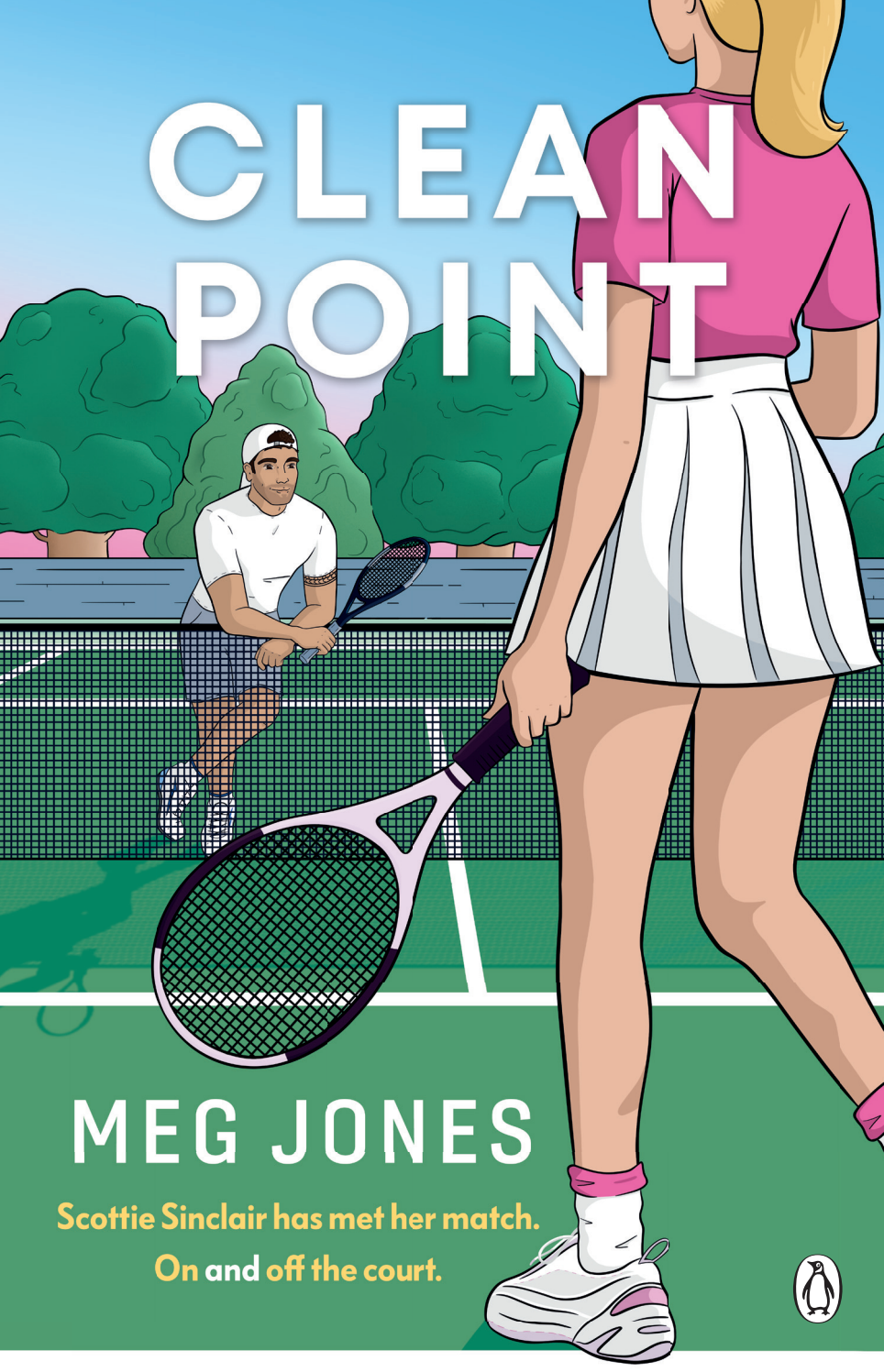

CLEAN POINT
MEG JONES
Scottie Sinclair has met her match.
On and off the court.

PENGUIN BOOKS

Clean Point

Meg Jones is a Scottish romance author who took beginners tennis lessons (two entire blocks and was still the worst in her class) twelve years ago before putting down the racket and picking up a book instead.

Meg is passionate about female representation in both fictional and non-fictional sports, and was constantly distracted by the idea of a tennis romance for two years before finally putting pen to paper. *Clean Point* is Meg's second book.

You can find Meg spending far too much time over on Instagram @megjoneswrites, or follow her newsletter for updates.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Clean Point

MEG JONES



PENGUIN BOOKS
Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Penguin Books 2024
001

Copyright © Meg Jones, 2024

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 12.5/14.75pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–97338–0

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

For anyone who's first exposure to a sport they love was through pop culture. Be it a TV show, film, smutty romance novel or even Taylor Swift's boyfriend. Your journey of finding your team is just as legitimate as any other.

GO SPORTS!!!!

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Author's Note/Content Warning

Please note that the following subject/topics are touched upon within this novel:

- Explicit content throughout with open door scenes (Dicktionary available at the back of the book)
- Abusive father/coach
- Mentions of intentional and secret drugging/ medical misuse
- Mentions of disordered eating due to training
- Alcohol consumption
- Sexual harassment
- Verbal abuse/Slut shaming

I hope I have written these topics with the care they deserve.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Playlist

vampire – Olivia Rodrigo
Coming Of Age – Maisie Peters
Burn Alive – The Last Dinner Party
Body And Mind – girl in red
Lisbon – Wolf Alice
You're Just A Boy (And I'm Kinda
The Man) – Maisie Peters
Breakfast – Dove Cameron
Not Strong Enough – boygenius
Will We Talk? – Sam Fender
$20 – boygenius
Crystal Clear – Hayley Williams
Shatter – Maggie Rogers
Norgaard – The Vaccines
NDA – Billie Eilish
ballad of a homeschooled girl – Olivia Rodrigo
Meltdown – Niall Horan
Brazil – Declan McKenna
Wildest Dreams (Taylor's Version) – Taylor Swift
The Walls Are Way Too Thin – Holly Humberstone
Family Friend – The Vaccines
Final Girl – CHVRCHES
Would've Could've Should've – Taylor Swift
Easier Than Lying – Halsey
Dream Girl Evil – Florence + The Machine

