge."

Emma looks at Mia, not wanting her to set aside the real reason why custody should be requested as soon as possible. The young caddie runs her hand over her face; she doesn't want to go through that moment again—not again—of telling Aaron he has to change families.

"You know Peter is sick and you won't be able to stay there with them anymore."

Aaron's face transforms into a look of terror.

"No, Mia..."

"Relax," Emma turns to the boy and puts both hands on his shoulders. "We're doing everything, even the impossible, so you don't have to go to anyone else's home. I just need you to trust us, okay? That way your sister will be more at ease."

The anguish on Mia's face has turned the lawyer's stomach. She felt an uncontrollable uneasiness and had to act. The kind look the caddie gives her is the best reward

Emma has received, without a doubt.

"How about we go to that pizza place you like so much?" Leah asks Aaron, trying to dispel the bad moment as soon as possible.

The boy nods, energetically.

"Go wash your face and hands. We'll wait for you here," Mia requests.

"Goodbye, Emma," Aaron says and runs to the bathroom with the speed and vitality of a boy his age.

"I'm leaving too," Emma announces, putting her tablet back in her purse. "Leah, nice to see you. Mia, I'll let you know when I have next week's itinerary."

The lawyer extends her hand to shake her client's professionally—after doing the same with Leah—and both feel that whirlwind again as soon as their skin makes contact. Mia locks her gaze with Emma's and, although Emma makes a motion to withdraw her hand, the caddie doesn't let go and, in an involuntary act, squeezes it a little and winks at her.

Emma nearly has a heart attack—damn ball girl—and walks so quickly she almost runs into a little girl who was in her path.

"I know she likes me," Mia states when the lawyer disappears from view.

"And do you like her?" Leah asks mischievously.

"If she weren't such a stuck-up jerk, I'm sure I would."

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Leah has just finished a class and keeps her gaze fixed on the adjacent court while wiping away her sweat. It's the court where she has her next session in ten minutes, Emily's session, which hasn't been canceled yet. In the distance, she sees Mia walking quickly toward her, and her pulse races.

"What?" Leah asks as soon as the caddy reaches her side, trying unsuccessfully to hide her nervousness.

"She hasn't canceled, Leah, and I don't think she will in the next ten minutes, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't make me check again," she says with an arched eyebrow.

Leah smiles and raises her hands, stepping aside to let her pass with the cart to start collecting the balls from the court. She decides to go to the locker room to wash up and change into a clean shirt because today the sun has been fierce, and she feels she's sweated more than ever. Not finding Emily inside puzzles her and makes her fear that she might have canceled at the last minute; however, when she walks out toward court number six, she sees her standing there by the bench. Her pulse skyrockets, and she feels her heart might burst out of her chest at any moment, but she frowns when she notices Emily isn't wearing athletic clothes but a tailored suit that fits her perfectly.

"Hello, Emily," she says when she reaches her.

"How are you, Leah?" the lawyer asks, offering a smile, though not as radiant as usual.

"Good. Why are you dressed like that? I mean..." Leah could make a joke that at

another time she knows would make Emily laugh, tell her it's not a good idea for someone with her clumsiness to train in heels, but she knows she shouldn't.

"I didn't come to train, I came to talk to you," Emily says, and Leah feels her lungs empty.

"Sure. Should we go to my office?" she suggests nervously.

"No, I'd prefer to go to the club bar if you don't mind," Emily responds, aware that being alone with the tennis player isn't a good idea.

"Yes, of course, no problem," says Leah, letting her pass to exit the court.

They settle at one of the tables on the terrace under an umbrella and order two sodas.

"I wanted to apologize for my attitude the other day," Emily says, and Leah appreciates that the conversation starts quickly with no awkward silences.

"You don't need to apologize, Emily, I..."

"Wait, Leah, don't interrupt me, please," the lawyer requests, raising a hand.

"Sure, sorry."

"Look, I'm a very open person about almost everything, Leah, as you've probably noticed, but not about feelings. Expressing what I feel or how I feel is something that's very hard for me, so I have the bad habit of keeping everything to myself. I'm telling you this so you understand how difficult this conversation is for me, which is why I need you to let me speak without interrupting," she insists.

"No worries, say what you need to say," Leah says, feeling consumed by nerves.

"At this point, I don't know if my reaction when I kissed you the other day was right or not. Since we met, I felt we connected really well, there was incredible chemistry between us that at first simply seemed like two people who click and could have a good friendship, but I quickly realized it was something more for me and, I don't know, I had the feeling it was for you too. When I kissed you on the court, it really was caught up in the moment, but I liked it so much I would have continued."

Emily pauses to drink, and Leah tries to stop her hands from shaking while biting her tongue to avoid interrupting the conversation until Emily says everything she needs to say.

"I like you so much, Leah," she says, looking into her eyes with an intensity that makes the tennis player's heart flip, "I can't deny that, nor can I deny that I had built up hopes thinking it was mutual and that we could start something. I never imagined you were with someone, and I felt tremendously disappointed when you told me," Emily swallows and bites her lips for a moment.

Leah tenses and rubs her hands hard under the table, containing the impulse to stand up and hug her, mentally scolding herself for those crazy urges to kiss her that are burning her from inside.

"But I want you to know that I have no intention of interfering in the relationship with your girlfriend. We're two adult women, we made a mistake, and that's it. What I want to ask is that we forget it and start from scratch. I don't want to stop training with you, Leah, or lose you as a friend. I like you a lot, and now that I know you're not available, this will pass, don't worry. Do you think you can forget what happened?"

"The truth is I can't, Emily," Leah says, staring at her.

Emily swallows and drops her shoulders. Deep down, she expected an answer like

this and understands.

"I can't forget it because I like you a lot too, Emily," Leah continues, and Emily looks up and opens her mouth, trying to catch her breath.

"What are you saying?"

"Don't ask me how it happened, but it did, and I can't get you out of my head. You drive me crazy, Emily Harris," she confirms, and Emily feels herself melt.

Her heart beats so fast she can barely think. Her hands tremble, and she wants to jump on Leah, sit on her lap, and kiss those lips with nothing to stop or interrupt them, but there is something stopping her, something very real she can't ignore.

"And what about your girlfriend?" the lawyer asks, her voice breaking with emotion.

"I'm going to break up with her. I know it sounds like the typical promise, that I should have done it already, but she's at a retreat for athletes, and until she returns, I can't go see her to tell her. Our relationship wasn't going well, Emily. Actually, it's not that we were bad either, it was just something superficial, something that interested both of us, in a way," she says and sighs, trying to push away the nerves she feels. "I'll tell you more details another time, but what's happened between you and me has only confirmed what I already knew, that my relationship with Stella isn't going anywhere."

Emily takes a few seconds to look at Leah and confirm she's serious.

"Alright, I'll trust that you'll do what you say, Leah," Emily says, and this time she does give her one of her radiant smiles.

"I swear, but until then, you and I can't, you know..." Leah raises an eyebrow and tilts

her head with a wolfish expression that sends a shock through Emily's body that explodes between her legs.

Emily fluffs her shirt, feeling it's suddenly very tight.

"Yes, of course," she says and takes a sip of her soda, "I had no intention," she laughs, making Leah laugh too and dispersing the sexual tension between them a little.

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"How did you feel after being honest?" Dr. Mitchell asks.

Emily Harris is attending her third appointment with the psychiatrist. The first one since going to the club two evenings ago and telling Leah face-to-face how she feels about her. The lawyer's surprise was so pleasant that night, overcome with emotion, she struggled to fall asleep. Also because she stopped by her favorite café and bought a chocolate coffee shake that, at first, helped her enjoy the moment when the tennis player told her she felt the same way, but when the caffeine entered her bloodstream, it made her more nervous.

Now Emily lies on the couch, talking with the doctor as if she's been her lifelong friend.

"It was liberating," she says. "It was hard to do it, well, you already know that, but that day I was certain I would do it."

Eveline Mitchell takes several notes while nodding, pleased. Some patients take months, even years to take that step. Others, like Emily, need just a couple of sessions to gain the strength they need to start facing their demons.

"I'm very proud of you, Emily," she congratulates her, closes her notebook and crosses one leg. "I wanted to end the session with this question because I want you to leave knowing how well you're doing. After spending part of your life keeping your feelings hidden, letting them flow is an interesting journey. There will be people who won't like you standing up to them, but you'll also get good rewards, like that day."

Emily broadens that radiant smile, her usual one, that lights up the entire office.

"Coming to therapy has been one of the best decisions I've made," the lawyer responds, getting up from the couch; they've gone a few minutes over the hour. "See you next week?"

"I'll be waiting," Dr. Mitchell politely says goodbye and walks her to the door.

Emily Harris leaves the office with renewed spirits. She stops on the street and breathes in Charleston's humid air. It's hot, but the lawyer feels so connected to nature that she doesn't mind at all that, when she starts walking toward her car, her neck is already drenched in sweat. She gets into her vehicle and drives calmly to the Walker Elite Sport Club. She's nervous. After that conversation with Leah and the tennis player's confession, Emily will find it hard not to approach her and kiss those lips that taste like mint and salt.

"Hello," Leah surprises her as soon as Emily parks and gets out of her car at the club.

Emily jumps and drops the gym bag she had just picked up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," Leah apologizes, trying to hide a smile. Emily's face shows total drama.

"I wasn't expecting to find you here," says the lawyer who, after picking up the bag, gives Leah a somewhat brazen once-over. The tennis player wears navy blue shorts and a tight white t-shirt.

"I had gone out and just got back for your class," Leah explains as they both start walking. "How are you?"

Both suddenly seem very young, almost teenagers. They appear calm, although inside they're trembling like a pair of custards on a tray. Emily hasn't felt this excited about someone in a long time, and Leah has spent too much time with a person she doesn't

feel what she should. So every time they're together, there are butterflies, vibrations, and hearts beating strongly.

"Eager to train," Emily resolves. "And you?"

"I want to be lying on the couch watching a series I'm hooked on."

Both women burst into refreshing laughter and walk through the locker room doors.

"Bad news for business," Emily winks at her. "You can do that on the weekend; it's not far off."

Leah twists her expression. Her lips move to one side while she raises both eyebrows.

"Saturday I'm flying to see Stella," Leah explains, opening the locker where she keeps her things and taking out some wristbands. Although it's a topic that concerns them both, she feels uncomfortable talking about the woman who is still her girlfriend. "I'm going to talk to her, like I told you."

Emily notices that Leah omits telling her she's going to see her girlfriend to break up with her. She should be jumping for joy, but she's not. The lawyer knows that, although their relationship isn't working, as she understands it, they've been together for some time, and a breakup is never comfortable.

"I hope everything goes well, as well as these things can go," Emily approaches the tennis player, squeezes her arm gently, and leaves a caress that's meant to be affectionate, but for them is pure fire.

Leah mentally debates whether she should grab Emily by the legs, lift her to her waist and make love to her right there against a locker, or run out to start training.

"I'll wait for you outside," Leah decides on the latter. She doesn't want to start anything with Emily without closing her chapter with Stella.

"Good, Emily, you're doing great," Leah says from across the court. "Stay focused on the ball and don't stop watching it."

They've been on the court for more than half an hour; Leah is rallying with her, making the lawyer go from side to side returning the ball. Emily has improved so much that she masters simple plays. She's still clumsy, slipping on any occasion and losing focus if things happen around her, but even so, she's starting to have good control, and that makes Leah proud.

"Leah," the tennis player stops the serve she was about to do because a very distressed Anne appears on the court.

"What's wrong, mom?" the tennis player asks nervously and approaches her.

"They've been calling Mia, she's not picking up, so Elena Morris called the club. Aaron has run away," the woman says in a tone of lament.

Leah closes her eyes for a second and twists her neck to look for her friend. She knows she's on court three with a maintenance guy changing the net. She sees her there laughing while checking something on one of the metal posts, and the tennis player's heart sinks.

"I'll go talk to her," Leah summarizes and notices that Emily is standing a few steps away from her. "I have to..."

"I'll come with you," Emily responds and walks toward her. "It's not pleasant news and, unfortunately, I've had to deliver it before."

Leah makes a head movement in gratitude, and the three women walk toward the court. Mia raises her head upon hearing the footsteps and smiles when she sees them. It disappears instantly when she notices their serious faces.

"Leah..."

"It's Aaron," the tennis player blurts out without anesthesia, "it seems he's run away from his foster parents' house."

Mia's face transforms into a look of horror. She freezes and drops the tool she had in her hand. She looks from side to side, perhaps looking for an answer or a solution to what they've just told her. Her eyes well up and a pain in her chest cuts off her breathing. She opens her mouth; the words don't come out because fear suffocates her. Her brother is all she has left, her only family, and without him, she's lost.

"Mia, we're going to look for him," Emily is the one who steps forward. "Do you have any idea why he did it and where he might have gone?"

The caddie tries to catch her breath. She looks at the sky and then at Emily. She shakes her head.

"No, I don't know where he might have gone. I'm sure it's because of the family change; he didn't take it well knowing he wouldn't be in that house anymore and that it wasn't certain he could come with me," Mia says, dismayed, and bursts into tears. "I need... I need to call the police."

The caddie starts frantically touching her pockets looking for the device and realizes she doesn't have it. She quickly remembers that she left it in her locker; she rarely does this, but when she has to do certain maintenance, she prefers to store it. The pocket of her pants isn't very deep, and it often ends up on the ground. Before she can start walking, Emily, again, is the one who intervenes.

"That's not a good idea," she explains calmly. "A police report will only hinder the adoption process; the social worker will want to change his family as soon as possible, and that will be worse for him. We have at least two hours to try to locate him. He'll be confused by what's happening. Go home, Mia, maybe Aaron will come looking for you. Leah and I will take the car and drive around the city. If he doesn't show up before nine, we'll go to the police station."

