

A Perfect Match



RACHAEL SOMMERS



Chapter 1

Lia stared at the plaque on the wall—*Carol Evans, Head Coach*—hands curled into fists to stop them from shaking. She'd been a frequent visitor to Carol's office in her seven-year tenure as the superstar striker for Manchester Wanderers. Yet she'd never felt such a churning in her gut, such a disquiet in her mind, such a seething anger making the edges of her vision black.

Stepping back into her club off the back of a record-breaking season after a few weeks off, Lia should be on cloud nine, ready to begin the new season. Following three years of coming in second place, Wanderers had unseated their closest rivals—Salford Albion—at the summit of the Women's Super League. They'd also beaten them to the FA Cup trophy. Not to mention Lia's prolific success in front of goal had meant she'd ended the season with the most goals, taking home the Golden Boot trophy for the first time in her career.

Instead, she was filled with loathing.

Taking a deep breath, Lia wrenched open the door and stormed inside before she could think better of it.

Behind the desk, Carol started. "Hey! You can't barge in here without—" The words died on her tongue once she got a look at Lia's face. "Ashcroft. W-what are you doing here?" Her voice trembled with fear.

Good.

For the past seven years, Lia had thought herself lucky to work with a coach as fantastic as Carol. She'd elevated Lia's game, brought the best out of her, and turned Wanderers into a team competing at the top level.

Lia used to feel nothing but admiration for Carol. And a desire to be the best she could possibly be to give back to the coach that had given Lia

her chance on the biggest stage of women's football, promoting Lia to the first team at eighteen years old.

Now, as her gaze rested on Carol's face, Lia felt nothing but disgust and disappointment.

"I needed to see you." Lia paused on the other side of the desk, letting her fingers brush against the edge of the stained wood—black, like Lia's mood. And like Wanderers' new training kit. She'd been asked to pull it on for a photo shoot, but the badge on her breast—red roses—once something she'd worn with pride, now felt heavy. Lead. Ruined.

"I want to leave."

"Leave?" Carol's brows creased into a frown. How *dare* she pretend Lia's words came as some kind of shock? "What do you mean? You need a break? A holiday? Some time away from the team?"

Lia shook her head, nails tapping a staccato rhythm on the desk. "I want a transfer. I want out of this place."

A disbelieving laugh escaped Carol's lips as her frown smoothed. "Are you joking? You signed a two-year contract extension a few months ago!"

"Yes, I'm aware." As was Lia's agent, whom she'd already had this argument with a dozen times in the past few days. Still, Lia's resolve hadn't wavered. She didn't just want out—she *needed* out. For her own sanity. "But I signed that contract under false pretences."

Carol swallowed, loud in the quiet office. The only other sound was the ticking of the clock on the wall behind Carol's head. Ticking down Lia's time as a Wanderers player.

"You know, the false pretences that you weren't screwing my fiancée?" Exactly as she'd intended, Lia's words landed like a blow.

Carol flinched like she'd been struck, wide eyes looking toward the door Lia had purposefully left open. "Lower your voice!"

"Should've thought about that before, shouldn't you? Did you really think you'd get away with breaking the rules about sleeping with one of your players and get off scot-free?" Whenever she blinked, she saw Carol and Hannah embracing. Her stomach roiled, threatening to expel the eggs she'd forced down for breakfast.

"I'll call it off."

"No. It's too late for that. I want out of my contract, to a nearby club. Salford Albion, preferably." Their stadium was so close that it was visible from the Wanderers training ground. Perfect for Lia—she didn't want to

move to a new city. “They should be in the market for a new striker after what happened in the FA Cup final.” Lia didn’t like seeing her fellow professionals get injured—especially not a player she’d admired for years—but Erin Finch’s torn ACL might work to her advantage.

“I... I can’t.” Carol’s face was ashen. “I might be able to get you out of your contract, but I can’t sell you to a direct rival. The board will never go for that. You’re one of our best players! They’ll have my head.”

Lia was unmoved. She didn’t care what happened to Carol. All she wanted was to get the hell out of here. “Then I’ll tell them what I know, and you’ll be gone anyway.”

She’d debated that option extensively, but having to stay at Wanderers, having to see Hannah every day after what she’d done, even if Carol was replaced with a new coach? Lia wouldn’t be able to stand it.

All of her memories felt tainted. She’d been at Wanderers since she was sixteen and had never thought she’d want to leave. But now she couldn’t imagine spending another day here.

She was going to tell the board regardless, but this way, she’d get what she wanted—what she needed—first.

A nasty look crossed Carol’s face, and she turned her attention back to her laptop in clear dismissal. “It’ll be your word against mine.”

Lia had expected that. Carol hadn’t earned her ruthless reputation by rolling over easily. “Not if I show them the pictures.”

That got Carol’s attention back on her. “What pictures?”

“I’m not an idiot, despite what you and Hannah might think. I knew she was cheating on me, just not with who. It’s easy to buy a spy-cam these days. Even easier to hide it on a shelf pointing at the bed.” Lia was bluffing, but Carol didn’t need to know that. And she could lie well when she needed to. “I have evidence of it all. Screenshots of your messages, too.” That part wasn’t a bluff. She also had evidence that some of her teammates had known about the affair but hadn’t deigned to tell her. Another reason Lia wanted out. “If you don’t get me transferred, I will go to the board, and the press, and you will never manage a game in England again.”