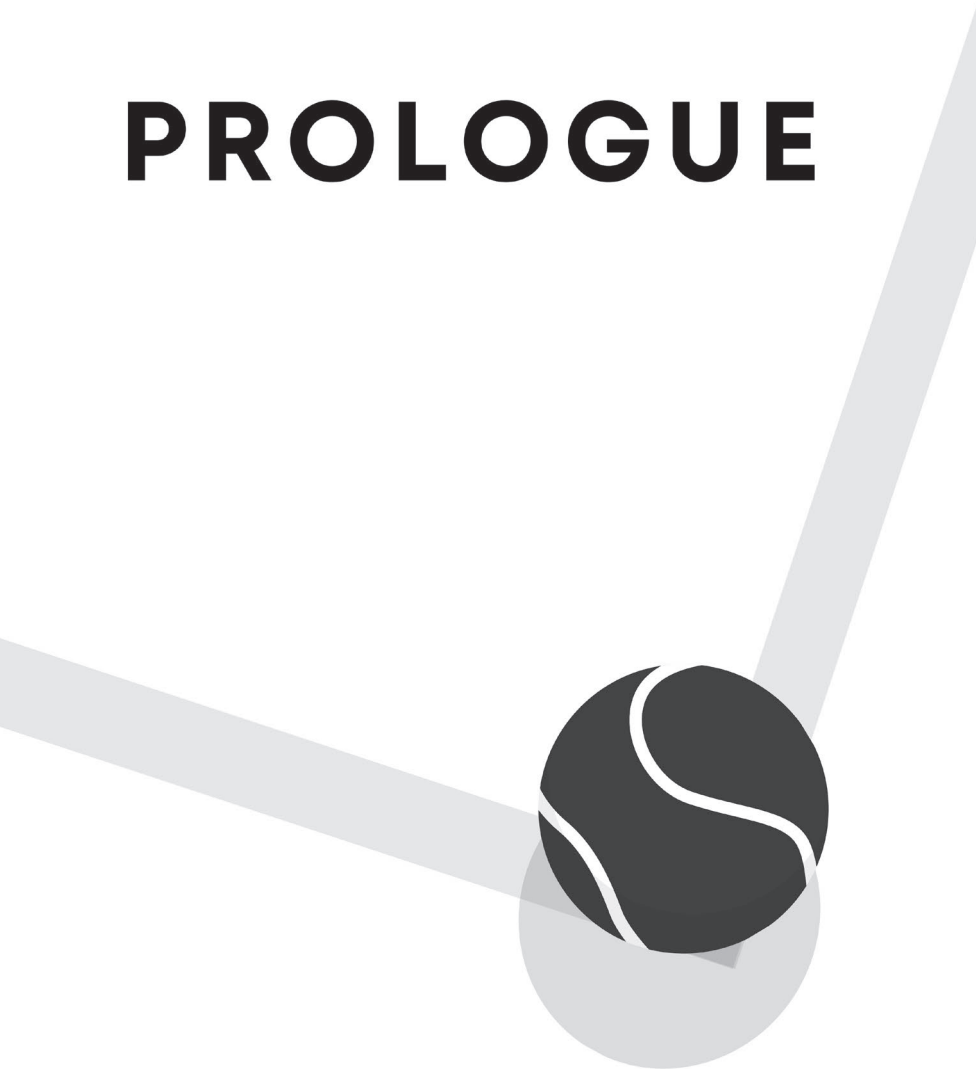
Copyrighted Material

True Blue – boygenius
How Not To Drown (feat. Robert Smith) – CHVRCHES
hoax – Taylor Swift
Don't Delete The Kisses – Wolf Alice
Superbloodmoon (feat. d4vd) – Holly Humberstone
Lullabies – CHVRCHES
Eat Your Young – Hozier
"Slut!" – Taylor Swift
bet u wanna – Sabrina Carpenter
History Of Man – Maisie Peters
Tennis Court – Lorde
You First – Paramore
peace – Taylor Swift
Call Me Lover – Sam Fender
I Like You – Harry Strange
My Lady of Mercy – The Last Dinner Party
Castles Crumbling (feat. Hayley Williams) – Taylor Swift
Play God – Sam Fender
i don't want to watch the world end with
someone else – Clinton Kane
Green Light – Lorde
I Know Places (Taylor's Version) – Taylor Swift
The Great War – Taylor Swift
Karma – Taylor Swift
I Know The End – Phoebe Bridgers
The Alchemy – Taylor Swift
Clean (Taylor's Version) – Taylor Swift

Spotify playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1c3rpwFV
LgC6bNRtETWi9M?si=e5ecd99c838f4fd3

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



Scottie

vampire – Olivia Rodrigo

A lifetime of living and breathing and bleeding this sport had led to this. A hot summer's day in mid-July, Wimbledon's Centre Court, the Women's Singles Final. First set was hers. The second mine. And the third and final was so close, so within grasp that my hands practically ached to feel the heavy weight of the winner's dish.

Gripping the racket tightly, I rhythmically bounced the small green ball against the grass surface. Tiny thumps echoed around the vast, hushed arena as I counted.

One. Two. Three. Just like dad used to do.

With a quick glance at the packed, overheated crowd, I found the family box and locked onto him instantly. A former tennis pro himself, he had retired in his late thirties and turned his eye to nurturing my talent. Now, eagerly leaning forward, his arms rested on his knees, his hands clasped together in anticipation as he followed my every move across the court.

I bet he counted too.

With a satisfied nod and a small smile, I focused ahead, finding my opponent, Dylan Bailey, shifting from side to side, ready and impatient for my serve.