Mia isn't sure it's the best idea, but she's so overwhelmed that she finds it hard to think. She accepts. Her brother knows perfectly well how to get to her house, and maybe it's logical for her to be there waiting. She nods repeatedly to confirm.

"Mom, go to my house," Leah speaks this time. "Aaron also knows how to get there, so if he decides to go, someone should be waiting for him."

"I'll go. I'll tell Natalie to stay here just in case; this is Aaron's favorite place," Anne suggests, and everyone agrees.

Mia leaves almost running to collect her things to leave. Leah and Emily do the same. They go to the parking lot, and Emily offers to drive. She had thought about telling the caddy she'd take her home, but she left so quickly there wasn't time.

"Does Mia have someone who can stay with her while she waits?" the lawyer asks as she maneuvers to leave the club.

Leah shakes her head.

"Just me and my moms."

Emily was almost sure of it, but she wanted to confirm. She touches the controls on her steering wheel, and immediately, through the speakers, comes the sound of a call.

"Tell me, Em," a female voice answers on the other end.

"Aaron has run away from the foster home; Mia has gone to her apartment in case the boy decides to go there. Can you go over? I don't think it's a good idea for her to be there alone in that state of nervousness," Emily says without even greeting her cousin.

Emma's breathing quickens. She visualizes Mia losing her mind upon learning that her brother has disappeared and can't help but feel her pain. She doesn't think twice, stands up and grabs her purse to leave her office.

"Can you send me the address? I have it in her file, but I don't want to waste time," Emma says nervously.

Emily looks at Leah, and she nods.

"I'll send it now."

When she hangs up the call, Emily hands her phone to the tennis player. Leah manipulates it until she enters the messaging app, locates Emma's contact, opens the conversation, and writes the address.

"Stay calm, he'll show up," Emily says in a soothing voice and slides her hand over Leah's to squeeze it tightly when she realizes the tennis player is shaking.

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Emily and Leah have been driving around for almost an hour. The lawyer drives slowly through all the places Leah can think of, but there's no trace of Aaron. Emily glances at Leah every few minutes. The tennis player's left leg bounces frantically inside the vehicle while she twists the hem of her shorts with her fingers and releases small sighs of anxiety without stopping her search through the window.

The lawyer doesn't know what to do, feels helpless because she can't help her, and when they stop at another traffic light, she stretches out a hand and places it on Leah's trembling knee, making her jump and turn toward her when she feels its warmth.

"He'll show up, Leah. It's just a childish stunt, you'll see," she tries to calm her.

Leah gives her a grateful smile, but her nervousness doesn't cease and the light turns green.

"Why did your relationship with Stella fail?"

Emily knows it's not the best moment to bring up the topic, but it's the only thing she can think of to pull Leah out of that state. The tennis player looks at her again, this time a bit dazed, but stops moving her leg and instead stretches it to make slow movements with her ankle.

"Don't answer if you don't want to, it's just that I think you need a distraction and, since you said you'd tell me another time..." Emily says. "Sometimes I have the gift of bad timing."

"Don't worry," Leah says after a couple of seconds. "This moment is as good as any."

Many things went wrong in my relationship with Stella from the beginning, and I've always been aware of it. Turn there," she asks the lawyer.

"Like what?" Emily asks while continuing to drive slowly.

"For starters, the age difference. She's ten years younger than me, and in other circumstances, that difference might not matter, but in ours it does. Stella is motivated by sports, her life right now revolves around tennis, competing," she clarifies, "that's her priority and she'll put everything else second to that. And I know because I used to do the same."

"And for you, priorities are different now that you're retired, I guess," Emily deduces.

"Yes. I'm focused on the club and living a quieter life, far away from all that chaos. When we started dating, we were very aware that we'd barely have time to see each other. We were here in Charleston, though she was often traveling wherever tournaments took her, but it seemed fine to us."

Leah explains all these thoughts she's had for a long time, that she's in the relationship for convenience, for the tranquility of having her own space and someone to hang out with and share good experiences when they're together, and that it seemed enough because she wasn't looking for more.

"Now I'm very aware that my mothers were right and I should have ended the relationship a long time ago. Beyond some daily phone conversation, all I had with Stella was sex when we saw each other. Except for tennis, she and I have nothing in common, but, like I said, it was convenient because, on one hand, I feel like I'm not completely alone and, on the other, I have all my space. It's a strange thing," she smiles and points with her finger for Emily to turn down another street.

"I think I understand," the lawyer says. "Do you think she'll take the breakup well?"

Leah takes a deep breath through her nose and releases it slowly.

"I don't think she'll make a scene. She's young, but Stella is mature and not in love with me, we both know that. She fell in love with my name, with who I was, and I fell for her youth and the freedom the relationship gave me, which later became long-distance. I'm not saying there aren't feelings involved, I've spent a lot of time with her and I care for her, and I know she cares for me too, but she'll accept it. We've both always known this had an expiration date."

Leah's phone lights up interrupting the conversation, and the tennis player answers immediately when she sees Anne's name on the screen.

"Yes, mom."

"Aaron is here, with me," her mother says, and Leah feels the tension in her muscles instantly relax.

"Is he okay?" she asks anxiously.

"Yes, he's perfectly fine, don't worry."

"Where are you?" she asks, somewhat disoriented, not exactly remembering where Anne is staying.

"At your house, he came here. I haven't called Mia yet, he's very nervous and I don't want him talking to her in this state," she says, distressed.

"Don't call her, Emily and I will be there in ten minutes."

Leah walks through her front door in less time than she said. When she does, Aaron, who was sitting on her couch next to her mother, jumps up and hugs her so tightly

that Leah finds it hard to breathe.

"I don't want to go to another house, I want to stay here," he says between sobs, and Leah's eyes flood while she hugs him.

She looks at her mother desperately, but Anne is also crying without knowing how to console him. Leah decides again not to call Mia. If she hears her brother in this state, she'll completely fall apart. She needs him to calm down so she can tell her that he's safe.

"We're trying to arrange for you to stay with Mia, Aaron," she says without letting go.

"She tried that the other time too and I'm still with the Morriszes," he says between hiccups.

"I know, but this time it's different, we have different lawyers and more time has passed..." Leah says, desperate. "Let's sit down, Aaron. You need to calm down so I can call Mia and tell her you're okay, please. She's very distressed."

Leah guides him, keeping him close to her body, and manages to get him to sit on the couch, between her and her mother. It's then that Leah looks for Emily and the lawyer winks at her with complicity before approaching Aaron and crouching in front of him.

"Aaron, my name is Emily and I'm one of the lawyers who will be handling your case," she introduces herself with a kind smile and a voice so warm that Aaron stops sobbing. "I promise we'll do everything in our power to ensure you don't have to go to another foster home, but doing things like this doesn't help us. You can't run away from home. If the judge finds out, she might interpret it as an act of rebellion, consider you a troubled boy, and conclude that you can't stay with your sister because she also had her problems in the past. Do you understand that?"

Aaron looks at Leah and the tennis player takes his hand.

"Yes, I understand."

"Great. I understand you're nervous, but now more than ever you need to behave in an exemplary manner and not do anything that draws attention. Leah would be delighted if you stayed here tonight, but you must return to the foster home, Aaron. You need to keep trusting your sister, you know she'll do everything possible for you to be with her," Emily says.

Leah stands up when she sees he's calm and has come to his senses.

"I'm going to call your sister to tell her you're here, and then Emily and I will take you to the Morris'es' house. Okay?" she asks and ruffles his hair.

"Yes, okay," Aaron accepts, calmer.

"I'll call Elena Morris to let her know too," Anne says, "they're very worried."

"I'm coming right now," Mia says with a rushed voice as soon as Leah tells her that her brother is with her.

"No, Mia. You're too upset and it took us a long time to calm him down. He'll get nervous again when he sees you. It's better if we take him to the Morris'es and resolve this before social services finds out," the tennis player says.

"Damn, Leah," Mia mutters.

"I promise you he's fine, Mia, really. He's talking with Emily now and he's calm, she's made him see reason and I'm sure he won't try to run away again. Go see him tomorrow at the Morris'es' and spend some time with him, I don't think Elena will

object."

Leah hears the voice of who she assumes is Emma Harris advising Mia to listen to her, that it's best for Aaron and for the case.

"Alright, make sure he gets into the Morrises' house, please," Mia begs.

"Don't worry, I won't leave until he does. I'll let you know when I've dropped him off."

"Thanks, Leah."

Almost an hour later, after leaving Aaron at the Morrises' house, Emily arrives at the entrance of the tennis club—now closed—so Leah can pick up her car. She stops at the gate and Leah turns to her before getting out of the car.

"Thank you for everything, Emily," she says and doesn't hesitate to take her hand.

She does it as a thank you, but immediately, their fingers intertwine without either of them being able to help it.

"You don't have to thank me," the lawyer says.

"Of course I do. You don't know what it would have been like for me to wander around alone looking for Aaron without going crazy. You helped me stay focused and then you were so good with him."

"I'm his lawyer, it's my duty," Emily smiles and they both know that tonight she's been much more than a lawyer, at least for Leah.

"In any case, thank you."

Leah leans in and gives her a kiss on the cheek that makes Emily's whole face burn and squeeze Leah's hand tightly. They look into each other's eyes intensely and the air becomes so dense that the tennis player feels she can't breathe.

"God, this is so hard," Leah smiles, releasing her hand to move away and open the door.

Emily gives her a smile and, as a goodbye, blows a kiss in the air that makes Leah's heart skip a beat.

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"Yes, perfect. Then, if you don't mind, I'll stop by to see him tomorrow as soon as I get off work."

Mia Clark is on the phone with her brother's foster mother. The woman sent her a message confirming that Aaron had arrived home and, although he was a bit nervous, he apologized to her, ate a light dinner, and went to his room. Mia, who paces around the small living room of her apartment with one hand on her hip, appreciates that Elena Morris is approachable, someone she can talk to without problems and who also allows her to see her brother occasionally without informing the social worker. With the previous foster mother, she didn't have that relationship – the woman was gruff and found fault with everything, not allowing unscheduled visits even on special days.

"If you notice he's anxious, please call me," she asks the woman. "One of his lawyers has made him understand that this kind of behavior only hurts us, but Aaron is still just a child, after all."

Emma follows her with her gaze. She thought that after receiving the call from the tennis player informing that Aaron was safely at home, Mia would relax and the anxiety that had been consuming her for hours would disappear. It hasn't happened; the caddie doesn't stop moving, clenching her fist, or biting her lips. The lawyer has had to use all her tactics to hold her back. Mia was convinced that seeing her brother that very night would help calm him down, but nothing could be further from the truth, and in their current custody process, it's best to maintain a low profile, not make too much noise, and act intelligently.

Mia says goodbye to Elena, apologizing again on Aaron's behalf. The caddie puts her

cell phone on the table and takes a few awkward steps to the couch. She collapses next to Emma and covers her face with both hands before resting her elbows on her legs. The young woman's breathing is rapid, her shoulders are positioned in a way that indicates tension, and the entire time she was talking, her tone was halting.

"It's over now, Mia," Emma says, the first thing that comes to mind. "Aaron is safe, and what he did was just a silly mistake caused by his fear."

The lawyer struggles to know what to do. Always moving in a cold environment among her friends and lovers, there have never been reassuring approaches or words loaded with hope and encouragement. On the contrary, when something has affected them, they either don't share it to avoid showing weakness or they mention it as something that can be resolved with money. Emily is the one who's good at these things; despite being very tough in court, she's affectionate and knows how to handle these situations. Emma wonders if it would be excessive to call her and ask what to do.

"Aaron is all I have left," Mia whispers without removing her hands from her face. "If something happened to him, I'd go crazy."

Emma feels a violent and sudden urge to tell her she's not alone, that she's there too. She reproaches herself for the thought; the caddie is her client, and the only reason she's there is to represent her legally.

"I'm terrible at giving encouragement," Emma responds and puts a hand on Mia's back to transmit some security, "but I can tell you that we'll do whatever it takes to make sure you're by your brother's side."

Without being fully conscious of it, Emma slides her hand softly, caressing the girl's back. They remain silent, neither knowing what to say, though Mia clearly finds this touch familiar, intimate, exciting. It's hard for her to think. The caddie has

experienced such a moment of stress that right now she'd love to go out and run through the streets of Charleston until her legs burn, though she prefers to burn that feeling of anxiety in another way, a more delirious one. When she feels the lawyer's touch has shifted toward her thigh, the caddie doesn't think twice, she acts. She stretches her arm and grabs Emma's to pull her up onto her lap, leaving her straddling her. They look at each other as if it's the first time their armor rests far away from them. Mia caresses her bare thighs; that flared gray skirt works in her favor and allows her to touch the lawyer's white skin. Their chests heave faster, Emma moistens her lips, and Mia gives her time to reject her, get up, and leave her apartment. She doesn't; Emma's response is clear because she approaches the girl and, without touching her with her hands, slides her tongue across Mia's lips with an agonizing slowness.

"You taste so good," Mia whispers when their tongues meet and the lawyer intensifies the kiss with a pleasurable murmur.

Emma's head spins, like one of those fairground rides that turns at a surprising speed. Mia has always seemed like a strong woman to her, even a bit rough, and what she's demonstrating at this moment is completely different. She caresses her calmly, almost with veneration. Her fingers feel like silk and her lips like cotton candy. Emma is on cloud nine, getting higher and higher, because Mia's caresses are taking her to Mars. The caddie stands up from the couch, keeping Emma with her legs around her waist.

"Right now I prefer the bedroom," Mia says against her lips while pressing her tighter against her body.