Carol’s face drained of all colour, her mouth gaping open.

“You know my agent’s details. She’s expecting your call.” One conversation down.

Now she just needed to confront her cheating fiancée.

Lia spun on her heel and strode from the room before she ran to the closest bathroom and emptied her stomach.



As a chorus of “Happy Birthday” rang around her apartment, Erin tried not to squirm in discomfort.

Though it was hard to feel anything other than joy with the way Maisie gazed at her, green eyes wide and a huge grin on her mouth, like Erin was the greatest aunt in the whole wide world. Maisie had her mother’s eyes, and it reminded Erin of the way Jessica had looked at her when she had been nine years old. Hard to believe that was nearly twenty years ago. Time really did fly.

“You have to blow out the candles, Aunt Erin!” Maisie pushed the chocolate cake toward her like it was the most valuable thing in the world. “I put thirty-one on there.”

At the reminder of her age, Erin winced. Most people panicked on the approach to thirty, but it was a different kind of fear when you were an athlete, racing toward retirement with each passing year. Still, she put on a brave face for Maisie, blowing out the candles to applause.

Maisie was too young to understand Erin’s panic. To her, she was still the great Erin Finch, best striker in the women’s game. But in Erin’s mind, she saw the headlines that had circulated at the end of last season after she’d suffered a serious injury.

Is Erin Finch finished?

Will Erin Finch ever be able to recover back to her best?

Will we see Erin Finch play in a Salford Albion shirt again?

The headlines made Erin furious, feeding into the doubts that had surfaced ever since she had torn her ACL two months ago. When she should be focusing solely on her recovery, she was plagued with fears that she might never set foot on the pitch again.

Already, she was reaching the end of her lifespan as a professional player. Advancements in sports technology and the impeccable shape Erin kept herself in had maintained her position as the best of the best, still able to play full matches with ease, but an ACL injury could curtail the

career of even the youngest of players. And without her career, without the sponsorship deals, without the ability to continue to support the rest of her family...Erin didn't know what she'd do. Football was her whole life. She hadn't ever considered failure, hadn't ever had a plan B. She thought she'd have a few more years to figure it out.

Hopefully, she still did.

"I'm going to go cut the cake!" Maisie raced off to the kitchen with the cake held aloft.

At least she'd broken Erin out of dark thoughts.

"And I'm going to make sure she doesn't cut *herself*." Jessica climbed to her feet and wrapped a hand around Erin's shoulder. "Happy Birthday, Erin."

Erin covered her sister's hand briefly with her own before releasing her to hurry after her daughter as she wielded a knife much too large for a nine-year-old.

Soft laughter came through the speakers of her laptop, balanced on the coffee table. Erin turned to the smiling face of her dad, her stepmother sitting beside him. Despite their weekly family video calls, it had taken some time for them to figure out how to point the camera at their faces and not at the ceiling.

"How are you really doing, sweetheart?" Her dad's forehead was crinkled, deepening the lines already there. "I know the past few weeks can't have been easy for you."

"I'm okay." She wasn't, not fully, but she didn't want him to worry. He'd spent so many years of his life worrying about her already. Left as a single father after his wife had walked out on their family, he'd worked two jobs to make sure she and Jessica were never hungry and that Erin always had everything she needed for football.

He shot her a look. "No, you're not."

With a wry smile, Erin grabbed her laptop and balanced it on her good knee, careful not to disturb the slumbering black cat snoozing on her lap. Not that Gerrard seemed to notice. "I will be. Promise."

"I'm sorry we couldn't make it out to be with you in person, sweetheart." Behind him, the sun loomed high in the sky, lighting his apartment and making him and Isobel glow. Or the glow could be due to being able to retire in sunny Spain. "But Isobel wasn't feeling up to travelling, and I didn't want to leave her."

"I did tell him to go without me." Isobel turned a stern glare her dad's way. "But he wouldn't listen."

"Don't worry about it." Sensing the chance to change the subject, Erin seized it with both hands. She was tired of thinking about her injury; she didn't want to talk about it, either. "How are *you* doing? A stroke trumps an ACL."

Isobel waved a hand. "Oh, I'm fine, *mija*. Recovering well. We'll definitely be out to visit you at Christmas."

"Can't wait." Family had always been Erin's reason for wanting to succeed. The desire to make her dad proud—and to pay him back for everything he'd given up for her and Jessica. He might not have been able to emigrate to Spain to be with Isobel without Erin's help, and she wouldn't have been able to support Jessica and Maisie.

Not that they needed much help anymore, now Jessica was working as a junior lawyer. But nine years ago, after becoming a mother at eighteen, had been a different story.

And it hadn't been easy. When Erin had started out, few female players were professional, and those who were weren't exactly high earners. But, in the years since, progress had been made, and Erin had been one of the drivers of that movement, smashing records the way she had.

"Here's your cake!" Maisie bounded back over to the couch, a plate in each hand.

Jessica trailed a few steps behind with a much smaller slice of her own.

Erin turned back to her laptop screen. "I'll let you go so you don't have to watch us eat it. Speak to you next week?"

"Of course." Her dad and Isobel waved goodbye to them all before hanging up, and Erin returned her laptop to the coffee table so she could eat, the chocolate ganache melting on her tongue.

"Auntie Erin?" Maisie peered at her, chocolate smeared around her mouth. "Can I stay here tonight?"