I waited for the gust of eastern wind to die before finally tossing the ball into the air. Exhaling, I unleashed

Copyrighted Material

my racket, colliding with the ball and firing it across the court like a missile.

With that, the final battle had begun.

Dylan returned my shot, swiftly whipping her racket through the air with a short cut of her backhand. I lunged across the court, extending my arm to strike back. The rally continued, stroke after stroke, as she effortlessly returned each shot.

My opponent was deadly. One mistake and she'd catch it, exploit it, and triumph. Like me, she was hunting for her first Grand Slam title. And today, one of us would walk away. I couldn't afford a single misstep, not if I wanted to end this and win. *Finally* win. I pushed aside the frantic beats of my racing heart, disregarded the piercing gazes from nearly fifteen thousand pairs of eyes fixed upon me. My focus narrowed solely on the one goal I'd trained relentlessly for my entire life.

Return that damn ball.

The hot air grew heavy with the weight of tension as the crowd waited for one of us to falter. The strain was palpable, suffocating and claustrophobic. Her grunts grew tired as she returned another volley, catching me out. Her strings carved down the back of the ball. It spun backward, hit the grass, barely bounced.

My heart stumbled, a surge of adrenaline propelling me from one side of the court to the other. Stretching my arms to their limits, I loosened my grip on the racket as I exerted every ounce of strength to close the distance between the top edge of my racket and the ball. In that moment, milliseconds felt like an eternity.

Years of training, of bloodied blisters on my palms and

Copyrighted Material

playing on anyway, of travelling to all the tournaments I could get into, every training session where I hit ball after ball after ball after ball until the strings on my racket broke and I was yelled at to restring the damn thing and start again. It had taken me here, led me onto this court, given my body the strength and resilience it needed to run across the grass in a split second and make this damn return.

My wrist flicked, the top edge of my racket connecting with the ball, striking it back. The ball jumped over the net, launching into the empty space on the other side, before shooting off court and . . . she'd missed. The roar of the crowd erupted, the noise deafening as always, toe-curling shrieks rang out as I looked around and realized that it was all for me.

'Game, set, match – Rossi—'

I had won. This was mine. Earned with bruises and strained, aching muscles. With early mornings and missed parties with friends and all the parts of me that had been taken up with training and practice and recovery. It was for this. I was a Grand Slam champion.

Finally, I had done it.

I tried to catch my breath as I choked back emotion, relief hitting me like a tidal wave. Stumbling, I made my way to the net, extending my arm out to take Dylan's. Her hand met mine, the palm sweaty as her fingers tightened painfully around my already sore hand. I winced in pain, but her gaze only narrowed on me.

She yanked my hand forward, pulling my body close to hers. From the crowd, it might have looked like a hug, yet it was anything but, her reserve of strength much greater than mine after the tiring match.

Copyrighted Material

Amid the deafening cheer, her words were almost lost, but with her lips at my ear, she sneered, 'Remember this feeling, Scottie. It won't last forever.'

She turned away, releasing me to the crowd as the officials reached me in congratulation. The moment apparently went unnoticed as Dylan gave her speech, receiving the runners up plate and thanking all the usual people with an expected look of defeat. Her words continued to play around my head, and despite my victory, discomfort lodged itself in my gut.

When my fingers met the cold polished silver of the Venus Rosewater Dish, the moment fully enveloped me. Relief surged as I remembered every time I'd considered quitting, even as recently as a few months ago, after I'd suffered an injury to my knee and my training came to a grinding halt. I was sure I'd be out for months.

Holding the dish high as the flash of cameras went off around me, I looked to the player's box again, finding my father. His eyes were on me, a warm smile on his lips, his hands wiping at his eyes. I could feel his pride radiating down on me, finally claiming my own title to sit alongside his. Continuing his legacy, training me to pick up his mantle, had been his focus for the last decade, and now it had all paid off.

All of this success, the glory of this win, was intertwined with his support and legacy. From the age of five, when my training first started, he woke at four in the morning, preparing breakfast and setting up drills. He assembled a team of experts, ensuring that I had the best resources at my disposal. His dedication matched, if not surpassed, my own, and he worked tirelessly, sharing my

Copyrighted Material

dreams of victory and pouring his heart into every step of our journey.

The rest of the ceremony slipped away in a blissful haze of champagne and celebration. The crowd buzzed as I lifted the dish above my head, walked around the court, and soaked in the reality of it all. The oppressive summer heat had melted away with a cool wind when we finally made our way inside, surrounded by my team and excited press.

By the time the sun set on the warm summer evening, I was beat from weeks of tireless competition. I headed home early, to the house I still lived in with my father. Boundaries would be nice, but since we trained together every morning, it didn't make sense to live apart.

Since I turned twenty-two last year, I moved out to the pool house, giving me some independence and a space to call my own, but I still had to walk through the main house for access.

As I wandered through the halls, aiming for the garden, a noise echoed from the kitchen. I stopped for a moment, before a familiar voice grew loud.

'We need to tell her,' my father's right-hand man, Jon, said. He joined our team a few years ago and would often fill in for my dad at practice.

I was careful with my footsteps, silently treading closer to the kitchen, suspicion growing in the pit of my stomach. When my father replied, the suspicion grew into full-blown fear.

'She doesn't need to know.'

The apprehension coursed through my veins as Jon's dissenting voice echoed. 'I don't agree with you doing

Copyrighted Material

this. It's her body, and you're risking everything she's worked for.'

'Risking it would have been to do nothing. Everything I've done over the last thirteen years has been for her career. I wasn't going to sit back and watch her miss her shot.'

Realisation hit as the weight of their conversation hung in the air, leaving me on edge, overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. Questions flooded my mind as I tried to unravel the cryptic meaning hidden in their words. Me, they had to be talking about me, right?

I wasn't sure if it was the few glasses of champagne I'd consumed on a more or less empty stomach, or if I was hearing this right. I crept closer, keeping to the shadows as I peered into the kitchen.