Emma crashes her mouth against hers and kisses her for a few seconds.

"Let's go," she only stops kissing her to release that monosyllable and continues clinging to her lips.

Mia walks confidently and, when they reach the edge of the bed, reclines the lawyer with delicacy. She looks at her, smiles with incredible sweetness, and begins to remove her heels. She kisses her legs and moves up slowly until she's on top of her.

"Can I take off your skirt?"

The question surprises Emma so much she's left speechless. No one has ever asked her permission for something like that. She's always assumed that, if she gets into bed with someone, responds to their caresses and kisses, she's giving approval for them to, at least, undress her. It doesn't bother her, it just throws her off for a few moments before she nods.

The caddie leaves a kiss on her lips and another on her neck before beginning her task. She finds the button that's right on the side, above a zipper. She opens it, slides it down, and removes that garment covering the woman's legs. She sets it aside gently and moves to Emma's belly to lift her shirt a bit and kiss that area which, without a doubt, could become her favorite.

"Your skin is so soft," the caddie runs her hand along her side and immediately raises her gaze to lock it with Emma's. "You're beautiful, incredibly so."

Emma thinks she might melt in the middle of the mattress. What she's experiencing is completely surreal. Suddenly she realizes she hasn't said anything, has barely moved, and the feeling that Mia might think she's inexperienced or one of those who lie in bed and do nothing, doesn't appeal to her at all.

"Come here," the lawyer asks with a voice tinged with desire, and she bites her lips when the girl obeys, but does so leaving a trail of kisses wherever she goes.

Emma takes her face and plunges her tongue fiercely. She lowers her hands to find the edge of Mia's shirt, tears it off with a quick movement, and opens her eyes to

observe her. She doesn't ask; she doesn't seem to be as polite as the caddie, she removes her bra, and those small, firm breasts cry out to her that they need the warmth of her mouth. She sucks them, bites them, and delights in the taste that remains on her lips while listening to her companion's sighs and feeling the pressure she exerts with her hips.

They spend a good while in bed; Mia believes there isn't a corner of Emma's body left to discover. She has licked every part of her and recognized every inch of her skin. First the caddie comes, and minutes later, with a couple of fingers inside her, Emma does too. There are no multiple orgasms or wild screams. In the bed lie two women who seemed to hate each other and suddenly have made love. Yes, love, because that can't be called fucking. Emma has never been touched in such a subtle way, with such adoration, and she believes her mind might explode.

"Do you want something to drink or eat?" Mia speaks with her eyes closed and a voice velvety from exhaustion, pressed against Emma in a state of absolute relaxation.

"Rest, I'm fine," the caress that the lawyer leaves on her face has come without thinking, but she wanted it so much that she couldn't control herself.

Mia falls asleep immediately. Her breathing becomes calm, regular. Emma is assaulted by doubts, anxiety, a nervousness that has decided to start telling her that what she's done isn't typical of her. She has slept with this ball girl who seems hateful to her, or seemed to, because, damn, what a sweet girl. But the fact that she felt that way doesn't erase the difference between them: personalities, attitudes, social classes, nothing about them is compatible. She has to leave, she can't stay in that bed. Okay, she enjoyed the encounter and must understand that it was just that. She moves slowly so as not to wake Mia and escape from that apartment. When she's about to succeed, she feels an arm holding her; Mia presses against her, hugs her, and leaves a kiss on her shoulder to curl up against her and continue sleeping. The lawyer is

completely disarmed, it's as if this girl has the power to give her a happiness she didn't know existed. She's in trouble, she knows it, but decides – for once in her life – to leave that worry to the Emma of the future. She closes her eyes feeling Mia's warmth behind her and clears her mind to fall asleep in just a few minutes.

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"How about that one?" Stella asks while she and Leah walk across the terrace of the bar they've just entered.

Leah landed an hour ago. This time, Stella did pick her up at the airport and, although during the flight Leah felt nervous thinking about the best way to approach the conversation, as soon as she saw Stella and they greeted each other, her nerves vanished and she's surprisingly calm. During the car ride they talked about trivial things, the typical polite questions asked out of courtesy, shared a few smiles, and endured a period of awkward silence they managed by turning up the radio volume.

"That one's better," Leah says, pointing to a table in the back, located in a corner so far from the entrance that there's barely anyone sitting at the nearby tables.

"Sure," Stella says, heading that way.

They sit facing each other and a waitress quickly arrives to take their order. Leah orders a black coffee with ice and Stella a mineral water.

"You came to break up with me, didn't you?" Stella fires as soon as the waitress walks away.

Leah moistens her lips before swallowing and nodding with a grimace while a small knot tightens in her throat.

"I'm sorry, Stella, but I think continuing doesn't make sense. We both know our relationship isn't going anywhere," Leah explains, stretching her hand across the table.

Stella hesitates, but takes it.

"We have our differences and our relationship isn't perfect, but you never cared before," Stella says. "Why now?"

A shiver runs through Leah; she doesn't want to lie, but causing pain without reason isn't part of her plan.

"Because now I feel I need more and you can't give it to me, Stella, and even if you could, we're not in love and you know it," Leah explains in a burst of sensibility.

"Yes, I guess that's true, but I didn't think it would happen like this, without time to prepare myself."

"I'm really sorry," Leah squeezes her hand affectionately and bites her lips.

Even though love isn't enough between them, she cares for Stella and the last thing she wants is to hurt her.

"I know, I'm sorry too that it couldn't work out. I really would have liked things between us to be different. Maybe at another time the feelings would have been different..."

Leah knows that's not true, that at another time, there probably wouldn't have been anything between them, but she smiles fondly.

"Yes, maybe. How did you know I was going to break up with you?" she asks, trying to ease the tension in the conversation.

Stella smiles with a satisfied expression and releases her hand to drink from her glass. Leah experiences a sensation of relief at being freed.

"Because you came voluntarily and suddenly. The last few times, I've been the one asking you to come, and you've always complained about having to be the one to travel. Not this time. You called me as soon as I got back from the retreat, like you'd been waiting, like you were in a hurry, and you showed up here as soon as I arrived. It could only be two things: either you were dying to see me or you came to break up with me," Stella pauses and Leah swallows, "and considering how the relationship has been going lately, it wasn't hard to figure out you came for the second reason, so, in a way, I've had some time to prepare myself," she says, making a gesture with her fingers.

"I really am sorry, Stella," Leah insists.

"Is there someone else, Leah?" Stella asks bluntly, looking at Leah with an intensity that makes her nervous. "I won't get angry with your answer. If there's someone else, I'll understand. We live far apart and barely see each other..."

Stella makes a guilty pause, and Leah doesn't need to ask anything to confirm her suspicions that she has been with other women.

"I'm asking because your rush still doesn't make sense to me, no matter how much you say you need more now," Stella finishes.

"There's no one else," Leah responds firmly, "but I hope there will be, Stella. There's someone I like, and I couldn't stay with you when I can't stop thinking about her," she decides to be honest.

Leah omits the kisses with Emily that, although not sought after, she didn't reject either. It doesn't seem necessary to share information that can only cause pain. Deep down, she appreciates Stella's silence about her adventures, so she figures it's best to do the same.

"In that case, I wish you lots of luck, Leah. You deserve someone who makes you happy and can always be by your side," says Stella, and Leah knows she's sincere.

Her chest tightens and her eyes well up. Again, she stretches out her hand and they intertwine their fingers on the table, only this will be the last time they do so.

"I hope the same for you, Stella," Leah says.

"I know," Stella smiles at her. "Would you like to share one last meal? At that retreat the food was awful and I'm starving; I need a good binge on something decent."

Leah bursts out laughing and raises her hand to call the waitress.

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Emily Harris walks at a brisk pace toward Harris she'll never understand her cousin's obsession with that sugar-loaded drink.

"From my therapy session."

Emma suddenly remembers that her cousin attends sessions with a psychiatrist and can't help feeling a pang of guilt for not asking about her progress.

"How's it going with her?" she asks directly.

"If I'd known how great these sessions would make me feel, I would have started a long time ago," Emily confirms. "Dr. Mitchell has helped me so much that some days I feel like I'm a completely different Emily from the one I used to be."

Emma reaches out to take her cousin's hand. She admires her, has always thought she's an extraordinary woman, and although her Aunt Bilma had recommended therapy to Emily several times, Emma never thought it necessary because to her, Emily was the strongest person she knew. Now she realizes that perhaps we aren't all as strong as we appear.

"I'm so glad, Em," Emma says, squeezing her hand affectionately. "You know I'm here if you need anything from me."

The scene is absurd—it's supposed to be a family moment full of support and affection, but Emily sucks so loudly on her drink and makes such pleasure-filled murmurs that Emma can't help bursting into laughter. Emily smiles and winks at her.

"Well," Emma changes the subject to start working, "tomorrow I have an appointment with the social worker who's been handling Aaron's case from the beginning. I've also spoken on the phone with the foster mother, and we shouldn't have any problems with them either." Emma types for a few seconds and leans closer to the screen. "I have the two reports we were waiting for and one from the boy's school."

"We have almost everything," Emily adds. "You need to interview Mia again, review the information she provided, and have her sign the documents. After that, we just need to prepare Leah and her mothers for the meeting with the judge."

Emma tenses up, and not imperceptibly, because Emily notices how her cousin literally jumps in her chair. They look at each other, and Emily narrows her eyes, though she doesn't say anything.

"Can you talk to her?"

Emma's voice comes out somewhere between childish and fake nonchalance. She picks up some folders on her desk, straightens them, and puts them back in place. Her cousin's gaze drills into her, so she gets up to escape her analysis. She approaches the window and stands there like a statue. She's terrible at pretending.

"What happened?" Emily's question comes with a swivel of her chair that positions her almost facing Emma.

The younger lawyer remains silent for a few seconds, not because she wants to hide something from her cousin, but because she doesn't know how to say it. She thinks a bit about how to explain herself and, finding no subtle words, blurts it out.

"We fucked," she says. "You know, Mia and I. We fucked," she repeats.

Emily raises her eyebrows, opens her eyes wide, and twists her lips. Then she nods as if she just understood.

"Didn't you say you disliked her?" she asks with a mocking tone.

Emma snorts and crosses her arms.

"I thought so too. You know her, she's arrogant, hateful..." Emma bites her lips in a gesture she couldn't suppress.

"But..." Emily says, encouraging her to continue.

Emma shakes her head and walks back to sit in her chair.

"Fragile," she describes Mia with one word. "The night Aaron ran away, she was devastated. She was a bundle of nerves, couldn't stop shaking and saying her brother was all she had. I didn't know what to do you know how terrible I am at comforting people. I don't know how it happened, but suddenly we were kissing."

Emma abruptly stops her story. She crosses her legs because, although the sex wasn't as wild as she's had many times, the memory of the caresses and the delicacy with which Mia treated her makes excitement pool in her lower belly.

"I think it's the first time I've made love that way," she continues. "I thought it would be, I don't know, rough, like her. And it wasn't—it was something gentle, loving, magical."

Emily raises her eyebrows again. She's only heard her cousin talk like this once before, and at that time she was head over heels in love. She omits commenting and continues listening.

"I left in the morning. I panicked terribly and as soon as I could, I left her apartment."

"Haven't you talked since then?"

Emma shakes her head and starts fidgeting with a pen.

"Not about what happened," she explains. "We've talked twice, but only about Aaron. It's been very professional; she hasn't mentioned what happened, and neither have I."

Emma is like an extension of Emily. That's why the older cousin knows her so well. She can almost tell what she's thinking; it's always been that way. She remembers when that bottle blonde broke her heart, and Emma didn't even have to open her mouth; Emily saw her, hugged her, and consoled her for an entire week. That's why she knows something has shaken her, piercing through that ice and steel armor.

"Are you going to tell me?" she decides to ask, cautiously.

Emma looks away.

"I already told you."

Emily remains silent again, though she continues watching her cousin. She won't pressure her; she knows Emma will tell her what's going on.

Emma clicks her tongue and furrows her brow.

"I liked it a lot," she finally admits. "I don't remember the last time I felt that way. It seemed like I was everything to her, the only one she wanted in that moment. It's hard to explain."

"So, what's the problem?"

"I can't be with her," Emma answers categorically and clears her throat. "She's... she's an employee at the tennis club, with a criminal record, and..."

"Mia is a wonderful girl," Emily interrupts. "She's like a sister to Leah, and I'm sure if she weren't a good person, Natalie and Anne wouldn't love her like a daughter, and Leah herself wouldn't protect her so much."

"She's been to prison," Emma's tone turns childish again when she makes that statement.

Emily hardens her expression, and her voice emerges powerful.

"You know why she was there; you're her lawyer, and you know the facts by heart. You like Mia—I noticed it from the first day you saw her. You'll never be happy if you keep thinking about what others will say."

Emily rises from her chair. She's not upset, but she feels enormous rejection when her cousin enters the loop of the icy society she mingles with.

"Do you have to go to court today?" Emma radically changes the subject, and Emily accepts without complaint.

"I have a trial in an hour and a half; I can't wait for it to be over, really," she answers with a gesture of weariness.

"Have you spoken to Vanesa again?" Emma asks with interest.

"We had coffee again," Emily suddenly laughs. "If someone had told me I'd have a cordial relationship with Vanesa Cooper after what she did to me, I would have screamed that they were all crazy."

Emma laughs too and is glad her cousin has overcome that trauma and can see her ex-girlfriend without feeling a knife in her chest.

"Shall we meet for lunch?" Emma asks.

"Pick me up at the courthouse. I'm in the mood for a double hamburger."