Behind Maisie, Jessica shook her head. "You've stayed here three nights already this week. Your Aunt Erin is going to be sick of the sight of you soon."

"Impossible." As much as Erin loved her own company, she loved spending time with Maisie more. Soon the day would come when she didn't see Erin as cool anymore and wouldn't want to spend every waking

moment talking her ear off about football. "She's more than welcome to stay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." Erin let Maisie snuggle closer into her side. Jessica worried sometimes that she asked for too much; Erin was often the emergency babysitter whenever Jessica had to work unexpected hours, especially now she wasn't playing regularly. But Maisie's summer holidays would be over soon, and Erin wouldn't see her as often once school started. "You know I don't mind."

"Okay, then."

"Yay!" Maisie wrapped her arms around Erin's waist and squeezed her tight but made sure not to jostle her too much. Ever since the injury, she'd been careful, her worried eyes widening whenever Erin had winced. After the surgery, Maisie had refused to leave her side whenever she wasn't at school or her own football practice, dutifully playing Erin's nursemaid. It was nice to see her smiling again.

Erin hoped it wouldn't be too much longer until she'd be that happy again, too.



Lia's hands trembled so much that she could barely jam the key into the lock of the house she and Hannah shared.

Or used to share. After the conversation that was about to take place, Lia had no intention of coming back other than to grab her things. Had she done this the right way around, or should she have confronted Hannah before Carol? Would Carol have had the chance to warn Hannah that Lia knew about their affair?

As she pushed the door open and stepped inside, Lia's stomach churned.

The pitter-patter of claws on the wooden floor reached Lia's ears, and Hannah's Spaniel looked at her with big, brown eyes as he rounded the corner of the hall. "Hey, Charlie." Lia crouched to stroke him, managing a laugh in spite of herself when he licked her cheek.

Burying her face in his fur, Lia drew in deep breaths as she fought the urge to cry. Hannah had stolen so much from her: the last four years of her life spent on a relationship that Hannah had thrown away for a sliver of

attention from their coach; the team that Lia had spent all of her adult life as a part of; the teammates that she'd thought would be her friends forever but who had kept their silence so they didn't rock the boat; and her home.

Not just her physical home, either, but her home on the pitch.

"Lia? Is that you?" Hannah's voice echoed from the living room.

Moment of truth. Wearily, Lia pushed herself to her feet and trudged down the hall. Inside the living room, Hannah sat on the sofa.

Hannah hiccupped as her eyes met Lia's, tears spilling from her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"At least you're not going to deny it." Lia sagged against the door-frame, every ounce of strength leaching out of her as she looked at the woman she'd thought she was going to spend the rest of her life with. "Why, Hannah?" The question that Lia had been asking herself, over and over again, since she'd seen the messages on Hannah's phone. Things between them had been good—or so Lia had thought. They rarely argued, despite spending most of their days together. And okay, maybe they hadn't had sex in a few weeks—or was it months?—but that was normal, wasn't it, in a long-term relationship once the honeymoon period had ended? "What did she give you that I couldn't?"

"It wasn't like that." Hannah rose to her feet, moving toward Lia like she wanted to reach for her.

Before she could, Lia reared backwards, unable to stand the thought of Hannah touching her. "What was it like, then?" She barely recognised her own voice, sharp and brittle, one step away from breaking entirely. "Explain it to me."

"I don't...I don't know how to do that."

"Well, you didn't trip and fall into bed with her, did you? There must have been a reason!" A reason why Lia wasn't enough for her. A reason why she'd risked throwing everything they had away. "Did she pressure you? Coerce you into something?"

"No."

Lia didn't know whether to be relieved or upset. "Then why, Hannah?"

"I don't have an answer for you, Lia. I liked the attention she gave me. It was new and exciting, and I got lost in the thrill. I never intended to hurt you. I kept telling myself that I'd stop it or I'd come clean and tell you, but I didn't know what to say. I'm sorry."

Once more, Hannah reached for her, but Lia flinched out of her grip. Numbness crept through her body, making it hard for her to stay upright.

"Is there... Can we fix this?"

Lia wrenched the diamond ring from her finger and hurled it toward where Hannah stood. "This is how we'll fix it."

Before Hannah had the chance to call out, to beg her to stay, Lia made for the front door, slamming it closed behind her. She didn't have any of her belongings, but that didn't matter. She could stay in a hotel for the night and come back tomorrow when Hannah was in training.

As she was walking down the street, her cheeks damp with tears, her phone rang in her pocket.

"Hey." The voice of Lia's agent was breathless on the other end of the line. "I think we've had a breakthrough on the transfer fee. How do you feel about signing the ink on a contract with Salford Albion first thing in the morning?"

"That fast?" Lia had expected to have to wait at least a few days. Though she'd never been part of a transfer saga before, she knew how they worked. It could take weeks to hammer out the details, even when both parties wanted a deal.

"That fast. They want you, Lia. And whatever you said to Carol, it worked. Wanderers are throwing everything they can at this to get a deal over the line."

"I could be an Albion player as soon as tomorrow?"

"Uh-huh. What do you say? You sure about this? I promise it'll be the last time I ask you that."

Lia took a deep breath. Starting over somewhere new was utterly terrifying. What if she couldn't settle in? What if she didn't get along with her new coach? What if her new teammates hated her for the role she'd played in them coming in second the previous season?

What if Hannah snatched her career from her, as well as everything else?