Jon and my father were locked in a tense confrontation, the expanse of the wide marble island separating them. My father's back was to me, while I could see the lines of stress etched into Jon's face. Dad's voice sliced through the air once more, laced with threat. 'I am very aware of what is at stake. It's my name, my legacy, she's continuing. I've got as much at risk as she does.'

Jon's voice trembled with a mixture of regret and urgency as he attempted to interject, his words caught in his throat. 'Matteo, I—'

All at once, I'd had enough. Desperation clawed at my skin as I stepped forward, entering the kitchen with a newfound resolve. Jon's hazy eyes widened in surprise as they met mine. His body recoiled, inching away from the counter.

'What are you talking about?' I asked.

My father gradually turned to face me. His gaze,

Copyrighted Material

obscured by darkness, carried an unsettling intensity. With a calculated calmness, he said, 'It's nothing. You should go to bed. You've had quite a lot to drink.'

His words, mixed with a subtle dismissal, only fuelled the resolve burning within me.

'Dad, what is it?' I pressed once more, my voice quavering, certain it couldn't be anything as big as it felt. But as the air in the room grew heavy with unspoken truths, I stood my ground. Desperate for answers, I turned to Jon, my gaze fixed on him, silently pleading for clarity. 'Jon, tell me.'

Jon's expression shifted; a pained remorse etched upon his face. He shook his head, his eyes unable to meet mine as he uttered his apology. 'I'm sorry, kid.'

Panic seized my chest, threatening to overwhelm me. I fiercely clenched my hands, nails digging into my palms, fighting to maintain some semblance of control. My notoriously short temper was well known within the confines of the Rossi household.

'We can talk about this in the morning,' Dad started again, his expression betraying no hint of the truth. His demeanour was so calm, so convincing. Momentarily, it swayed me to believe him. Maybe at that point, I *wanted* to believe him. But my gaze fell upon the bottle of pills resting on the counter, a crushed white powder beside my familiar green morning smoothie.

And when my father deliberately shifted in front of it, as if to shield it from my view with his imposing figure, it became clear – it was too late to conceal the truth.

'Is that what I think it is?' I managed to utter. My voice strained as each word was forced. The tension in the room

Copyrighted Material

escalated, every passing second exacerbating the brewing storm.

My father's expression faltered, a flicker of apprehension dancing in his eyes before he attempted to regain his composure. His voice wavered ever so slightly, a crack in his carefully crafted facade.

'You don't understand.'

'You're right. I don't,' I admitted, shaking my head. My voice grew icy and hard. 'Explain it to me.'

'You were too slow. Months of no improvement. You were ready to throw in the towel. You remember, don't you?' His voice trembled, a hint of regret seeping through his words. But I was learning not to trust it. 'I couldn't watch you struggle anymore. You were beating yourself up, I could see it. So, we came up with a plan.'

'You came up with a plan,' Jon interjected, brows furrowed before his attention turned to me. 'Scottie, I found out tonight.'

Dad ignored Jon's interjection, and instead, took a step closer, his arms wide as if to show he was truly not dangerous, that he was still my dad. 'Do you think Dylan Bailey is not doing this, too? Everyone's doing it. There's no way to avoid it.'

My heart sank, betrayal settling upon my shoulders. The enormity of the situation threatened to crush me as I asked the question that had to be answered, no matter how much it hurt.

'Did you . . .' I paused, almost unable to finish the thought as I considered his words.

Everyone's doing it.

I swallowed, trying to find my resolve as my world

Copyrighted Material

crashed down around me. The portrait of the man that had raised me, put a tennis racket in my hand and taught me everything I knew, changing in the space of minutes.

'Did you cheat?' I finally managed.

The room fell into a stifling silence. The truth, now laid bare, awaited its verdict. The revelations had shattered the image I held of my father, leaving me to grapple with the ramifications. The bond between us, once unbreakable, now stood at the precipice, teetering on an abyss.

'Yes.' His answer echoed around the kitchen, and the tear between us was physical. A shifted fault line that could never be repaired.

I didn't move an inch as I spoke again, 'And me?'

'You needed it.' He pleaded, 'I couldn't watch my daughter lose again.'

I shook my head, tearing my gaze from him. Tears clouded my vision as one word echoed around my mind. One name I'd be called if they all found out, whispered in corridors and locker rooms when I dared to pass by. What I'd be branded as, even if I could prove I had nothing to do with it. What I was.

Cheat.

'How long?'

Cheat.

'Scottie.' I hated the way he said my name. Hated the betrayal. Hated that he thought he did this for me, that I was weak without it. Hated what he stole from me.

Cheat.

'How long?' My voice trembled as my control began to slacken, my feet growing weak from under me.

Finally, he answered, 'Two months.'

Copyrighted Material

My mind raced, but I already knew why. My knee injury. Sure, I had been behind on training, recovering, yes, but slowly, too slow to make a real impact this year, but there was always next year. Or the year after. This . . . this could steal everything from me.

Fear flooded my mind as I remembered the federation had stopped by for at least two random drug tests since then, and there was sure to be another visit now I'd won.

'I've done tests since then.'

He shook his head. 'They won't find it. Not unless they look for it.'

I wasn't sure if that was good news, knowing I could get away with this, keep my victory if I kept the truth to myself. I looked to Jon, trying to calculate if he'd report me. We'd worked together for years. He was like an uncle to me, training me day after day, but were we close enough to ask this of him? To keep this secret.

'I . . . I cheated.' The words seemed so foreign to me it felt like somebody else had said them.

'No,' Dad said, his voice stern and resolute. He took another step forward, but I clambered backward. 'You won.'

When I finally managed to look at him again, I swore it would be for the last time. The last time he would have any control over my life. The last time I'd ever think of him as my 'Dad'.

'I had every chance of winning, but you stole this from me. You didn't believe in me.' I spat the words at him, my body growing heated with anger, with shame I'd let this happen. That anyone had owned this power over me

Copyrighted Material

where they could steal the one thing I'd been working toward my entire life.