Emily leaves the office, and Emma sinks into her chair. Her head spins endlessly, and she even feels dizzy. She can't lie to herself: she's attracted to Mia, a lot, and doesn't deny wanting to repeat the other night. However, the other Emma drills into her head. What will her friends say when they see them together? Well, they could have a secret affair; nobody has to know. But then she quickly remembers that brat who was eyeing Mia at the club bar that day and realizes she wants Mia all to herself. She's going to go crazy, that's for sure.

"Damn," she lets out a sigh and squeezes her eyes shut. "I don't know what the hell I'm going to do with you, Mia."

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Leah puts her racket in its case while watching Emily do the same and thinks about how quickly all their training sessions together pass. She loves tennis and normally time flies when she's on a court, but with the lawyer, she feels it slipping through her fingers.

"I'm exhausted," Emily comments, wiping sweat with her towel, unaware of her trainer's thoughts.

"Have dinner with me?" Leah blurts out, causing Emily to turn, surprised by the question.

The lawyer wants to break into one of her enormous smiles, but forces herself to contain it because she isn't sure that dining with Leah—despite how much she wants to—is appropriate given the current circumstances between them.

"I want us to talk about something," Leah clarifies as if reading her mind and guessing her doubts.

"Okay," Emily accepts, a bit nervous, remembering that Leah went to see Stella. What if she's had second thoughts and hasn't broken up with her?

An irrational fear tightens her chest, but she decides to hide it, going against Dr. Mitchell's advice.

"Great," Leah experiences a sudden tingling in her chest just thinking about an evening with Emily, but works hard not to show it. "Do you like fusion cuisine? I know a restaurant where I can order..."

"Actually, I prefer a double cheeseburger with everything on it," Emily interrupts with flushed cheeks.

Leah stops mid-sentence and ends up smiling at the lawyer's honesty while imagining her holding one of those burgers that drip sauce everywhere, requiring more napkins than anyone could possibly use.

"Burgers it is," the tennis player concludes. "Any place in particular?"

"Surprise me," Emily says.

Leah gives a crooked smile and nods.

"In that case, I'll expect you at my place at eight-thirty. Does that work for you?"

Emily is so punctual arriving at Leah's house that she doesn't want to seem desperate and lets a couple minutes pass before ringing the doorbell. The tennis player opens the gate and Emily crosses the property to the house, where Leah waits with the door open, dressed in linen pants and a loose tank top that exposes one of her shoulders. The lawyer loses focus at this sight just as she's climbing the porch steps.

Leah can't do anything about the scene unfolding before her because it happens so quickly that she has no time to react. Emily trips over her own foot and her body lurches forward at the same speed as her purse, which Leah—stunned—watches fly past her and slide across the floor inside her house while Emily lands in front of her feet with a small cry of surprise.

"Oh my god, Emily," she says, immediately crouching down to help her up.

She grabs her under the shoulders and pulls her up, finding herself face-to-face with her radiant smile as soon as she's standing.

"Sorry, my clumsiness knows no bounds," Emily says, looking at her palms, reddened after landing on them.

Leah takes them delicately.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

Emily shakes her head with a quick movement that makes her hair dance, sending the fruity smell of her shampoo toward Leah, who can't help pulling her close enough to give her a soft kiss on the lips that sends the lawyer's heart racing while simultaneously throwing her off balance.

"You shouldn't, Leah..." she says, dazed, touching her lips with her fingers as if Leah's were still there. "We had a deal."

"And I fulfilled my part," Leah responds, looking at her intently.

Emily needs a few seconds to understand what she means.

"You broke up with Stella?" she asks, about to spit her heart out of her mouth.

"Yes, I went to see her for that, Emily," she reminds her and narrows her eyes. "Which means I'm free to..."

Leah can't finish explaining because Emily lunges at her mouth and tangles her tongue with hers while pushing her into the house. The tennis player doesn't even close the door when they enter, she simply grabs Emily's waist to guide her toward the couch and, before lying on top of her, the lawyer has already removed her shirt.

There are no preliminaries or tender kisses or electrifying caresses. Suddenly they realize that the waiting has been consuming them and the need to satisfy themselves

becomes an urgency they must address before continuing to talk.

Leah has no trouble lifting Emily's dress skirt and moving her underwear to the side, nor does Emily struggle to slip her hand into Leah's pants. When Leah penetrates her, Emily releases a pleasurable murmur that makes the skin on Leah's entire body prickle and nearly makes her come.

"Am I doing okay like this?" she asks, maintaining a soft, steady rhythm, dizzy with pleasure while Emily touches her.

"Perfectly," the lawyer answers between broken sighs.

The living room fills with the sound of their increasingly loud sighs and the smacking of desperate kisses before the moans arrive and, finally, a guttural cry escapes from Emily's throat when she comes while Leah muffles hers against a couch cushion.

"Damn, I didn't know I needed this so badly," Emily says after a couple of minutes relaxing, her gaze fixed on the ceiling while caressing Leah's back, lying face down beside her.

The tennis player smiles against her shoulder and nods.

"I agree," she affirms and lowers the strap of Emily's dress to give her a soft kiss that makes her shiver.

They're ready to continue without the initial rush, but the sudden growl of Emily's stomach makes them both burst into laughter.

"Better have dinner," Leah says, sitting up, "I wouldn't want to be responsible for you fainting."

"Those burgers will be cold," Emily says with a strange grimace.

Leah stands up and offers a hand to help her get up.

"Yes, you'll have to settle for a sandwich," she answers and arches an eyebrow.

"Only if I get dessert afterward," Emily says, devouring Leah with her eyes.

The tennis player feels a current run through her and swallows hard as they walk to the bathroom to wash their hands.

"You can have all the dessert you want, now let's go to the kitchen."

"How did Stella take it?" Emily asks while Leah, as she prepares the sandwich, summarizes her conversation with Stella.

"Well, it didn't take her by surprise. I guess she knew as well as I did that our relationship was living on borrowed time. Still, it's not pleasant to go through this, I cared about her a lot."

"I can imagine," Emily says, nodding with a look of understanding.

"But now it's done and I don't want to keep talking about that," Leah serves the two plates on the table and turns to Emily before they both sit down. "I like you, Emily," she blurts out, making the lawyer stop breathing. "I wasn't counting on this, but it happened, I like you so much."

Emily, red as a tomato because she wasn't expecting this, grabs her by the waist and winks at her.

"Do you like me as much as Emma likes Mia or vice versa?" she asks, trying to

reduce the tension a bit.

She gives her a kiss on the lips and turns toward the table, desperate to bite into that sandwich, but Leah frowns, not quite understanding the question.

"What do you mean?" the tennis player asks.

Emily's lips curve and her eyes shine with pure amusement.

"You don't know?" she asks without stopping smiling, sitting at the table with a mysterious air.

Leah follows her and sits across from her with a questioning expression.

"Know what, Emily?"

Emily, who loves gossip, allows herself a moment of glee when she realizes she possesses information that Leah doesn't yet know. She takes a bite of her sandwich and savors it with delight while staring at her intently.

"Are you going to tell me?" Leah asks impatiently.

Emily wipes her mouth and delicately places the napkin next to her plate.

"Mia and my cousin slept together."

Leah's jaw nearly drops and Emily smiles, enjoying her expression.

"When?" she asks, perplexed.

"The night Aaron ran away. Can you believe it? You and I were looking for him

while these two were rolling around on the couch," she jokes, drawing a laugh from Leah.

"Mia hasn't told me," Leah says, "but knowing her, I'm not surprised either. Now she must be traumatized from sleeping with the posh Harris girl."

Emily laughs again.

"Emma told me this morning if that's any consolation. I hope they figure out their silliness," she says seriously. "By the way, I forgot to mention that tomorrow you should all come by the office. I mean you, your mothers, and Mia. I'm sorry to tell you with such short notice, but it completely slipped my mind. I hope it's not a problem."

Leah scratches her head, thoughtful.

"No, we'll manage, don't worry. Why do we need to go?" the tennis player asks.

"To prepare you for the questions the judge will ask when she talks with you. It's just a formality, but it's better to do it. It'll give you confidence and an idea of what to expect," Emily explains.

"Sure, we'll come as soon as I organize everything at the club."

"Good, in that case, can we move on to dessert now?" Emily fires back, and Leah's throat goes dry.

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"Emma, please come to my office," Emily Harris says with the phone pressed to her ear while collecting a couple of folders. "They've arrived."

The older of the cousins hangs up after hearing a vague murmur of acceptance on the other end of the line and rises from her chair. She's nervous, her left hand trembles slightly and her throat itches. She clears her throat, runs her fingers through her hair and smooths out nonexistent wrinkles in her suit jacket. The night before she stayed late at the tennis player's house, they made love again and remained in bed for a good while talking in whispers. Afterward, Emily woke up ravenously hungry and they went to the kitchen to nibble on some cheese with a glass of wine. They ended up devouring each other in the kitchen, and when the lawyer remembers it, a shiver makes her hair stand on end. She's fascinated by this stage where you can't keep your hands off the other person, everything is new and exciting and, of course, Emily intends to enjoy it until the intensity fades.

"Good morning," the lawyer greets as soon as she opens her office door and sees the Walker women seated in the waiting area.

Leah smiles and the sparkle in her eyes tells Emily that she too is happy to see her. Now standing, the women approach and greet each other professionally, shaking hands courteously. Until it's Leah's turn. Mia appears in the hallway and that greeting with the tennis player hangs in the air, but after welcoming Aaron's sister, Emily doesn't hesitate and plants a chaste kiss on a very startled Leah's lips. Anne's eyes widen, Natalie blinks rapidly, and Mia turns and pretends to admire a painting decorating the hallway.

"How are you?" Emily asks, looking into Leah's eyes.

"Much better now," the tennis player answers and gives her another quick kiss.

The sound of heels that seem determined to crack the polished floor makes them all turn and watch the younger Harris lawyer approach. As always, Emma is dressed to break hearts. A long skirt suit and jacket with a black shirt featuring white details. Hair pulled back, flawless makeup, and eyes with a sharp expression.

The gaze between the lawyer and Mia Clark gets caught for a second, enough to denote the tension between them, dampen Emma's panties, and throw off an insecure Mia who never gets nervous about a woman, except for her, the unbearable snob who makes her mouth water remembering the taste of her kisses.

"Emma, take Mia. I'll handle Leah and her mothers," Emily says, which, although it seems like a macabre plan, was actually planned this way.

"Sure," Emma answers, her voice strangled. "Mia, follow me, please."

After saying goodbye to the rest of the women, lawyer and client walk down the hallway. In silence they head to Emma's office where, polite as always, she opens the door and lets Mia enter first.

"Sit wherever you like," Emma invites her while heading to her own chair.

Hearing Mia's voice suddenly makes the lawyer's heart beat hard.

"Let's settle this once and for all," Mia's tone tells her she's not playing around. "I can't give this judicial process my full attention if I have other things on my mind."

Emma looks at her and feels a knot in her throat threatening to strangle her. She decides to take the easy route.

"What do you mean?" she asks and pretends to be busy turning on her computer.

Mia snorts and shakes her head.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Emma," she responds harshly. "We slept together, you ran from my house, and we haven't talked about it. If you don't want to discuss it, that's fine with me, but I want to settle it, to know if there's a pending conversation or if we're going to act like nothing happened."

Like nothing happened.

The phrase echoes in Emma's brain. Is that what she wants? No, certainly not, but she should let it go. Now that Mia gives her the opportunity to not even touch the subject, Emma should tell her that what happened won't repeat itself.

"What do you want?" the lawyer asks.

"Me?" Mia points to herself, incredulous. Emma has decided to throw the ball far from her court. "I wouldn't mind continuing to see you, meeting occasionally, going out to eat somewhere, but I know how you are, and dating a ball girl plus ex-convict isn't something I think lawyer Emma Harris could tolerate."

The caddie's honesty is crushing. So much so that Emma feels miserable. Hearing those words from her companion's own mouth has been a direct stab to the chest that won't stop bleeding. She's clear that Mia is a great woman; she has seen with her own eyes how hardworking, loyal, intelligent, and passionate she is. The lawyer knows her story by heart and knows that, despite the caddie having had an extremely tough life, she has forged ahead alone and managed to become the wonderful person she is. Emma touches her nose nervously, then readjusts in her chair thinking about her response. She's not going to deny something obvious, though the problem is she doesn't know how to act.

"Let's do something," Emma proposes in response, "let's focus on preparing you for the interview with the judge. I need you very focused on this. And tonight we'll meet, outside of here, just you and me."

"The lawyer and her client?"

"No. Emma and Mia," the attorney answers.

Mia nods and, finally, sits down in front of the black wooden desk that occupies much of the office. She relaxes a bit and realizes that the office smells like Emma, like her perfume, like her skin. She's lost, she knows it, because she made the mistake of kissing those full lips, feeling her tongue entwined with hers, and at that precise moment, her defenses crashed to the floor.

"Don't try to deceive the judge," Emma pulls her from her thoughts. "Be sincere, speak calmly, and answer everything she asks you."

"Do you know what she's going to ask me?"

"I've prepared a list of possible questions; the important thing is that you stay calm. You have nothing to hide, you've complied with everything they've asked of you, you have a good job, a home, you're free of crimes, and your behavior has been exemplary."

"That almost sounds like praise from you," Mia says, trying to ease the tension.

Emma locks onto her gaze and all she wants is to stand up and kiss her. Tell her that everything will be fine, that she'll be there to guide her and promise that she'll do everything, even the impossible, to ensure her brother is by her side, but once again, that cold marble she's covered with prevents her from approaching the girl she likes in that way. Even so, she smiles and winks at her in silent acknowledgment of what

she said.

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"So, can we leave now?" asks Anne when Emily accompanies them out of the office, where Leah waits for them, having entered before them.