Instead of letting the doubt get to her, Lia straightened her spine. She couldn't let that happen. Couldn't let herself drown, give in to the ache deep in her chest whenever she thought about what she'd lost.

"I'm sure. Tell them I'll sign whatever they want me to."

Chapter 2

“Let’s see it, then.” Folding her arms, Erin leaned back in her chair in the Salford Albion team canteen, watching Alex shovel an omelette into their mouth.

“See what?”

Chatter swirled all around them, so loud it nearly drowned out Alex’s reply. Two months since the last season had ended—two months since Erin’s life had turned upside down—and the entire team were back from their summer breaks, eager to catch up with one another.

Usually, Erin’s summers were spent at international tournaments or resting and relaxing at her father’s home in Marbella. That summer, she’d spent at Park Lane. Albion’s training facility wasn’t exactly her go-to destination, but her strict rehab routine hadn’t left her with much choice. The first few weeks, Erin had been the only player in the building.

Compared to that silence, the conversation swelling around them now was deafening.

“You know what. The European Championship winner’s medal.” Erin tried not to grimace as the words left her mouth. It stung. Erin had been forced to watch the competition at home, injured knee propped on her coffee table, high on a cocktail of painkillers after reconstructive surgery. A medal should be hanging off *her* neck. “I’m not buying that you left the house without it because I know I wouldn’t be taking it off for weeks. And I assume the media circus around here this morning is to welcome you and the others back.”

Two of their other teammates had also played with them on the national team, and Erin had seen them earlier, showing off their own medals. She wasn’t close enough to them to ask about the championships. Erin wasn’t

close to anyone on the team, aside from Alex. And that was because they went way back, playing together since the tender age of fourteen.

As the first non-binary player to come through the English league, Alex hadn't had an easy time of it in the beginning. At their first England camp, they'd bonded over the fact they were both from Liverpool, and after Erin had punched someone for calling Alex a fucking freak—making sure none of the coaches were around to see, of course—they'd become inseparable.

Sheepishly, Alex drew the medal out of their pocket and set it reverently on the table.

Erin took it, heart clenching as she ran a finger over its shiny surface. At the domestic level, she'd won everything there was to win. But internationally, glory had always eluded her. She'd have to wait at least two more years for another shot. And that was if her knee healed well enough for her to be selected for the next World Cup squad.

"Congratulations." Erin handed the medal back before she was tempted to keep it. She managed to sound sincere—she was happy for Alex, even if the victory made her ache.

"Thanks." Alex slid it back into their jacket. "But the media circus isn't for us. Maybe we've got some fresh blood coming in."

Erin tensed. She would be out for months—ACL recovery could take eight to twelve—and she wasn't naïve. It was likely that someone would be brought in to replace her. Temporarily. Albion's usual back-up striker was good, but she wasn't twenty-four goals a season good. Goals that would need to be found elsewhere. "Do you know something?"

With a shake of their head, Alex finished the last bite of their omelette. "I know as much as you."

So, little.

"How's recovery going?"

Erin sighed, fingers automatically rubbing at the bandage on her left leg. "Slowly." The longest she'd ever been out before was fourteen weeks. Eight weeks since tearing her ACL in the FA Cup final, she already wanted to crawl out of her skin, knowing she was nowhere close to stepping back onto the pitch.

Not to mention she had nightmares every other night.

In her sleep, she relived that horrible, awful moment over and over: She received the ball on the edge of the penalty box and then turned, her

studs catching in the perfectly prepared Wembley turf, her knee twisting. A pop. Agony flashing through her body, stealing the breath from her lungs and causing her to howl in pain.

A movement she'd done a thousand times before, but it had never resulted in her lying flat out on the grass, crowded by the Albion team doctors as they raced onto the pitch to treat her, panic and terror clawing at her throat because pain like that could only mean one thing.

"Surgery went fine." Erin forced herself to focus on the positives. Her physio would be proud; Gregor was constantly chastising her for dwelling on the worst-case scenarios. "And I'm back in the gym working on strengthening. But they say it'll be another two or three months at least before I'm running again."

"It'll be over before you know it."

"We'll be halfway through the season by then." Watching from the sidelines would be torture. "But—" Erin paused when she glanced at the TV screens spread around the room, tuned into the sports channel. A breaking news banner ran along the bottom of the screen, and hushed whispers broke out around the canteen.

In a shock move, Wanderers star Lia Ashcroft LEAVES and signs with rivals Albion.

On the TV, a video of Lia arriving at the Park Lane training ground played, cameras flashing to document her arrival.

Erin's stomach dropped.

Of all the players they could have possibly brought in to replace her, Lia Ashcroft had to be the worst. Seven years Erin's junior, the Welsh striker had been lauded as the next big thing in the Women's Super League. When she'd beaten Erin to the Golden Boot trophy last season—by one meagre goal—the media had had a field day, touting Lia as the greatest striker the English game had ever seen.

A title that once had been Erin's.

Who had approached who? Had Lia sensed blood in the water after Erin's injury and asked to make the switch to the other side of Manchester? No, that didn't make any sense. Why would she leave the team that had won the title last season to go to the runners-up?

But the alternative, the idea that Albion's coaching staff reached out to poach Lia from their closest rivals, made Erin uneasy. She was not an insecure person, but Albion seeking out the one woman people already thought was better than her? Were they not confident that she'd make a full recovery? Did they doubt Erin's ability to get back to her best?