My career, all my training, it had been for him. Matteo Rossi's daughter is what I was. A tool to further his success. That's what my life was reduced to.

Well, fuck that.

I wanted to burn it all to the ground. Free myself from his grip. And if it meant decimating my career, then so be it.

I left the room, left without another word, running to the pool house to grab only the essentials: passport, phone charger, not even a change of clothes, before disappearing into the night, swearing never to return.

Copyrighted Material

FORMER GRAND SLAM CHAMPION STRIPPED OF VICTORY AS DOPING SCANDAL ROCKS TENNIS WORLD

STORY BY Rachel Kenrick

Today the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) announced that Scottie Sinclair (formerly Rossi) will be stripped of her recent Wimbledon victory.

The agency confirmed the 'presence of a prohibited substance in a player's sample,' sending shockwaves throughout the sport.

Despite the Brit's voluntary admission to her illicit actions, her failure to provide a plausible explanation for her use of the restricted substance caused the agency to hand down a two-year ban.

Adding fuel to the fire, reports suggest a rift between Sinclair and her father and mentor, Matteo Rossi. At the time of publication, neither party was available for a statement.

Copyrighted Material

FALLEN WIMBLEDON QUEEN'S WILD NIGHT EXPOSED!

STORY BY Rachel Kenrick

Scottie Sinclair spent a steamy night with two Formula heartthrobs!

The golden-haired siren, who has been gallivanting across the European playground ever since her two-year tennis ban twelve months ago, was seen cosying up to the racing duo at an exclusive club before retiring with the two at the famous Hotel de Paris Monte-Carlo.

Despite tantalising eyewitness accounts, bolstered by a grainy photograph, this columnist dares not speculate on the juicy details.

This is the latest in a series of scandals for the British beauty. Remember when she had to be dramatically rescued off the sun-kissed Amalfi coast, after an extravagant champagne induced escapade caused her to sink an A-lister's luxury yacht, stranding them both in a sea of embarrassment? Oh, the drama never ceases to follow the irresistible Scottie.

OTHER STORIES: Gut-Wrenching Blow for Tennis Star Nico Kotas as Knee Injury Forces Him Under the Knife! Find out more here!

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1ST SET



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



1

Scottie

Coming Of Age – Maisie Peters

(Almost) Two Years Later

I never much cared what the newspapers and gossip rags wrote about me, but the article exposing the threesome with the F1 drivers in Monaco . . . yeah, I cut that one out and framed it.

Monaco had been fun. All of Europe had been fun. Everywhere I went was sun soaked and carb heavy, with late nights and later mornings. But when that second winter in exile rolled in, I found myself longing for London again. I had ended up crashing at my mum's house.

Kit Sinclair was a supermodel in the 90s, accidentally left knocked up after a one-night stand with Matteo. Barely eighteen, she was on her own, and at the start of a promising career. So, after a brief holiday to Switzerland, a baby, and an intensive version of the cabbage soup diet, she returned triumphant to the runway, leaving all parental rights in the hands of the oh so trustworthy Matteo.

'Good morning, love,' Mum yawned, tucking her short blonde hair behind her ear as she walked into the kitchen. 'What's making headlines today?'

I glanced at the iPad resting in front of me, featuring a photo of last night's escapade: me being escorted out of

Copyrighted Material

a trendy SoHo nightclub, tightly linked with a Dutch prince. Or wait, was he Swedish?

'Nothing new, really. Not worth looking at.'

'I'm sure I'll catch up later.' She slid into the chair across from me, a luxurious silk dressing gown draped around her slender frame. Leaning forward, she delicately pinched a slice of toast from my plate, taking a minuscule bite akin to that of a bird, before placing it back.

I arched a brow at her. 'I can make you your own if you'd like?'

'No need,' she dismissed me with a wave of her hand. 'I'm heading out to Bellamy's for lunch. Don't want to spoil my appetite.'

I shrugged, not bothering to argue with her, before finishing up my own piece. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision to reach out to her six months ago, when I discovered we were both in Paris for Fashion Week, courtesy of Page Six. Despite the absence of a relationship between us, I had always assumed it was her who didn't want a connection.

But after tracking her down, and two bottles of French wine later, she'd finally told me the truth. Matteo had forced her to sign over parental rights, threatening to leak stories about her to the press. Her career was only beginning to heat up at that point, and the press was an entirely different beast in the 90s.

Mum had allowed him to take me away, still a teenager herself, believing it was best for her to disappear from my life. I had never felt the absence of a mum until these past few months, and now, I wondered how different my life might have been if she had been a part of it.

Copyrighted Material

'Oh, I forgot to say, a friend stopped by for you last night,' she said casually, taking a sip of tea. My eyebrows furrowed as I tried to remember if I was expecting a visitor. I had never brought anyone here, always meeting in hotels or bars. Somewhere public where I could be seen in case I got up to something.

'Who was it?' I asked, curiosity tinged with a hint of caution.

She squinted for a moment as she seemingly wracked her brain for a name. 'Jonathan?'

My heart clenched as the name hit me like a lightning bolt, throwing me back to that dark night almost two years ago. The last time I'd seen him. He'd called, but I'd blocked his number and tried to forget. He'd claimed to be innocent, but since he had been my coach, I didn't know who I could trust.

'Jon was here?'

Mum nodded, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. 'Tall guy? Handsome? Could do with some Botox around here?' She pointed to the side of her eyes. 'Only a little, of course, don't want to lose that hunky, weathered look altogether.'

I wasn't sure about the wrinkles, but the rest sounded like him. 'What did he want?'

'To talk, I think? I told him he could stay. I certainly wouldn't have minded. But I also didn't know when you'd be back.'

'Do you know if he's . . .'

'Coming back? I think so. He didn't want to wait around, but he was eager to chat.'