"Yes, that's all. Thank you so much for coming," Emily responds with one of her smiles, as radiant as it is sincere.

"Perfect. Will we see you at the club?" probes Natalie, unable to contain her curiosity.

"Yes, of course. I won't miss the next practice," Emily assures.

Natalie smiles, glancing sideways at Leah, whom she plans to interrogate as soon as they get in the car.

"Shall we go, Leah?" asks Anne, but Leah's eyes remain fixed on Emily's.

"One second, Mom," the tennis player requests and approaches Emily, takes her hand, and moves her away from her mothers before bringing her lips to the lawyer's ear. "Have lunch with me?"

Emily hadn't anticipated this proposal, but finds it impossible to refuse, especially with the trembling in her legs after feeling Leah's breath slide across her neck.

"Sure, but it'll have to be near the firm. I have to meet with a client in a couple of hours."

"No problem." Leah turns to her mothers with a satisfied expression, reaches into her

pocket, pulls out the car keys, and hands them to Anne. "Go without me. I'm having lunch with Emily."

Natalie's eyes widen, and she opens her mouth, ready to interrogate her daughter in the middle of the hallway, but Anne moves faster and takes the car keys.

"Of course, honey. Will you take a taxi afterward?" Anne asks.

"Yes, I'll figure it out. Don't worry."

Leah and Emily walk them to the car, wait until they leave, and then head in the opposite direction toward one of the nearby restaurants Emily classifies as suitable for lunch during work hours.

"When we have more time, I'll take you to my favorite place, but for now, this will do," she says, approaching the door to open it.

"You mean like a date?" Leah smiles, narrowing her eyes.

Emily nearly falls when she goes to push the door and it opens from inside. She doesn't lose her balance because Leah, already accustomed to her clumsiness, moves quickly and grabs her by the arm before Emily collides with the person exiting.

"I'm sorry," says Emily, and upon looking up, she loses her breath seeing Vanessa Cooper in front of her.

"No, I'm sorry, Emily. I opened the door too abruptly," says Vanessa, passing by while also observing Leah. "See you around the courthouse."

"Yes, see you," says Emily with flushed cheeks.

Leah notices the lawyer's discomfort after crossing paths with the woman but decides not to comment until they're seated at their table.

"Everything okay, Emily?" asks Leah without intending to pressure her.

The attorney slowly exhales until her lungs empty and adjusts her back against the chair. She could respond that yes, Vanessa is just a work colleague, but she doesn't want to lie to Leah either.

"Yes, everything's fine, but that woman, the one we just ran into at the door..."

"Yes," says Leah, encouraging her to continue.

"She's a lawyer, and also my ex," Emily finally admits.

"Mmm, I see," says Leah, "and she doesn't seem like just any ex."

Emily smiles and thanks the waiter when he hands them the menu.

"No, not just any ex. She's the one who broke my heart."

Leah grimaces and nods, thinking that if Emily had told her a few minutes earlier, perhaps—accidentally—she could have stuck her foot in front of Vanessa Cooper's ankle when they crossed paths and made her trip.

"Can I ask what she did to you?" says Leah. "Only if you feel like telling me, Emily. I'll understand if you don't want to talk about it."

"Do you want to hear it?" asks the lawyer, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"Yes, of course. I want to know everything about you."

Emily's heart races so suddenly that she feels as if her body has shifted slightly. She looks into Leah's eyes for a few seconds and realizes that therapy is definitely working because, before attending sessions with Dr. Mitchell, she's sure she would have told Leah she didn't want to talk about it, or that she couldn't. Now, however, she wants to tell her, to open up and let Leah know her most vulnerable parts.

"I've moved past it," says Emily while continuing to eat her meat in sauce as she explains the story to Leah, "but I can't help feeling anxious when I see her, especially if it's unexpected like before."

"I guess that's normal. She betrayed your trust, and no matter how much you forgive her, I imagine that's impossible to forget," comments Leah.

"Yes, I really didn't see it coming. Actually, it was a textbook mistake on my part. You should never reveal anything about your strategy to opposing counsel, much less information they could use against your client, but she was my girlfriend and I trusted her completely. It never even crossed my mind that she would do what she did," explains Emily, surprised by how easy it is to express her feelings to Leah.

"It must have been a tough blow," says the tennis player, extending her arm across the table.

Emily takes her hand and they intertwine their fingers, immediately smiling as they look at each other.

"It was," she says without letting go. "When I heard her speak in the middle of the courtroom, spilling everything I had told her after such an intimate moment, it felt like taking a bullet to the center of my chest. I couldn't forgive her, so at that moment, everything ended. I lost the case and I lost her too."

"I'm sorry," says Leah.

"Thank you," Emily smiles, "but I'm good now," she winks and Leah's pulse races.

The waiter arrives with the dessert menu, and they realize they're still holding hands across the table. Emily laughs again as she lets go, like an embarrassed teenager, but when Leah is about to ask if she wants to share a dessert or wants one for herself, Emily becomes transfixed watching the television.

Leah turns to see what's captivating the lawyer's attention and frowns, confused to see it's an advertisement for an amusement park.

"Do you like those places?" asks Leah when the commercial ends and Emily's attention returns.

"Almost as much as tennis," Emily laughs. "I used to go a lot, I mean during my student years, when I still had time to breathe. I love the rides, especially the fast ones, because I can scream like a maniac without anyone looking at me like I'm crazy."

Leah bursts into laughter and continues listening as Emily enthusiastically tells her about the many times she visited those types of parks and how long it's been since she's been to one, thinking she should find time to take her there, despite hating them herself.

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Emma curses under her breath for accepting Mia's proposition to meet somewhere private instead of a restaurant. The caddie insisted on meeting at her apartment; she wanted to be comfortable and able to talk without interruptions. Emma, who apparently always needs to have the last word, not only agreed but demanded they meet at her own place. Now, after showering, she observes with analytical eyes the two clothing items laid on her bed. Even though dinner is right here, she's incapable of putting on comfortable clothes and glances sidelong at the gray heels resting on the floor. She opts for the black dress; it's not too elegant, though it gives her the poise she needs for this occasion.

She makes a face when she puts on her shoes. She's been on twelve centimeters of leather and wood all day and feels like her feet might explode. She applies makeup carefully, straightens her hair, and pauses in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom. Her reflection shows an impeccable woman with a carefully chosen outfit and shiny hair, but with the dull gaze she's been seeing for a long time. She presses her lips together and turns to head toward the living room. She's prepared the table meticulously washed linen tablecloths, silver cutlery, handmade scented candles, and countless details she couldn't overlook. Emma Harris surveys the living room, checking that everything is in place. The expensive couch is nicely complemented by comfortable cushions, the floor is perfectly waxed, and the soft lighting creates a sense of intimacy.

"Perfect," Emma murmurs while checking the time on her wristwatch.

Ten minutes later, the apartment doorbell alerts her that her guest has arrived. She walks calmly, hiding a nervousness that hasn't left her skin since that morning when Mia asked to settle once and for all what's happening between them. She opens the

door and freezes. There stands that arrogant caddie with her casual air, dressed in simple black jeans, matching sneakers, and a fitted white t-shirt. Her hair hangs loose, slightly damp, and Emma catches the minty scent of her shampoo. It pisses the lawyer off—tremendously—that her heart pounds so powerfully when the girl is near.

"Are you going to let me in?" asks Mia, smiling crookedly. She knows Emma likes her, despite trying to fight against her feelings.

"Of course," says the lawyer nonchalantly and steps aside to let her enter.

Mia takes several steps and stops in the living room. She feels somewhat disoriented; she knows the economic level the Harris family enjoys, but the apartment she's entered seems more like a luxury hotel than a home. Since meeting Leah Walker, she's seen many places and people with money, and she knows perfectly well that most who display their properties like magazine photos do it more for appearance than anything else.

"Is there a problem?" asks Emma, noticing her guest isn't moving and is observing everything with mechanical movements.

Mia shakes her head and turns to hand her a cloth bag she's carrying.

"None," she resolves. "Here, I brought a bottle of red wine and some beers."

"You didn't have to bother," Emma responds politely, "I have everything planned."

By planned, she means she called a restaurant where she usually meets her friends and ordered enough food for both of them, plus the best wine she could get. Emma Harris has ensured it will be a perfect evening.

Mia could say many things, but doesn't want to offend her host. She appreciates that

Emma organized everything so well, though it wasn't what she imagined when they agreed to have dinner at home and talk more intimately.

"Come," the caddie requests when Emma exits the kitchen. "Join me on the couch."

Emma frowns. She hesitates for a second, then approaches Mia.

"Take off those heels, please," the request comes with an almost erotic scan from Emma's feet to her face.

The lawyer remains confused, but that doesn't prevent her from complying with Mia's request. She feels that from those lips she kissed a few nights ago, only enchanted words emerge that she can't help but follow. They sit on the couch, and without thinking, the caddie takes one of Emma's feet and begins massaging it skillfully. The lawyer nearly lets out a squeal of pure pleasure feeling those expert fingers bringing relief to her sore sole.

"When I asked for intimacy, I also meant comfort," says Mia, smiling as Emma closes her eyes from the massage. "Don't get me wrong, you look beautiful and your place is very nice, but nobody can think clearly wearing those infernal shoes."

Emma laughs, half amused and half nervous from the compliment she received. It's ironic she's tired of hearing she's pretty, but on Mia's lips, it sounds much better.

"I want to be very honest with you, Emma, and I want you to be honest too," she delves into the conversation that brought them together tonight. "I like you, I really do, and it's been a long time since a girl attracted me this way, but I have my priorities, things that come above everything, even above what I feel for you."

Emma wants to say something, but finds herself speechless. She prefers Mia to continue while she unclogs her throat.

"Since what happened with my parents, my goal in life has been to get Aaron back. I've fought tooth and nail to clean my record and become who I am now," Mia takes Emma's other foot and continues her massage. "I've dated several women, but I've always been clear that I don't want to be with someone who causes me problems, and if you're not clear, you will cause them."

"Me?" Emma finally speaks and points to herself. "Between us, I think you're the one who might cause problems here."

They both laugh. Emma has said these words smiling and trying to help them both relax with the joke.

"I want to be at peace, focus on getting my brother back and giving him the best I can, not racking my brain thinking my girlfriend is uncomfortable because I work at an elite club picking up balls, that I don't drive a high-end car, or that my parents aren't prestigious investors," the conversation turns more serious and Emma straightens her back. "I am what you've already seen, and I'd like to keep discovering what's behind that gold armor you always wear, but under no circumstances will I do it if you try to hide me from the world."

Emma looks at Mia in silence. All she hears is the crackling of a couple of candles on the side table and the sound of her own heart. She's never thought about hiding a partner; she's never had the need to do so because they've all been from her same circle. Now that Mia has mentioned it, she feels strange, miserable, and even somewhat disgusted. The girl is right; if she puts herself in Mia's position, she wouldn't accept being with someone who's ashamed of her or tries to hide her.

"I think we have a connection, you know?" Mia continues talking, she's also nervous and finds it hard to stay silent. "I don't know if you believe in these things; I do. There are hundreds, thousands of people who pass through our lives and only a few pull at your soul as if they had a magnet. I feel that with you I have some kind of

bond that does me good," Mia readjusts herself on the couch and this time faces Emma with a serious expression. "But that won't make me stay by your side if you don't do things right."

That last comment seems to give the lawyer the strength to speak. She doesn't want the girl to think she has no interest, though she doesn't know if what she'll say will benefit her or, on the contrary, push away any chance of dating the caddie.

"Although my life has always been pretty easy, from a very young age I chose this bubble I'm still in, and I find it hard to leave," seeing Mia's confused face, Emma tries to explain better. "I decided to mingle with people who live for appearances, you know, who has the best car, who makes the most money, has the most powerful partner... a world of fake friends, expensive clothes, and elegant parties. Without wanting to, I got used to it. I can't eat a hamburger no matter how much I want one, go without heels, or stop choosing clothes as if I were in an eternal beauty pageant. In that, Emily has always been very different and never understood why I stay in this world where I don't belong."

"It's never too late to make a change, Emma, but you have to want it. If you feel good where you are, no matter how hard you try, you'll never manage to leave."

Emma sketches a tired smile and shakes her head.

"Last week I was at a penthouse, at a small gathering I was invited to. You don't know how much I wanted to stay home watching a scary series, terrified in each episode," Emma catches Mia's laughter. "But instead, I spent part of Saturday at the salon, then getting my nails done, and finally wearing an incredibly uncomfortable dress to spend hours listening to a bunch of idiots discuss which five-star hotel is better for a party or about the new car that just hit the market. I've been feeling this way for years; however, I've stayed in the same place without even considering setting aside these people and really doing what I want. Until now."

Silence envelops them. Emma feels she may have said too much and Mia thinks she hasn't heard correctly.

"What do you mean?" Leah's friend dares to ask.

Emma clears her throat and runs her hand through her hair. That's it, she's said it and now she's not backing down.

"I like you too, Mia, and believe it or not, that's given me something to think about."

"That you like a ball picker must be very hard for you," she mocks.

Emma's only response is to throw a cushion that Mia easily dodges.

"Believe it or not, it is," Emma says seriously. "When you spend your whole life surrounded by people who only see appearances and money, there are things you can't afford."

"So what's changed?" Mia asks.

"I haven't felt like dating anyone for a long time. I don't remember the last time I really wanted to get to know a woman; I can't even tell you how long it's been since I thought about a girl before falling asleep."

Mia sketches a mocking smile.

"Do you think about me before sleeping, attorney Harris?" Mia raises her hands in peace when she sees her companion's angry gesture. "Sorry, I'm being silly."