Was this Albion's way of trying to nudge Erin off the first team?

She clenched her hands into fists.

Erin imagined the drivel the media would write now, her lips curling into a snarl as Lia waved at the cameras before ducking inside the Park Lane entrance. She bit back a growl. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."



"One more interview and then you're done." Milly, Salford Albion's player liaison manager, shot Lia a kind smile. "Would you mind wearing the away kit for it?"

Lia took the proffered bundle of clothing. Operating on autopilot, she stripped out of her brand-new blue-and-white striped home shirt and shorts and swapped them for the solid burgundy away kit. She hadn't worn a different kit in seven years, and seeing Albion's roaring lion on her breast instead of Wanderers's roses made her stomach swoop.

Things had moved so quickly since she'd stormed into Carol's office. Lia still hadn't processed things. Everything in her life had been upended in the last week, and she was still trying to catch her breath.

Once changed, Lia was led back into the room she'd spent the last two hours in, undergoing interviews and photo shoots to capitalise on the buzz her transfer had generated.

"So, Lia." A reporter pressed a microphone toward her mouth. "What are you most looking forward to at Albion?"

Pushing aside her anxiety and sadness, Lia smiled, playing the part of a football starlet excited to begin the next stage of her career. "Helping the team to win as many trophies as possible."

A rehearsed answer, but a true one. As much as Lia loved playing football, she loved winning things even more. She'd never pass up the chance to add to her trophy cabinet. And with Albion playing in four competitions throughout the season, she'd have multiple chances to try. Three domestic trophies were available: the Women's Super League and

two knock-out cup competitions—the League Cup and the FA Cup. But the fourth was European glory—the Champions League. The greatest teams in Europe all vying for their chance to be the best of the best. Last year, Lia had won two of those. This year, she wanted more.

“So, are you hoping to follow in your brother’s footsteps and win multiple league titles?”

Only Lia’s years of media training prevented her smile from faltering. Just once, *once*, Lia would like to be able to talk about her own career without Brett being brought into it. Some people thought it was cool that two siblings played for some of the best teams in the world. Lia wasn’t one of them. “While I can’t deny that my stepbrother has made a name for himself, I think my own accolades speak for themselves. I don’t want to follow in anyone’s footsteps. I want to rewrite all the record books.”

After a few more generic questions, Milly clapped her hands. “Okay, I think we’re all done! I’ll take you on a tour of the training facility next, and then I’ll leave you in the coach’s capable hands. Do you want to change into your training kit first?”

“Sure.” As she pulled on her navy-blue clothes, Lia allowed herself to bask in a rare moment of solitude. The tracksuit pants and the matching T-shirt were soft and breathable, and the hooded jacket that she zipped to her chin was comfortable. Wearing a football kit had always felt like armour, and Lia supposed there was no reason why this one couldn’t feel the same, even if it was a colour she wasn’t used to.

Stepping out into the corridor, Lia took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing nerves. But it was no use. She followed Milly around Park Lane, barely concentrating on a word she said.

“Hey, are you okay?” Milly set a gentle hand on Lia’s elbow, a frown on her face.

“I’m fine.” The lie came easily to Lia’s lips. “It’s just a little overwhelming.”

Milly’s smile was sympathetic. “I understand. This is your first time being part of a big transfer, right?”

“I’ve been at Wanderers since I was sixteen. Didn’t have any of this fanfare then.”

“Well, that’s what you get for being one of the best in the world.” Milly squeezed her arm. “I know it’s a lot, but I promise we’ll get you through it. Everyone in the team here is great—they’ll have you settled in in no time.

And anytime you need someone to talk to, come to me. Whenever you need it. It's my job to be here for you, okay?"

Gratitude flooded through Lia. It was nice to know there was at least one friendly face at Albion. "Thanks, Milly. I appreciate that, even if it hasn't seemed like it today."

"Are you kidding? I used to work for a men's Premier League team—you're a dream compared to some of those egos. And it's just a few more hours today, and then you'll have the evening to decompress. By the time you're done with training, all your belongings will have been moved into your new apartment."

One of the best things about a team having a player liaison manager was not having to worry about anything. Milly had found her a new place in a sleek apartment building in central Manchester a few minutes away from Park Lane.

"Come on, I'll show you the most important room in this place next." Milly led her down a set of stairs and along a long hallway until they reached a set of double doors.

Beyond them was a canteen full of a dozen tables, the seats blue and the walls painted the same colour to match Albion's home kit. Large glass counters housed the offerings from the kitchen staff, though most of them were empty. A handful of people bustled around the room, tidying after the breakfast rush. They waved at her as she and Milly stepped inside.

TV screens lined the walls, and Lia's face stared back at her from each one. To say that her transfer had caused a splash was an understatement.

"It's not usually this quiet," Milly said. "The team are in a meeting now, being told about your arrival."

A shiver of apprehension trickled down Lia's spine. She needed to make a good impression if she wanted to do well at Albion. And she was determined to do that. Her decision to leave Wanderers may have been hasty, but she was going to prove that she'd chosen the right path. "I'm guessing I'm supposed to make an entrance?"

"If you're up for it. If not, I can lie and say our photo shoot overran."

While Lia appreciated the offer, she'd need to get it over with sooner rather than later. "Nah, I'm good. Let's not keep them waiting."



Erin stared blankly at Ayla's face, trying to take in what she was saying.