I swore under my breath. I had no intention of 'catching

Copyrighted Material

up' with anyone from my old life, especially if they had a connection to Matteo. The only news he'd have of me would come from gossip rags. I swiftly carried my dishes to the sink, my mother's eyes tracking my every move.

'I'm going out of town,' I said. 'I have a Danish prince who offered to show me around Copenhagen.'

My mother responded with an exasperated eye roll. 'Darling, been there and done that. Trust me, there's not much excitement in Copenhagen, even with a prince by your side.'

I shot her a confused look before resolving. 'Fine,' I declared, my mind already racing. 'I'm sure there's plenty to do in Paris. I'll catch the next train.'

Rushing out of the kitchen and up the grand staircase, I made my way to the guest bedroom I'd been calling my own and grabbed an empty duffle bag. I grabbed what clothes I could, not bothering to think of outfits as I went. It was Paris, after all. I could shop.

'Scottie, what are you doing?' My mum lazily appeared in the door frame, cup of tea in hand.

I didn't bother to even look at her as I answered. 'Packing.'

'No, I mean you packed my Dior dress,' she exclaimed, a small hint of annoyance in her voice. 'I love that we are the same size, but I told you – no taking the vintage out of the country.'

Without uttering a word, I tossed the dress back to her, my determination undeterred. I continued my packing mission, locating my passport on the dresser and throwing it in the bag.

'I'm not sure why you're in such a rush,' my mother

Copyrighted Material

remarked, her tone teasing. 'He was quite handsome. I wouldn't be so quick to escape if a man like that was searching for me.'

'If you knew who his boss was, you'd be running too,' I replied cryptically.

'Maybe . . .' she trailed off. 'Or . . .'

'Or?'

'Or you could not run and listen to what he has to say,' she proposed, her voice gentle yet persuasive. Sounding, dare I say it, motherly?

'And why would I do that?' Scepticism laced my words as I finally spared her a glance.

'Because he left a message begging you to not run and to listen to what he had to say. It's almost like he knows you well.'

I hesitated, thinking over the situation. We'd been friends, Jon and I. Sure, he'd worked me to the bone during training. But we'd joke around, he'd listen to me if I was complaining, and would take my aches and pains seriously, an ice pack and some aspirin at the ready.

'You never said he left a message.'

'You didn't let me get very far before you stormed up here and started stealing—' she let out a sharp dramatic gasp '—the black Chanel dress from '93. Pass it here.' She pointed a thin finger at my bag. I turned, the dress falling out.

Damn, I'd been hoping to get that one past her.

Reluctantly, I pulled the dress out and handed it to her. She clutched the delicate material to her chest before her gaze softened once again, voice tangled with concern. 'I think you should hear what he has to say.'

Copyrighted Material

'Why? You know what they did to me.'

'Wasn't it your father—' I cut her off with a scowl before she corrected herself, 'Matteo?'

I shook my head, glancing around the messy room, clothes thrown all over the floor. 'I can't be sure,' I admitted, a wave of nausea rolling through my stomach at the mere thought. The memory of finding out someone who claimed to love me had drugged and violated me for months was still vivid in my mind. My autonomy stripped away, my body no longer my own. I had spent countless hours in therapy trying to heal from the trauma, but I was still grappling with the aftermath. I was still unsure if I wanted all the details. Sometimes, ignorance was safest.

Silently, Mum moved further inside the room, settling herself on my bed. With a tender gesture, she patted the spot next to her, and I surrendered, easing myself down onto the mattress. A wave of weariness washed over me as I leaned against her on instinct, breathing in her expensive perfume. Chanel, no doubt.

'You don't need to run, you know,' she said. 'Your dad isn't chasing you.'

I lifted my head, shooting her the 'we don't call him that' look, but she brushed it off nonchalantly before continuing. 'It's been almost two years. I think you've made it clear by now with all your gallivanting around Europe and throwing your career into the fire that you want nothing to do with him.'

'I feel like I'm waiting for him to show up on the doorstep and order me back into a cage.' The words were barely louder than a whisper, but they hurt all the same. I hadn't realized how restrictive my life had been until I'd

Copyrighted Material

left. How much there was of the world to enjoy. What it was like to have more than one glass of wine and eat both the burger and chips and not feel guilty after. Now I was free, the thought of going back was an enormous monster hiding in the dark, taunting me with only its presence.

'He doesn't make the rules anymore, Scottie. You call the shots, you make the decisions.' She raised a hand and gave my blonde hair a gentle, comforting stroke before wrapping her arm around me and pulling me close. 'If you want to run to Paris, give me five minutes and I'll pack a bag. Girls' weekend in the City of Lights. The two of us together? We'll tear it to pieces.'

I laughed lightly, thinking somebody better pre-warn France. 'What about your lunch at Bellamy's?'

She waved a hand, dismissing the thought. 'My friends are used to my last-minute cancellations. And besides, who wants to lunch with a group of former models? They hardly touch the food they order.'

'We should discuss your eating habits sometime. I'm amazed at how you manage.'

She smirked, a mischievous glint in her blue eyes. Deep ocean blue, lined with black. The same as mine. 'Oh, I do eat. I just ensure it's worth every single calorie.'

Before I could roll my eyes at her playful remark, the sound of the doorbell pierced the air, and my heart skipped a beat. I inhaled deeply, remembering my mother's words.

I was done running.

Copyrighted Material



2

Scottie

Burn Alive – The Last Dinner Party

Jon Anderson settled himself into my mother's plush couch, positioned directly across from me. Two steaming cups of tea sat on the coffee table divide, forced upon the American by my mother's good English nature.

'It's good to see you, Scottie. You look well,' Jon said, a warm smile forming faint lines on his face. He looked almost the same as he had two years ago, with the same friendly thin-lipped smile and sharp eyes, his skin now slightly weathered and darkened by countless hours standing outside watching players running across a court.

'Thanks,' was all I managed. From the moment I'd opened the door to my mum's townhouse and found him standing on the quiet London street, my mind had been a rush of panicked questions, overwhelming me into an unusual silence.