"What I mean is that I want to get to know you too, date you, but I warn you that you'll need patience," Mia nods and Emma continues speaking. "I've spent my whole

life walking on golden cotton balls, and bad habits don't disappear overnight."

"What matters is that you want to do it, Emma."

"I do," the lawyer confirms.

"Then," Mia Clark jumps to her feet and extends her hand for Emma to do the same, "we can say that, starting tonight, we're going to get to know each other a little better."

Emma smiles and Mia bites her lips. They share a kiss as soft as those from that night when they made love, and the lawyer sighs, melting.

"How about we eat now?" Mia suggests.

"You're going to love the food."

"I hope it's not caviar or those things you rich people eat that taste awful and leave you hungry."

Emma bursts into laughter. Mia is right, but tonight they'll eat more than caviar, though what she's really looking forward to is dessert.

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After checking for the umpteenth time that she hasn't forgotten anything, Emily zips up her suitcase and lifts it off the bed to carry it to the door. She knows it's too much for a weekend, but she's one of those people who prefers to have too much rather than too little.

She checks the time and realizes there are still ten minutes before Leah is supposed to pick her up, so she starts pacing back and forth, not knowing what to do with herself. She's experiencing a mixture of emotions that are hard to control—nervous, excited, and above all, intrigued because she has no idea where Leah plans to take her. All the lawyer knows is that yesterday, after training, Leah told her not to make any plans for the weekend and to prepare a bag with a change of clothes.

Emily fired a barrage of questions at her like she was a client she needed to defend, trying to get as much information as possible, but Leah was relentless and didn't give her a single clue.

"You'll find out when we get there," she said and planted a kiss on her lips before leaving Emily standing there like a statue and heading to her next class.

Emily smiles at the memory and checks the time again. Five minutes. She lets out an exasperated sigh as she waits. The truth is she doesn't care where they go; she needs to disconnect because the last two weeks have been intense at work, and she's barely had time to enjoy her newly formed romance with Leah.

Her case against Vanessa Cooper continues to progress, and after preparing Mia, Leah, and their mothers for the interview with the judge, it was time for them to meet with her, for Aaron to undergo psychological evaluation, to speak with the social

worker, and to submit a mountain of paperwork that Emily wanted to review with Emma. Now they're waiting for the judge's decision, and Emily has felt so much stress during these two weeks that she feels this weekend with Leah is exactly what she needs to disconnect from everything.

Anxious, she decides to go outside and wait on the sidewalk, and just as she's closing the door, Leah's car appears down the street.

"We're sleeping away for one night, Emily, not a week," Leah says when she gets out of the car and sees her loaded down as if she's moving houses.

Emily laughs and throws her arms around Leah's neck, greeting her with a deep, tongue-filled kiss.

"If you do that again, I might change my mind and we'll spend the weekend at your place," Leah says with darkened eyes.

"No way," Emily pushes her away with a smile and closes the trunk. "I'm dying to know where you're taking me."

Leah smiles as she watches Emily climb into the passenger seat and buckle up, happy as a child.

"Where are we going?" Emily asks when Leah sits beside her.

"I already told you," she says, putting on her sunglasses. "You'll know when we get there, so don't insist."

Emily's suspense lasts for the two hours it takes them to reach Myrtle Beach, and even then, she's wrong. When they walk through the doors of a five-star hotel to check in, Emily thinks they're going to spend the day relaxing on the beach and

frowns, thinking Leah could have told her to pack swimwear in her suitcase, though fortunately, she's always prepared and did so anyway.

"I love it," Emily says when they enter their room, dropping her suitcase to dive onto the bed.

Leah watches her while approaching the terrace and drawing back the curtain from the window.

"I've never been to this area. We'll have to buy sunscreen, I didn't bring any. Did you bring swim—"

"Shut up, Emily," Leah cuts her off, making her eyes widen in surprise, "and come here," she orders, opening the terrace door.

Emily blinks with curiosity and gets up from the bed. Leah takes her hand as they step outside together and shows her the view. In front of them, the sea; to their right, an immense amusement park.

"That's where we're going," Leah says, pointing to the park.

Emily turns abruptly, excited.

"Really?" she asks, but before Leah can answer, she jumps on her, wrapping her legs around Leah's waist and kissing her so many times that the tennis player can't stop laughing.

Once inside the park, Leah feels like she can't keep up with Emily. Every attraction catches her attention, and she pulls Leah to wait in line and ride them. Leah isn't a fan of these types of parks, not even for strolling around and spending the day, but she has to admit that just seeing Emily's excited face and hearing her scream with pure

joy at each place makes the effort worthwhile.

They exit a water ride—the only ones Leah actually enjoys—soaking wet and refreshed from the stifling heat, and continue walking until Emily stops in front of a roller coaster. Leah's stomach twists when she looks at the attraction; she doesn't like heights or the speed at which these contraptions move, but when she sees the expectation with which Emily waits for their turn, she's unable to tell her she'd prefer not to ride.

"We'll definitely dry off here," Emily comments, hugging her and kissing her neck as they advance in line.

Leah shivers in her arms and tells herself she can do it, that she'll close her eyes and wait for it to pass. But Leah can't.

Her stomach contracts when she looks down and sees how people turn into tiny figures as the cart climbs up the ramp. Cold sweat runs down her back and her legs tremble uncontrollably under the harness.

"Are you okay?" Emily asks without erasing her smile.

Leah is unable to answer and closes her eyes, but this only intensifies the feeling of instability. She opens them again, fixing them on a distant point on the horizon, trying to ignore the dizzying height while cursing herself for being so stupid to think she could handle it.

When the cart reaches the top, Leah holds her breath. The world stops. And then, the fall. Her body lifts from the seat, held only by the safety bars. The scream gets trapped in her throat while the wind hits her face, preventing her from breathing. Tears spring involuntarily from her eyes. Each turn and loop intensifies the horrible sensation that she's about to plummet into the void, and dizziness takes over, turning

the landscape into a blurry smear of unrecognizable colors and shapes.

When it finally stops, Leah trembles so much she can barely stand up. She doesn't even understand Emily when she speaks to her, nor is she aware of how they exit the ride and stop in a slightly shaded area where Leah doubles over and ends up vomiting.

"Are you better?" Emily asks, accompanying her to some nearby benches to sit down.

Leah nods, and the lawyer pulls out a packet of tissues from her fanny pack and hands her one.

"I'm going to buy you a bottle of water, I'll be right back," Emily says, pointing to one of the stands.

Leah raises her head and looks at the sign showing what they offer.

"I'd prefer a lemon slushie if you don't mind."

"Of course, the sugar will be good for you. I'll buy water too."

Five minutes later, Emily returns with both drinks, and Leah already looks better.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have gone on the ride," she says, managing a smile. "I have vertigo."

"WHAT?!" Emily exclaims, horrified. "Why didn't you tell me before? We could have gone on a different ride."

"I wanted to be with you, you looked so..." Leah smiles, embarrassed, and Emily hugs her tightly.

"I appreciate the gesture, but don't ever do something like that for me again. I can ride alone, Leah."

"I'm definitely never getting on one of those again, or any other type for that matter. I'll wait for you on the ground."

Emily bursts out laughing and tenderly brushes a strand of hair from Leah's face.

"We can leave and go to the beach, I like that too."

"No. If you don't mind riding the attractions alone, we'll stay here. I love hearing you scream," she smiles and takes the last sip of the slushie, which seems to bring her back to life.

When they return to the hotel, they're so exhausted that they decide to take a shower and lie on the bed to watch TV before dinner time. Leah reclines against two pillows, and Emily rests her head on Leah's shoulder while the tennis player wraps an arm around her. They watch a movie that Emily stopped paying attention to a while ago because she feels so happy with Leah that she can't stop thinking about how she's exactly what she needs. She's been with many women after Vanessa, but with none has she felt anything beyond attraction, except with Leah, for whom she's beginning to harbor feelings that are growing at a dizzying pace.

Suddenly, she grabs the remote, pauses the movie, and turns to Leah.

"What's wrong?" the tennis player asks.

"I want to be with you," she says, her voice trembling.

Leah blinks, not understanding, and sits up when she sees the seriousness in Emily's expression.

"I mean something serious," the lawyer clarifies. "We said we wanted to see where this would lead us, but I don't need to see anything more. I want to be with you. I'm falling in love with you, Leah."

Leah takes her hand and remains silent, letting Emily say what she needs to.

"You don't laugh at me, you laugh with me, and you have infinite patience helping me during training. I know it's your job, but you're the only one who makes me feel comfortable being myself both on and off the court. You organize matches so I can play despite how bad I am, you bring me to an amusement park and get on a roller coaster despite having vertigo just to be with me, to see me happy. No one has ever had those kinds of gestures with me, Leah, and I hope I can live up to what you deserve and make you as happy as you make me."

"What moves me is your smile, Emily, from the first day I saw you. You have the most beautiful and sincere smile I've ever seen in my life. I think it gives me energy; seeing you smile is enough for me," Leah says, looking into her eyes.

Emily's heart beats so fast that she breathes in short gasps as she crashes her mouth against Leah's, eager to feel the warmth of her body.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Leah Walker parks her car a couple of blocks from the bar where she's meeting Emily for lunch. When she received the lawyer's call, the urgency in her voice seemed unusual, but Leah chose to focus only on her excitement about seeing her. The tennis player feels happy; the weekend marked the beginning of a relationship Leah has been waiting for years because, although she hasn't been alone all this time, she never felt as fulfilled as she does now. She thinks about Stella and the women who accompanied her romantically in one way or another and concludes that none of them transmitted the calm and that feeling of home that Emily Harris gives her. She crosses the street when the pedestrian light turns green and spots her girl waiting at the entrance of the establishment. Both smile when their eyes meet, and Leah feels a warmth in her chest that comforts her.

"I was looking forward to seeing you," Emily says as soon as she sees her, and they exchange a kiss as a greeting.

"Me too," Leah scans the lawyer's face, noticing something troubling her. "Is everything okay?"

Emily hesitates for a millisecond, though she quickly composes herself and takes Leah's hand to enter the bar.

"Let's go, I'll tell you inside."

The smell of freshly baked cornbread hits them both. The bar is a quiet place with a rustic look, wooden tables and stools scattered throughout the room. Waiters move skillfully carrying trays loaded with plates, beer mugs, and water bottles. The aroma of spiced beef also floats in the air, and both women salivate in anticipation.

"Today's special is pastrami and mustard sandwich with coleslaw," recites a young woman wearing a gray polo with a white embroidered logo that reads Jack's Tavern.

"I'll have the special and a bottle of water," Emily orders.

"The same for me," the tennis player chooses, just wanting the waitress to disappear so Emily can tell her what happened.

Just as the girl turns away and they're left alone, Leah opens her mouth to question the lawyer. Emily speaks first, without embellishment.

"They denied the custody request we filed for Mia."

The news hits Leah worse than that old injury that cost her an important tournament and kept her off the courts for several months. Her heart seems to stop only to immediately accelerate and beat so hard it causes pain in her chest. Her mouth dries up and she can't react. Emily notices and extends her hand to hold the tennis player's. She squeezes it affectionately and decides it's better for her to continue talking and give Leah time to recover.

"The judge was very firm with her decision; despite Mia meeting most requirements, she hasn't completed the five years without committing a crime that justice demands."

"I can't believe it," Leah laments, finally reacting. "She's done everything they asked, she's reintegrated into society perfectly, she works hard, has her own home, and has proven she's the right person to take in her brother."

Emily agrees with everything she says and gives her a caress on the arm before settling back on her stool.

"We agree on that, but the judge requires compliance with all demands."

"I need to talk to Mia," Leah stands abruptly, suddenly realizing her friend must be devastated. She looks from side to side, unsure what to do.

Emily stands too and approaches her.

"Please sit down; Emma is with her. As her lawyer, she's explained everything that happened and is keeping her company," Emily speaks calmly, but with the composure of a professional. "There's an option, and that's what I want to explain to you."

Leah breathes again. Hearing those last words gives her some relief, a glimmer of hope.

"Can we do something? Please tell me yes."

Emily nods.

"It's something I've always had in mind as Plan B if our petition was denied. To be honest, there was a strong possibility the judge would cite noncompliance with requirements, but we had to try," Emily confesses and stays silent for a few seconds while the waitress places the plates on the table. "If you're the one requesting custody, we're very confident they'll grant it to you."

Leah's eyes widen. It's something that never crossed her mind, and she scolds herself for it. Her response is quick; Aaron is like a little brother to her, and she won't hesitate to support Mia this way.

"What do I need to do?" asks the tennis player. "Whatever it is, I'll do it."

Emily raises a hand indicating she should calm down; the decision isn't so simple.

"It's not just a mere formality, Leah, and as a lawyer, I must explain it to you. If you decide to take this step, you'll be Aaron's legal representative and, consequently, responsible for his actions," Emily speaks like an experienced person who knows the laws inside out. "He would have to live with you, and you'd be accountable for everything he does. Attending school meetings, ensuring he has a safe space, and being the person who legally accompanies him until he turns eighteen."

For Leah, the decision doesn't change. She knows Mia will move in with her, and in the end, Leah will be that legal figure only on paper because her friend will take care of her brother.

"I trust Mia and Aaron," Leah answers firmly. "Of course I'll have a talk with him so he's aware his behavior must be impeccable, but he's a noble kid who just wants to leave foster homes and be with his real family."

"I have no doubt you trust them, but I still ask you to think about it during the day," Emily says in a calm voice. "It's a big step, and for years you'll be tied in one way or another to Aaron's actions, at least until Mia can request custody again."

Leah understands. If the boy decides to get into trouble, Leah will suffer for it. Additionally, financially she'll be the one putting her money toward his welfare. She still doesn't care about all that; the tennis player just wants to help those she considers her siblings, but she'll discuss it with her mothers anyway and follow Emily's advice.