"I think most of you have heard the news by now." Albion's coach stood at the front of the briefing room with her muscled arms folded across her chest, gaze flitting around the faces of the thirty players sitting in the comfy chairs before her.

Ayla had been an incredible player in her prime, a pioneer of the women's game, paving the way for those who came after her to be full-time professionals. Since her playing career had ended, she'd scaled her way to the top levels of management and was the first Black coach to win all four domestic trophies. All of them in her five years at Albion. Erin respected her a lot, but with how chaotic her thoughts had been ever since hearing the news about Lia, she found it hard to concentrate on Ayla's words.

"It wasn't how I wanted you to find out."

No, a breaking news announcement wasn't how Erin wished she'd found out, either. Worse—it hadn't been a joke. Lia Ashcroft was somewhere in the building, about to waltz into the first team squad, about to take Erin's position on the pitch, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

"The timing is good for us—Lia is able to join our pre-season tour in the US next week. That'll be a good chance for you all to get to know her and hopefully start to gel together on the pitch before the season starts in September."

Back when Erin had first started out, she'd been lucky to play any kind of pre-season at all. Even a few years ago, it had meant two or three matches against their nearest opposition. Now, as the women's game continued on its upward trajectory, they were offered the kind of lucrative tours that had been historically reserved for the men's teams. Last year, they'd travelled to Australia. This year, New York City was their destination.

Erin's injury hadn't gotten her out of going. It wasn't like she was going to get on the training pitch, but Ayla had been insistent that the whole squad make the journey—because they were set to bond off the pitch as well as on it.

Yuck.

A light knock sounded on the door, and Ayla's face broke into a smile. "That should be her now."

The door creaked open, and Lia's face loomed in the gap. Green eyes darted around the room, her brown hair falling in loose waves around her pale cheeks instead of in her usual matchday ponytail.

As she stepped inside the room, Lia buried her hands into the pockets of her navy-blue jacket. A thirteen was emblazoned across her chest, answering the question of what number shirt she'd be wearing. Unlucky for some—and certainly for Erin.

Ayla ushered Lia over to where she stood at the front of the room. "Everyone, please give a warm Albion welcome to our newest recruit, Lia Ashcroft!"

Applause rang out as the team took Lia in. She didn't seem comfortable being the centre of attention, which went against the assured cockiness Erin associated her with whenever they'd met on the pitch. Had that all been an air—or was this the act? Pretending to be nervous so people would feel sorry for her and welcome her with open arms?

"Lia is an incredible talent," Ayla said. "She has everything you could possibly want in a footballer—pace, strength, and a hardworking attitude—not to mention that she certainly knows how to find the back of the net." Ayla's smile turned wry as her gaze found Erin. "Only one of our own came close to outscoring her last season."

Beneath the bandage, Erin's knee throbbed, and she gritted her teeth.

Ayla wasn't done yet. "I am so excited to see where this season takes us with so much firepower at our disposal. Lia, is there anything you want to say to your new teammates?"

With her cheeks flushed pink, Lia swallowed.

It *had* to be an act. Erin didn't buy for a second this was the same woman she had met on the pitch.

"Um, just that I am so happy to be here. I can't wait to get started and get to know you all." Though she hadn't mastered the same projection as Ayla, her words still carried to where Erin sat in the back row.

"Well, I'll leave you to say hello. Lia is such a consummate professional that she's joining us for training this afternoon—diving right in." With an approving smile, Ayla stepped back.

Erin's teammates swarmed around Lia, but Erin made a beeline for Ayla before the coach could leave the room. Or as much of a beeline as she could manage these days, anyway.

Ayla's mouth tightened when Erin reached her, and she tucked a strand of her long hair behind her ear. As always, her nails were immaculately painted. This week, they were blue. "Erin. How's the knee?"

Knowing Ayla didn't really want the answer, Erin ignored the question. As coach, she'd be kept up to date with every single one of Erin's movements from the team doctors and physiotherapists. "Why is *she* here? Am I being replaced?"

"Of course not. There's no replacing our best player." Ayla should know flattery wouldn't get her anywhere. "But it'll be months before you're back on the pitch. Longer until you're at full-match fitness. Did you expect us to spend a whole season without an out-and-out striker?"

Well, no. It was, of course, better for the team as a whole to have not just an out-and-out striker, but a *good* one to keep them competitive. The more trophies Albion won, the better. But...

"I didn't expect *her*." Why couldn't it have been anyone else? Why did it have to be the one player everyone kept touting as Erin's successor? As the young striker coming for her crown and all her records? Now she'd be forced to watch it happen.

And would there still be a place for Erin when she was back? Lia couldn't have come cheap, and Erin's wages were on the high side, too. She had one of the most lucrative contracts in the Women's Super League, thanks to her fantastic goalscoring records. Could Albion justify keeping them both? Or would Erin be sold to make way for Lia to become their new star?

"Neither did we." Ayla gave a disbelieving shake of her head. "She'd not long signed a contract extension with Wanderers. She shouldn't have been available. But when we heard she was, I wasn't about to let that chance go."

Regrettably, Erin understood. Were she in Ayla's position, she would have done the same thing, but that didn't lessen the sting.

Ayla met Erin's gaze. "And I have faith that the two of you will be able to play together once you're back to full fitness. You're both formidable alone—how incredible can you be as a striking partnership?"