'Have you been in London long?' my mother asked as she entered the stylishly decorated living room, placing a delicate plate of chocolate-covered biscuits between us, before sitting to my left.

'A week or so. I've been working in Spain for a while.'

'Oh, that explains the tan,' she remarked with a warm smile. 'Was it more coaching work?'

He leaned forward, perching himself on the edge of

Copyrighted Material

the sofa as he picked up a sugar cube and plotted it into the brewing liquid. 'Yes, I've been working with Inés Costa since—' He paused, as if realizing his words. When he continued, his revelation caught me off guard. 'Since I was fired.'

'Matteo fired you?' I asked, my voice still quiet.

He nodded, his grim expression reflecting the gravity of the situation. 'Just after you left.'

'I'm sorry.'

A smile broke his stony demure. 'Don't be. I was about to quit when he did it. And because he terminated my contract early, I got full payment.'

I let out a brief, awkward laugh, feeling the tension in the room grow as the conversation settled upon us. The unease in my stomach intensified.

'Listen, I know I said it before, but I promise, I didn't know. I walked in on him crushing the pills for your smoothie, and I knew better than to trust that they were just supplements. I never would've done that without your permission. Hell, I would've quit if your training plan included a banned substance. All that hard work lost because of a blood test?'

I raised an eyebrow at Jon, just as he realized his wording. 'Sorry, I . . . I was proud of you for stepping forward. It wasn't you who cheated, but you paid the consequences, anyway.'

'I figured the best way for payback was to make it all for nothing.'

'It cost you everything, Scottie.'

My gaze fixed on my steaming cup of tea as I moved to pick it up, feeling a mix of emotions swirling within me.

Copyrighted Material

His words sunk in, and a sense of bitterness and regret crept into my voice.

'It is what it is,' I muttered, taking a long sip. Nothing like a strong brew to wash away the trauma.

Jon leaned forward, his fingers intertwining, 'I don't quite agree there . . .'

'What do you mean?'

'You know your ban is up in a few weeks?'

'So?'

'So,' his voice is light, full of a hope I feel so unfamiliar with, 'now is the time to start training again.'

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me, the disbelief I had at the idea. I placed the mug back on the table, barely able to get the words out fast enough. 'I have no intention of training ever again.'

I was exhausted at the thought alone. That lifestyle was a million miles from my life now. Sure, I'd kept up my fitness with near daily gym visits and the odd escapade running through the streets of Rome with the Italian police at my back. I was a certain male pop star's running companion for a while until I realized he couldn't keep up. However, his short shorts did make up for it.

But that was nothing compared to training professionally. That took body, mind, and soul. I'd been able to commit to it before, but now I'd tasted freedom, and my soul wasn't so sure it wanted to return.

Jon lowered his head, his eyes wide with shock. 'What?' the word stumbled out of his slackened mouth.

My back stiffened as I tapped into that white hot rage that lived inside of me. 'I have no intention of ever stepping onto a tennis court again unless Matteo Rossi is

Copyrighted Material

trapped inside, and I have a tank of fuel in one hand and a lit match in the other.'

He took another sip of his tea as he made me wait for his response. 'Well,' he shrugged. 'I think that's a waste.'

I laughed. 'Of what? Human organs?'

'Of talent.'

'I only won because I cheated,' I reminded him, and beside me, my mother stiffened, her reaction reminding me of her presence. I looked over at her and found her brows crinkled with worry. When she noticed my gaze, she smiled weakly, a hand coming over to rest on mine and giving it a tight squeeze of comfort.

Jon coughed to clear his throat, before he continued, 'I can assure you, Scottie, you can absolutely win without cheating. You could be one of the greatest in this sport, but somebody robbed you of the chance to see it. To prove that to yourself.'

While I was quiet, he continued. 'I've been watching the others. Emilia, Inés – you must've seen she won the French Open. Even Dylan Bailey. They haven't changed tactics in the last two years. All of your competitors, playing the same way, the same old tricks. You were the one who caught them out, saw their plays before they could take advantage of you. You knew how to wear them down. How to trap them. That's how you got to the finals, and I know, with training, good honest training, you could do it again.'

I closed my eyes, shielding myself from his praise. I didn't need to hear how good I once was. It all counted for nothing. 'I-I can't go back.'

'Why not?'

Copyrighted Material

'Nobody will trust me.' *Cheat.* 'They'll say it's all drugs.' *Cheat.*

All I could think of was how they would look at me with whispered snide remarks, judging for what had happened *to* me, thinking I was the culprit instead of the victim. They'd think I'd brought it on myself.

Cheat

He shook his head, eyes filled with determination. 'We will prove them wrong. The ITIA will test you to within an inch of your life, anyway.'

He was right. They'd suck me dry like a vampire.

'I'm too out of practice; there's no way I can catch up.'

Jon shrugged my concerns away. 'All the more reason to start as soon as we can. It's a challenge, but people have come back from worse.'

I rubbed my clammy palms along the denim of my jeans, trying to soothe the rising nerves. I hadn't dared let myself wonder what I'd do when my ban was up. Part of me thought nobody would care anymore. They all had me labelled as a cheat. Besides, with the way the tabloids had reported on my every single move the past few months, my reputation was in near tatters. That was what I'd wanted, what I'd needed for revenge. To reclaim everything from the person who had stolen it.

'I-I can't win. Matteo . . . he will—' I stuttered, the chaos of my mind erupting out of my mouth. Mum's hand squeezed around mine once again.

I hadn't realized Jon had gotten up until he sat down next to me, the couch dipping under his weight. Even sitting down, he towered over me. I was tall myself,

Copyrighted Material

long-legged like my mum, but closing in at six-foot-eight, Jon was a certified giant.

'Matteo thought you couldn't win on your own. Prove him wrong. Prove yourself better than he ever was,' Jon said, his arm wrapped around the back of the couch to face me. I could see fire and resolve burning in his eyes, the very same that I used to have.