"I'll go to the club later to talk with my moms."

"That seems right," Emily says and smiles at her. "When I leave the office, I'll call you, and if everything remains the same, we'll meet with Mia and Emma. Now, please, let's eat, I'm famished."

The theatrical face Emily puts on makes Leah burst into relaxed laughter. Both enjoy

their meal; the sandwich melts in their mouths, and Leah decides this bar will be one of her favorites. They stay there for about twenty minutes until they pay the bill and leave. Emily walks Leah to her car, and they say goodbye with the promise to talk in a few hours.

Leah wastes no time and drives to the Walker Elite Sport Club. The traffic at this hour makes her nervous because the anxiety to arrive and talk with Anne and Natalie is consuming her inside. She greets the guy at the security booth at the entrance of the club, parks in a space reserved for her, and walks at a quick pace to the offices.

"Hi," the somewhat shaky greeting makes her parents look up and simultaneously furrow their brows.

"What's wrong, honey?" Anne asks, nervous.

Leah sits in front of them and relates everything Emily told her. She leaves out no details and immediately informs them of the Plan B that the lawyer has devised with Emma Harris.

"We'll help you," Natalie decides and looks at her wife, who nods at her comment.

"We know Mia will take care of him, but we can support her in whatever she needs," Anne adds, determined.

"So, you think it's a good idea?" Leah asks to confirm, though their comments have already given her an answer.

"Of course, honey," they confirm. "You know Mia is like another daughter to us, and we'll help her however necessary."

"How is she?" Natalie asks.

Leah makes a face with her lips.

"We haven't talked; Emma is with her. Later we'll meet to tell her about the plan," the tennis player explains and stands up while checking her watch. "I'm going to send Emily a message and go to class with Ted. We'll talk later."

Leah leaves her mothers' office with a radiant smile and the feeling that for the first time in her life, she'll do something truly good. Helping Mia a few years ago benefited them both; Mia managed to get a job and a family, and Leah gained a sister and confidant. Now, they'll go a step further, and Aaron will officially become another member of the Walkers.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Emma sits on Mia's sofa, silent, while stroking the hair of the cadet whose head rests on her lap. She's been there all day. Since going this morning to deliver the bad news before Mia left for the club, Emma hasn't been able to leave her alone with so much sadness. She took care of ordering food for both of them, plenty and varied in hopes that Mia might want to eat something, but she's barely touched a bite. Now, at least, she's managed to calm her down and, although they sit in silence, neither feels uncomfortable.

Her phone vibrates. Emma unlocks the screen and smiles with relief as she reads her cousin Emily's message.

"Leah just called me and says she has nothing else to think about, she wants to go ahead with plan B. Come with Mia to the club restaurant. We're waiting there to discuss it with her."

Finally some good news to give Mia, Emma thinks.

"Get up, we need to go to the club," she says, giving her a tap on the arm.

"Pass," Mia says, moving her head so Emma can get up.

"This isn't a request, Mia. Emily wants to talk to you about your brother's case. There's something else we can do, but if you don't move your butt, you'll never know. Seriously, it's important," she adds in an affectionate tone.

Mia jumps up.

"What thing?" she asks, grabbing Emma's hand to stop her from walking toward the door.

She smiles and restrains her urge to kiss her.

"I'd love to tell you, really, but I don't think it's my place to do so."

"Damn it, Emma," Mia huffs, making the lawyer smile.

Forty minutes later, they walk through the doors of the club restaurant, and Mia sighs deeply when she sees that Leah, her mothers, and Emily are sitting at Leah's favorite table. The first thing the tennis player does is stand up and hug her to say she's sorry about what happened. Then Mia receives the same show of affection from Anne and Natalie and, finally, from Emily.

"Sit down," Emily says, settled next to Leah.

They've left the two chairs across from them empty for Mia and Emma, with the tennis player's mothers heading each corner of the table.

"What's going on?" Mia asks nervously.

Emily looks at Leah in case she wants to be the one to speak.

"You tell her," Leah requests. "You'll express it better than me, and it was your idea."

"Okay," Emily agrees, fixing her gaze on Mia. "I know the judge's rejection has been a hard blow, Mia, but I think there's something we can do so Aaron can be with you."

"What?" she asks, taking Emma's hand under the table without even being aware of it.

"Leah could apply for custody."

Mia blinks, mouth agape, as she looks at Leah for a moment before focusing back on Emily.

"Can she do that?"

"Yes, any adult who meets the requirements can do it. It will always depend on an evaluation, just like what happened with you, but in Leah's case, I think there's a very high probability they'll grant her custody. She has no record," Emily makes a sad face at that comment and continues, "She has enough financial stability to give Aaron a very promising future, she has a structured family that supports her," she adds, pointing to her mothers, "and she's a public sports figure with an impeccable reputation. No judge in their right mind would deny a possibility like this to any child, but as I say, there's always a chance they'll refuse, although in my opinion, it's very small."

"And you would do this?" Mia's eyes are already flooded when she looks at Leah because, deep down, she already knows the answer.

"Of course," Leah responds firmly.

Mia swallows, tries to undo the knot in her throat while stretching her hand across the table to take the tennis player's.

"And what does all this mean for Leah?" she asks Emily, but Leah is the one who answers.

"It means I'll be Aaron's legal guardian, but I trust you and him. You just have to say yes, Mia. Give your approval to Emily and Emma so they can start the paperwork, and maybe in a couple of months, you and Aaron will be moving into my house to

live under the same roof once and for all. You're a few months away from meeting the judge's last requirement, then you can start the custody petition again, but meanwhile, you don't have to stay separated."

"Are you both okay with this?" Mia asks, shifting her gaze between Natalie and Anne as tears slide down her face.

"Of course, what kind of question is that?" Natalie huffs, making an annoyed motion with her hand.

Mia smiles through her tears, and her gaze shifts to Emma for a fraction of a second, finding her smile.

"Okay, yes," she says and stands up at the same time Leah does so they can melt into another hug.

"Good," Emily says, running her fingers under her eyes to collect the moisture that emotion has brought to them. "In that case, we'll get started tomorrow. Emma will focus exclusively on preparing all the documentation they ask for. If they consider Leah suitable, we'll try to get Aaron out of the Morris home as soon as possible. In our favor, this case isn't going through the normal channels, so with a little luck, it'll be quick."

"I don't know how to thank you, Leah," Mia says, still hugging the tennis player.

"Aaron and you are like family. I know you'd do the same."

Mia nods and hugs her tighter before letting go. When they separate, she feels the weight of the day fall on her like a slab. Suddenly, she's exhausted and only wants to get home and throw herself on the couch, preferably with Emma, who seems to read her mind and stands up to position herself next to her.

"Want me to take you home?" Emma whispers as Leah sits back down next to Emily.

"Please," says Mia, nervous about her closeness.

"If you don't need anything else," Emma says, addressing all the women, "I'm going to take Mia to her apartment. It's been an intense day for her."

"Of course," Leah responds, smiling as she watches them.

Mia seems like a disoriented doll, standing by the table, dazed. Until Emma, without thinking much about it, takes her hand, interlacing their fingers, and they start walking toward the exit while the lawyer whispers something in Mia's ear.

"What don't I know?" Natalie asks, fixing her gaze on her daughter and the lawyer.

Anne bursts out laughing, although she too watches them, waiting for an explanation.

"You mean Mia and Emma?" Leah asks, amused.

"Them and you two. Nobody's leaving this table until you tell your mother and me everything I want to know," she says, rubbing her hands together at the look, both complicit and terrified, that Emily and Leah exchange.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Three weeks later. "I'm sorry, the traffic this morning was unbearable," Emily Harris apologizes when she arrives flustered at the court where she's scheduled to meet Leah for one of their weekly practice sessions.

Today the lawyer had a session with Dr. Mitchel—she was also late—and then class at the Walker Elite Sport Club. Emily has been attending in the mornings instead of afternoons as was her habit because for a couple of weeks she's been under so much stress that she's needed a higher dose of exercise to drain all that tension. It hasn't helped that each night she goes to bed later than usual; she's been meeting with Leah at one of their two houses and, between conversations, dinners, and good sex, she sleeps little. The trial that takes almost all her attention, the one where she faces her ex-partner Vanessa Cooper, is reaching its end. Emily hopes that tomorrow the jury will deliberate and close it. She's also somewhat anxious because the judge handling Aaron's case is taking her time. Both Emily and Emma had thought that it would take a week at most to make a decision, but it's been three weeks now. In fact, they've filed an appeal citing the priority for the boy to leave the Morris home, but the response received was firm: there's still time.

"Don't worry, not many people come at this hour, we can stay on the court a little longer," Leah approaches her girlfriend and, after giving her a kiss on the lips, studies her face carefully. "How are you?"

Emily makes a face with her lips. It's not typical of her to say she feels somewhat suffocated, but thanks to the sessions with her therapist, she's learning to release what she carries inside, what overwhelms her.

"Not very well, honestly," she says and drops her gym bag on one of the benches on

the court. "I'm a little stressed, though today I feel somewhat better."

Leah knows. The previous week, Emily, with her eternal clumsiness, knocked over the coffee table Leah has in her living room. She fell to the floor and, additionally, a small vase on the wooden surface shattered into pieces. Emily cried inconsolably, promising she would travel that same week to Puerto Rico to buy the piece—Leah acquired it in that country during one of her getaways—and also tried to pay her with all the cash she had at that moment, though twelve dollars were far from covering its price. The tennis player consoled her, made sure she hadn't hurt herself, and convinced Emily to stop searching on her phone for plane tickets to go buy the darned vase. They talked at length and the lawyer began to relax. Leah Walker is sure that she only needs a response to the custody application and to close the case she's handling for Emily to relieve all that distress.

"We could go to the spa with Theresa this afternoon," Leah suggests while hugging her. "It'll help you feel better; that woman has magic hands."

Emily smiles, grateful. Next to Leah she feels supported; the tennis player is very attentive to her and never hesitates to always offer her some solution for everything.

"I have to go to the courthouse," Emily wrinkles her nose in an exaggerated way, "but you can make an appointment for Saturday, it'll do us good."

Leah nods and signals for her to join her on the court. She doesn't want to waste time; she needs Emily to hit some good shots and think about nothing but the ball.

They don't start very well; in the first ten minutes, Emily slips twice, hits the ball so hard that it flies off the court, and nearly hits herself in the face with the racket. Amazingly, this relaxes her; she starts laughing at her own clumsiness, runs from side to side trying to return the ball to Leah, sweating as if she were in the middle of a marathon. Her energy rises and, before they know it, the lawyer is once again focused

and free of tension.

"Focus on where you want to place it, Emily," Leah shouts from the other side of the court, referring to the serve the lawyer is preparing.

The sound of air being cut is heard when Emily serves; her technique isn't polished, but it's nothing like the woman who was unable to hold the racket correctly. Leah pretends not to reach the ball and lets Emily make that point.

"You can't beat me," Emily shouts raising both arms. She knows perfectly well that Leah let it pass, but these small gestures make her immensely happy.

"Soon you'll wipe the floor with me," Leah responds, wiping her sweat with her wristband.

Before Emily can answer, the sound of her phone interrupts them. Normally she wouldn't answer it, but she's during work hours, so each call that comes to her phone has a high probability of being work-related. The screen shows the name of the family law firm and Emily answers immediately.

"Honey," says Bilma Harris on the other end of the line. "The electronic notification about Aaron Clark's case has arrived," Emily holds her breath and her mother doesn't waste time. "The custody is approved, congratulations."

Emily smiles widely and looks at Leah, who suspects what that call is about upon seeing her girlfriend's expression.

"I'm going to call Emma," she responds, and her mother interrupts her.

"I called her first, she's the lead attorney," she reminds her. "She had stepped out of the office when the notification arrived."

"Thanks, Mom," she says, "see you later."

Emily turns and raises her arms in triumph as she approaches Leah.

"We did it," she tells her, "you're officially Aaron's legal guardian."

Leah screams like a little girl and hugs Emily tightly, spinning her around a few times. She gives her a kiss and embraces her again.

"Let's tell Mia," Leah says while pulling Emily along. "She's been barely living for weeks waiting for this answer."

The two women walk through the courts; Leah doesn't know exactly where her friend is. She assumes she's preparing some court, but doesn't see her anywhere. They go to the locker rooms, the bar, and nothing. Leah accesses the back part of the club and sees her there giving orders to several workers who are in charge of pool maintenance. They quicken their pace and reach the girl, who hadn't noticed the women's presence.

"Hi," the caddie greets and finishes telling one of the workers what needs to be done.

When the men begin working, Leah takes her hand and smiles at her. Mia takes a tenth of a second to interpret that expression, and the color of her face turns ghost white.

"What happened?" stammers the girl.

"We did it, Mia," Leah's voice breaks with emotion.

Mia Clark can't help it. She falls to her knees in uncontrollable tears. She covers her face with both hands while hiccups take over her body. They've done it. Tears,

sleepless nights, pain, penetrating pain, the kind that cuts off your breath and doesn't let you think. That's what Mia has experienced since that day when a group of police officers entered her house, took her parents away, and she was left as unprotected and lost as her brother. Years of fighting to recover what she loves most in life, and today she has finally achieved it. Leah crouches down beside her to lift her up and hold her in her arms.

"Now nothing will keep you from Aaron," Leah whispers, and Mia nods, emotional.

Emily is a sea of tears watching the scene. She also feels Mia's emotion and removes that pressure in her chest she's had since they received the negative response.

"Congratulations, Mia," says the lawyer and approaches her.