Erin fought the urge to shake her head, to tell Ayla she didn't want to work as a pair. "So there's still a place for me here? Even with her?" She hated how vulnerable it made her sound—and hated the sympathy that washed over Ayla's face more.

"Of course there is, Erin. And I, for one, am looking forward to what the two of you can achieve together over the next three years."



"I still can't believe you're here." Cerys was the first player to embrace Lia, skipping to the front of the queue and wrapping Lia in her arms.

Some of Lia's nerves eased as she inhaled Cerys' familiar perfume, her nose tickled by a face full of unruly red curls. Her international teammate, they'd been playing together for Wales since the age of fifteen, and kept their close bond despite—until now, at least—playing for rival teams.

Cerys cupped her cheeks. "Like, are you really standing in Albion's briefing room right now?"

"Better believe it." The joy on Cerys' face meant Lia's smile was her first genuine one in days.

"Oh, we are going to have so much fun together."

"Don't hog the newbie."

Lia glanced over Cerys's head to see the captain of Salford Albion grinning at her. A striking Black woman standing at six feet, Shanice Rookwood was easily the tallest person in the room and instantly recognisable. Her hair was cropped short, brown eyes sparkling as she reached Lia's side. As a central defender, Lia had tussled with her a dozen times over the past few seasons—the woman was fast, and she was *strong*.

"Welcome to the team, Lia." Shanice wrapped a warm arm around Lia's shoulders. "I have to say that it'll be nice to be on the same side. You were a terror to play against. No offence."

A laugh bubbled in Lia's chest, more of her nerves falling away. "None taken, because I feel the same. I hated playing against you—you're too damn good."

"I like you already." Shanice nudged Lia forward to meet the rest of the waiting line of players.

Of course, she already knew all their names. She'd played against most of them for years, after all. But being embraced as one of their own was different to shaking their hands before a match.

She couldn't help but notice that one player hung back from the rest.

Erin Finch stood with her back against the wall a few feet away. Her blonde hair was cut short, barely brushing the nape of her neck, and hazel

eyes regarded Lia with open hostility, the sharpness of her gaze rivalled by the jut of her jaw.

All her weight was on her right leg, her navy shorts showing a tight bandage around her left knee. Lia had been close to her in the cup final. She had seen the anguish on Erin's face as she'd fallen, palm slapping the grass as she'd called for help.

Lia never liked to see someone go down like that. Especially when they were as good as Erin. A victory felt hollow when the opposite team was without their best player, their talisman.

And that was what Erin Finch was. Albion rarely lost a game when Erin was at her best. But, sadly, it would be months before she could be at her best again. That was to Lia's gain, but that didn't mean she wanted Erin to be injured.

Not to mention that coming in as Erin's replacement meant she had big shoes to fill.

Because Erin Finch was one of the best players the game had ever seen. For years, Lia had admired her, wanting to emulate her favourite player's form, dreaming that one day she might be as good as her.

Last season, Lia had met that goal by winning her first two trophies, and now many people saw her as the next big thing. The player to knock Erin Finch off her perch as the best player in the world.

Judging from the icy glare Erin was sending her way, she thought Lia was there to do that, too.

Lia swallowed. She'd already known that Erin wasn't her biggest fan—that she was competition—but she'd hoped that maybe by being on the same team, that might change things.

Evidently not.

But that didn't have to be a big deal. She didn't have to get along with every single one of her teammates. And maybe with time, she could win Erin over. Show her she wasn't a threat, and that together, they could be even better.

Maybe she should start right now. Resolved, Lia took a step toward Erin—only for Erin to melt into the crowd and disappear from view.

Swallowing her disappointment, Lia allowed herself to be drawn into conversation with Cerys as they made their way to the gym.

Well, she'd signed a three-year contract. Lia would have plenty of time to get Erin Finch on her side in the next few months.

Chapter 3

Lia tossed her keys into the bowl on the table beside the front door of her apartment, humming along to the song playing through her AirPods. When Milly and her player liaison team had asked her about her preference for living arrangements, Lia had asked for her own place, but she'd forgotten how *quiet* an empty apartment could feel.

The house she'd shared with Hannah had been so loud in comparison: the baby wailing from their next-door neighbours', the couple on the other side arguing, Hannah clattering around in the kitchen or blaring podcasts while Charlie scampered around at her feet, claws tip-tapping across the wooden floors.

Now, on the seventh floor of an apartment complex in the heart of Manchester city centre, the walls thick and the glass on the windows and balcony doors reinforced to keep any noise from the street filtering in, the silence was oppressive.

Three days in, Lia's AirPods were all but surgically attached, chasing away the loneliness. It didn't help that the space felt too empty, either. Her meagre possessions had fit into a total of three cardboard boxes and two suitcases—she'd left the rest at Hannah's, wanting few reminders of their time together.

To be fair to her, Milly had done a great job with furnishing the place. The open-plan kitchen-slash-dining room-slash-living room was dominated by a large, round mahogany table and a pair of comfortable brown leather couches. It would be a good place to entertain guests—if Lia was inclined to invite anyone around. Maybe Cerys, once she felt more settled.

She hoped that day would come soon.

On her way to her favourite part of her new place, Lia passed the wall of photographs she'd hung on her first night. In the centre, her grandmother beamed, one arm around Lia's shoulders. It was a proud moment for them both—Lia's professional debut—and she could still picture the tears in her grandmother's eyes at the end of the game as she'd hugged Lia close.