That was what it took to win. You had to be prepared to fight for every strike. Meanwhile, I still felt the weariness in my bones, the fear of losing it all again. If I was going to do this, I had to turn fear into fight. Turn anger into ambition.

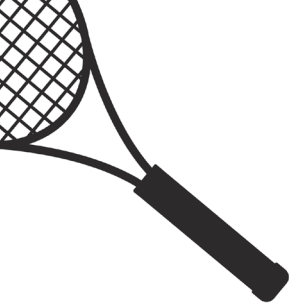
And it had to be enough to fuel me.

Jon's smile turned crooked as he changed tactics. 'And if it's revenge you're looking for . . .'

I hesitated, something flickering inside. The strike of a match. 'Yes?'

A wide grin stretched across his lips, like a hunter realizing its prey has fallen into a perfectly laid trap. 'Then I have the perfect doubles partner in mind for you.'

Copyrighted Material





3
Nico

Body And Mind – girl in red

Smashing the tennis racket against the ground did nothing to alleviate the throbbing pain in my right knee, but it sure was cheaper than anger management classes.

The metallic arch of the rim bent like rubber against the floor of the indoor court, before giving in to the force and shattering into bits. Even the string bed crumpled against the ground and lost any structure it once had. The sharp snaps and cracks bounced off the bare walls, ringing loudly in my ears, barely managing to drown out the voice inside my head repeating over and over.

Failure.

In mere seconds, the racket had fallen to pieces in the same way I'd been doing for months.

'Are you done yet?' Jon snipped, appearing at the edge of the court, his tall stature taking up the doorway. He walked over, an unusually light tone to his gruff voice. 'Or would you like another racket to beat to death? Perhaps you could throw some balls toward the sun and launch them into outer space?'

I turned away, seething anger and frustration still coursing through my veins. I needed a moment to breathe. Struggling not to limp under the fiery ache in my leg, I stretched for my water bottle, taking a deliberate,

Copyrighted Material

prolonged sip, wishing I could perform some kind of miracle and turn the drink into whisky.

'I'm fine,' I ground out, tossing the bottle into my racket bag. I needed to massage my knee, work through the pain like the physio had shown me, but I wasn't ready to surrender to that kind of vulnerability. Work through the pain. Pretend it doesn't exist. It's all in my head.

Ever since the accident, a simple slip during a match, my knee wasn't the same. The fatigue of playing professionally had already taken its toll, but after the injury, the pain got worse until it was nearly unbearable to walk for days after competitions.

'The racket begs to differ.'

I looked plainly at him, but he only shrugged me off. 'How long have you been here?'

A quick glance at a clock on the opposite wall had me realizing how much time had passed. Hours in the gym used to be nothing to me. I couldn't let it be any different now.

'Couple hours,' I lied easily. I'd had a restless night, pain waking me up at five in the morning despite the pre-bed ice pack. I'd learned the hard way there was no point in trying to get back to sleep, so I'd figured I'd try to train off the pain instead.

I was almost six months post-op, or more accurately six months post the *first* surgery, and the recovery process was still too slow. I spent weeks trying to distract myself from all the wasted time lying around. From watching old matches, studying opponents and game play, to letting my older brother drag me along to his weekly Dungeons & Dragons group.

Copyrighted Material

At least that wasn't a complete waste. I got my half-orc Barbarian to level twenty.

When the physio finally allowed me back to regular training, I had thought this would be it. This would be what my body had been begging me for, my feet on the court and a racket in my hand. Feed the hunger that had been building. And get me away from spending the rest of my orc life fighting imaginary goblins and kobolds.

The destroyed racket was evidence of how wrong I'd been.

'Your physio said you're allowed back with *rest*,' Jon reminded me. His tone was soft, yet his words pricked my skin like tiny needles.

I shook my head. 'I've rested enough.' Reaching down, I grabbed another racket from my bag before looking back at Jon. 'Can you just let me practise my returns?'

He didn't move from his spot, his arms folded. 'I think you've done plenty for today. Hit the ice bath, take a breather. Get out of the house.'

'I go out,' I argued back. 'I'm here, aren't I?'

'I meant somewhere other than the gym. When did you last go anywhere other than home, here, and the physio?' he interrogated. I didn't answer. There wasn't anything for me elsewhere. This was all that existed. Well, this and my brother's basement, but I wasn't telling Jon anything about game night.

Jon reappeared in my life three months back, sent by my previous trainer when my recovery became too complicated. Jon and I shared a history – buddies from way back when he used to coach me. We'd parted ways after he was poached by another player, but we'd managed to stay in

Copyrighted Material

touch, catching up over drinks in hotel bars wherever our paths crossed at tournaments. He'd been helping with the recovery, putting me in contact with his team of doctors and physios. Checking in every few days, he'd blend his analysis into the gameplay I was glued to, insisting on diversifying my watchlist. He forced me through the first Rocky film before I gave in, letting him queue up the entire series and the numerous spin-offs without much protest.

I shook my head and pressed a button on a remote. The machine set up on the opposite side of the net began to shoot balls in my direction. Grinding my teeth, I unleashed a barrage of returns, knocking each ball to the other side. I focused my attention on the fluidity of my movements, attempting to find the rhythm that once came so effortlessly. The familiar sound of the ball meeting the strings and the whip of the racket echoed in the air, and for a moment, I felt a glimmer of the joy this used to bring me. The sun's heat on my neck, sweat rolling down; the echo of the umpire's decisions, the relief when it went my way; and the true focus on the win, on my opponent. But every swing carried a reminder of the setback I'd endured, the months of frustration and slow progress. A pang of frustration gripped me, threatening to overshadow my determination. I fought it down, channelling my energy into each stroke, each return.

'Stop favouring your left leg!' Jon shouted as he stood on the sidelines. I swore under my breath. I knew I'd been doing it, but the weariness was returning, creeping into my vision. Pushing on, I took his advice and shifted my weight over to my right leg.

I ran back to return the ball, when my right leg shifted

Copyrighted Material