Mia smiles at her and hugs her so tightly that Leah fears her girlfriend might break in two.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Mia repeats with a voice loaded with emotion. "If it hadn't been for you... for all of you," she corrects herself, remembering that Emma has fought as hard as Emily to achieve this victory, "we wouldn't have made it."

Emily wants to tell her that it's her job, and although it is, she knows very well that this case was special for her.

"Can we go pick him up now?" asks Mia while wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

"Not so fast," Emily stops her gently. "Now Emma must see the judge and give Leah some documents she needs to sign. Once it's legalized, then we can go to the Morris house."

"How long does all that paperwork take?" asks Leah somewhat desperately.

"A week at most," Emily says with certainty. "That gives you time to prepare Aaron's room in your house. The social worker will do a second review."

Tamara Burk remains responsible for the stability of Mia's brother. When the tennis player applied for custody, the social worker had to do a thorough review of the space where Aaron would live. The woman was impressed by Leah's house and didn't raise any objections, although protocol dictates that she must be present when the boy occupies the house and confirm that the space remains safe.

"Don't worry, we'll take care of it," says Leah and affectionately squeezes Mia's shoulder when she notices that, although she's happy, she remains very nervous. "Go on, take the day off."

"Are you sure?" she asks with raised eyebrows.

"I can manage without you today," confirms Leah, and Mia smiles, says goodbye, and goes straight to get her things to find the only woman she wants to see right now: Emma Harris.

"And can you manage without me?" Emily stands in front of Leah and smiles at her with a mischievous gesture.

Leah makes a face while pretending to think about her answer. Emily gives her an affectionate nudge.

"No, I can't," she answers and kisses her with such intensity that they decide to go to the tennis player's office seeking a bit of privacy.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:26 am

Four days later, Mia finally crosses the threshold of Leah's house with Aaron. They picked him up early in the morning, and between them and Elena Morris, they helped him load his things into the car. Afterward, Aaron said goodbye to the people who had been his foster parents for the last few years in the presence of the social worker, and Mia promised Elena that they would visit them at least once a month.

Leah opens the door and, as soon as they enter, Aaron finds himself greeted by the tennis player's mothers and the two lawyers.

"Welcome home, Aaron," says Leah, ushering him inside.

Aaron hugs Anne and Natalie and then does the same with the two lawyers, grateful for what they've done for him and his sister.

"Come on, I'll show you your room," says Mia with a nod.

"We'll wait for you in the garden; we've prepared a nice lunch to celebrate," says Anne.

All the women leave the house except for Mia and Leah, who carry Aaron's things and climb the stairs with him. Leah stays behind and lets Mia take charge of showing him everything.

"That over there is my room," the referee points to a door, located a bit before Leah's room, "and this one," she adds, turning to the one directly across, "will be yours."

Mia opens the door and lets Aaron in, who finds everything they thought he might

need in addition to the basics, like a huge desk with a computer, a gaming chair, and a study table. Aaron blinks in surprise, drops the duffel bags he was carrying, and heads straight for the computer. He picks up the headphones and sets them aside, runs his fingers over the keyboard and his other hand over the two screens, thinking about the games he'll play with his friends.

"Is this really for me?" he asks, excited.

"Yes," replies Mia, who spent all her savings on these gadgets she has never had any interest in, "but don't think you're going to spend all day playing. There will be rules here—studies come first."

Aaron frowns slightly and smiles with amusement, looking at Leah for an ally.

"Don't be smart," she says. "I may be very nice on the court, but as an adoptive mother, I swear I'll be a pain in the ass. Don't even think that one of us will be the good cop and the other the bad cop. Either you keep getting good grades, or I'll cut off your internet," she smiles with a mischief that makes Mia double over with laughter. "Not to mention those who are now officially your grandmothers," her eyebrow arches. "You don't want to make them angry, believe me. I'll leave you so Aaron can get settled," she adds with a wink.

As soon as Leah goes out to the garden, the first thing she does is locate Emily, take her by the hand, and ask her to walk with her.

"Where are we going?" asks the lawyer.

"Don't worry, I'm not kidnapping you. I just want to be alone with you for a while," she says without stopping, guiding her to the front porch, where they both sit on the steps where Emily once tripped during one of her visits.

"Is something wrong?" Emily asks when Leah turns to her.

"No, but a moment ago, when I was with Aaron in the room, I realized that I never asked you how you felt about me becoming his legal guardian. I mean, you're my partner, Emily, and it affects you to some degree, and I didn't take that into account," she says, tenderly brushing a strand of hair from her face. "What do you think about this?"

Emily smiles, pulls a hair tie from her wrist, and gathers her hair into an improvised ponytail because she feels hot.

"What I think is that you have a huge heart, Leah," Emily says.

"Yeah..." Leah smiles, "but besides that. Do you think it might affect us? I don't know. Aaron will live with me, and so will Mia. We won't have privacy."

Emily laughs, and Leah watches her with fascination.

"For intimate moments, we have my house, Leah, stop worrying. I'm with you in this and in anything you do, unless you ask me to hide a body," she jokes, making Leah laugh as she hugs her.

"Aaron, come here a minute," says Mia, sitting next to Emma under one of the garden umbrellas.

Aaron, who is sitting with Anne and Natalie, excuses himself and gets up to see his sister.

"What's up?" he asks, sitting across from them.

Mia clears her throat, flustered, and Emma takes her hand to encourage her.

"You see, you might notice Emma coming to Leah's house very often," she explains nervously and begins to smile, "actually, it's not a possibility, it's something that will happen."

"Is she your girlfriend?" Aaron fires, and Mia sits with her mouth open, not knowing what to say.

"Yes, Aaron," Emma responds, throwing the referee a lifeline, "exactly that."

"Okay," the boy responds, shrugging his shoulders. "Can I go back to the table? Natalie says she's going to buy me a new phone."

"Yes, go," says Mia, watching him in bewilderment. "My God, he's a manipulator."

"More like a spoiled kid," Emma corrects her. "Look at him properly. He has four women around him willing to give him everything he needs, and if he's not stupid, he'll get everything he can out of you," the lawyer laughs.

"Give it a few weeks and you'll fall under his spell too."

Two years later

Emily Harris rearranges—for the third time this month—the distribution of a couple of side tables in the living room and all the decorative objects on a large vintage wooden cabinet she purchased last year. She takes two steps back and, with her brow furrowed, evaluates her artistry. She shakes her head and takes a metal plate with three different-sized candles and moves it to the left side. She smiles because she likes the change, but immediately clicks her tongue; now the picture frames aren't aligned the way she wants. She picks up one specific frame and sighs; in the photograph, a very excited Emily wearing a Mickey Mouse hat hugs Leah at the famous amusement park in Orlando. She remembers that getaway fondly as one of those moments that define a couple's life.

Flashback

"Look, Leah, look!" Emily shouts like a little girl when the park's closing show begins.

Leah watches her with tenderness; they've been together for a year and her life has completely changed. Their relationship has flowed with ease, they understand each other well, and whenever they've had disagreements, they've discussed them calmly. The lawyer remains as formidable as ever in the courtrooms but not so much on the court. Practice sessions have become more frequent because they not only play at Walker Elite Sport Club but also at the tennis player's house. Leah has had a somewhat busy but satisfying season; she has given several conferences as the sports icon she is, attended major tournaments as a spectator, and at her club, they host very interesting tournaments that have caught the attention of the press and tennis fans.

"I prefer looking at you," Leah answers with love-filled eyes as the music plays and the light show begins.

Emily's smile widens and she moves closer to kiss her. Fireworks start illuminating the sky with brilliant colors, making Leah's profile shine even brighter. The lawyer observes her and feels a shiver settle in her stomach. Just like that time, during that surprise getaway when the tennis player took her to another theme park, Emily feels that overwhelming need to confess, to tell her once more how much she loves her and how much she wants to keep her in her life. She takes her hand and squeezes it slightly, making Leah turn her head to look at her.

"We've been good together, haven't we?" Emily asks, but doesn't let Leah answer. "Better than expected. I love you, Leah, and you make me the happiest woman in the universe. You're attentive, loving, loyal, you understand me so much that I think you were created exactly for me. I want to wake up beside you every morning, get into bed together after a tough day, and feel your calm breathing when you fall asleep on the couch. I want to live with you."

Leah's teary gaze says many things. Love, excitement, joy. Everything her girlfriend makes her feel, and now she's asking to take another step in their relationship. Before answering, she hugs her tightly because she needs to feel Emily's body next to hers, matching their breathing as had become usual between them.

"Nothing would make me happier," she says, her voice breaking.

Emily shouts, like she does when playing tennis—her notable improvement has allowed her to win some matches against less experienced opponents—and hugs her even tighter.

"Rearranging the photo again, honey?" Leah asks as she passes through the living room and sees her girlfriend holding the picture frame.

The lawyer flashes one of her smiles, the kind that melts Leah.

"Come on, don't look at me like that," the tennis player says, narrowing her eyes and approaching to give her a kiss. "If we don't hurry, we'll be late."

"I'm ready, just need my shoes and my purse," Emily answers, still trying to figure out where to place the photo.

After that declaration and their return to Charleston, both began moving in together. In less than a week, Emily was already settled in Leah's house. Adapting wasn't difficult at all; they spent many days together, and being permanently under the same roof only made things easier.

"Wait, Leah, I left Natalie's gift on the bed," Emily announces and starts running toward the bedroom.

The usual happens: the woman returns just as quickly, but trips on the corner of the rug. The gift bag flies to one side and she rolls across the floor. Leah lets out a scream, rushes to Emily, and starts laughing when she sees her girlfriend bursting into laughter.

"Damn, honey, one day you'll really hurt yourself," the tennis player says, helping her up.

"You know I won't," she answers with a wink.

"Have you heard from Emma?" Leah asks when they get in the car. "I've texted Mia twice and she hasn't responded."

Emily fastens her seatbelt and puts on her sunglasses.

"Yes, Mia was going to pick her up at her house, that's probably why she hasn't

answered you," Emily states while adjusting the air conditioning vent.

The relationship between the younger Harris lawyer and caddy Mia Clark has gone better than anyone could have imagined. Everyone knew about the icy armor that covered Emma, especially regarding appearances, but life taught her a lesson that blew up in her face and showed her the true reality she was immersed in. After Mia and Aaron moved into Leah's house, the romantic relationship began in earnest; they met several times a week, spent some nights together, had dates alone and also with Mia's brother. They went to the movies, out to eat, everything couples do. Emma even became close to Aaron; she helped him with homework and sometimes picked him up from school. Mia was warmly welcomed into the Harris family, and everyone noticed the happiness that filled Emma. One night, they attended the birthday party of a friend of the lawyer; everything was going well until a guest highlighted the fact that Mia was the maintenance girl from Walker Elite Sport Club. From that moment on, there were whispers as if they were in school, looks of astonishment and even of morbid curiosity from those who thought of a high society woman with a dirty secret under her sheets. That was the end; Emma left that penthouse holding her girlfriend's hand and cut ties with all the scum that surrounded her. She was left alone; no one even sent her a message when she disappeared, and she realized that she had made the decision very late, but was finally free.

"I don't know why they don't just move in together," Leah opines as she turns onto a street. "I think it would be simpler."

"They're fine as they are," Emily confirms, having had long talks with her cousin. "Mia needed to adapt to the change. After spending an entire year living in your house, she had to create a new home with her brother."

Mia Clark again requested custody of Aaron when she completed the time the judge required her to stay clean, without a single offense. Despite Leah's insistence that she didn't mind continuing as legal representative, Mia needed to take that step she had always fought for. This time there was no denial; the process was somewhat long, but

she was no longer in a hurry. As soon as she had the signed document in hand, she returned to her home with her brother.

"Emma gets along so well with Aaron and the three spend so much time together that, for practicality, it makes more sense for them to live together," Leah insists as if the situation affected her.

"They have it under control, honey," the lawyer says. "I'm sure that when they feel it's the right time, they'll make the decision."

Leah leaves the car with the valet parking when they arrive at the restaurant, and upon entering, she encounters the now-familiar family tableau they've formed. Emma talks with Anne about something that makes them both laugh alongside Aaron. Mia and Natalie discuss some topic, and Leah suspects they're talking about the club. Now that Natalie is adding another year, they've decided to reduce her working hours, and Mia will gradually take over those administrative tasks. The caddy loves her job, being on the courts is something she enjoys, although this new assignment is so good that she couldn't refuse it. The schedule improves significantly, and the salary is higher. Now that she has Aaron full-time under her responsibility, both things are perfect for her.

"Happy birthday, Mom," Leah hugs Natalie tightly, affectionately.

"This is for you, Natalie. Happy birthday," Emily hands her the gift they bought and also hugs her. Her relationship with her in-laws is excellent.

"Love, they're asking me to confirm if it'll be three or four days," Emma has taken advantage of the couple's arrival to approach Mia.

"Four," Mia assures her with a smile. "Three days is too short, and we have time."

Emma nods and quickly types her response on the phone. A few weeks ago, they

decided to take a getaway to nearby Kiawah Island, taking advantage of some days off. They'll go without Aaron; the boy has an end-of-year school trip for a week, and the women will enjoy some privacy. Mia looks at her girlfriend's features and thinks there's no woman in the world more beautiful than her. She never imagined that the posh Harris girl could change so much and stay by her side to support her and love her madly.

"Sit down, the food is coming," Anne requests, as they had placed their order as soon as they arrived at the restaurant, the same as last year for this same celebration.

"A toast to the birthday girl," Emily raises her glass, and everyone at the table imitates her.

"May we continue celebrating for many more years," Leah says.

Who would have thought that a high-level tennis player and a clumsy lawyer in sports could end up together, loving each other in this way? On the path from the law firm to the court, they found exactly what they both needed.