Guilt flooded Lia's stomach. In all the rigmarole of her move, she'd been lax that week with her visits to the care home. Unacceptable. Pushing open her balcony doors, Lia vowed to do better. She'd go tomorrow, right after training. And the day after, too, to make up for the fact that then she'd be away for two weeks.

She shouldn't have bothered emptying the suitcases, considering in two days' time she'd be hopping on a plane to New York with her new teammates.

A shudder wracked through her as she settled onto her outdoor sofa, the cushion crinkling as she sat. For once, her shudder didn't have anything to do with the temperature. It was a mild August evening, the sun still high in the sky and warm against her skin.

No, her trepidation was all to do with the prospect of two weeks in the US and trying to integrate herself into a new squad. It was going well so far, but it had only been a few days. And she was already tired of being peppered with questions, though she knew it was necessary if they were going to get to know her.

Still, being asked the same thing by twenty different people was exhausting. Not to mention mind-bogglingly boring. Maybe she should make a printout of the most common questions with her answers and hand them out in advance.

Yes, she'd really started playing football at the age of six, tired of being dragged along to her stepbrother's training practices and expected to sit on the sidelines—joining in with the eight-year-old boys instead. No, it had never been weird to be the only girl on the team, though she couldn't deny that the day she'd first gotten to play on an all-girls team had been a special moment. It had been difficult to be part of a blended family, despite her stepmother being in her life since she was five years old. Manchester had been her home since she was seventeen, but she'd spent the first ten years of her life in London before moving to Wales to live with her grandmother. No, nothing had happened to her parents, they were just too focused on Brett's career and the promise of the financial

security a place in a Premier League team could provide to properly care for her as well. Yes, that was outrageous—but it was the best decision her father ever made for all of them.

Her lips curved into a smile. At least all her teammates seemed harmless, if too curious.

Well. All aside from one. Erin Finch was still steadfastly avoiding Lia. And it wasn't like Lia hadn't tried. She smiled at Erin in the canteen. Approached her whenever the opportunity presented itself—just to say hello. To maybe try and clear the air. But each time, Erin disappeared before Lia reached her. It had happened too many times now to be a coincidence.

Lia was trying hard not to take it personally.

A few balconies over, on the floor below, a black cat rolled onto its back in a patch of sunlight. Its tail flicked lazily. Lia wished she was that relaxed.

In her pocket, her phone buzzed with an incoming call, tearing her gaze away. Lia picked it up, heart dropping. *Vanessa (stepmonster)* was written on the screen. Watching it buzz, she debated not answering it, but she hadn't spoken to her in a while. This would get Vanessa off Lia's back for at least the next few weeks. "Hello?"

She received no such pleasantries back.

"You left Wanderers?"

"Yes. A few days ago, now—thank you for finally noticing."

Her stepmother sniffed. "We were on holiday visiting your brother in Spain."

Lia glanced at her watch. Thirty seconds for her to mention Brett. She'd love to say that was the record. Under the dictionary definition of *golden child*, Lia wouldn't be surprised to see a photograph of her smarmy older stepbrother. His mother certainly thought the sun shone right out of his arsehole. "And how is Valencia at this time of year?"

"Lovely. As you'd know if you ever visited."

Lia would rather go for a pap smear than spend an hour with Brett. She could still remember the bullying she'd endured when her father had moved himself and Lia in with Brett and Vanessa, Brett being unable to deal with the attention being on anyone other than him. How she remembered the snarl on his face when he'd told her girls didn't play football and she'd never amount to anything. Lia had used it all as motivation to prove him

and her father—who'd been so desperate to keep his new wife happy that he'd always believed Brett over her—wrong.

"I'm kinda busy with my own career," she told Vanessa. Which was currently much more successful than Brett's. After a strong start in Premier League football, Vanessa's golden boy had tapered off sharply in the last few years, landing at a mid-tier team in Spain, his last accolade an FA Cup runner's-up medal five years ago.

Lia's trophy cabinet, on the other hand, was growing. She had a league winner's medal, one FA Cup, a Golden Boot, and a dozen player-of-the-match awards. All that was missing was a League Cup and a Champions League medal, which Lia hoped she could achieve at Albion. She wouldn't say no to another FA Cup or league title, either.

"Yes, well," Vanessa tutted, "your own career seems to be on the decline."

"Because I left one winning club to go to another?"

"Because you went from the winning club last year to the loser. And you didn't tell us! I had to hear about it from my hairdresser. Do you know how embarrassing it is to be asked about why your daughter switched clubs and not know where she went?"

Lia couldn't help but laugh. So *that* was the real reason she'd called. Not because she cared. But because she didn't want to be caught out when asked about Lia by people who assumed her stepmother cared about her daughter. "I am *so* sorry you embarrassed yourself by not checking on me. And you're wrong. My goals helped Wanderers get the better of Albion last season. *I* was their standout player. *I* was the one who turned the FA Cup final around when we were losing. They're the ones who are going to struggle without me, not the other way around."

"Well, you certainly think highly of yourself, don't you?"

Lia ground her teeth. "Someone has to, because we both know you or Dad don't give a fuck about me."

Silence, other than her stepmother's breathing. She'd never been good at listening to hard truths. Vanessa and Daniel Ashcroft's approach to problems had always been denial, or to brush them under the carpet, never to be spoken of again.

But what other reason would there be for packing off your daughter to her grandmother's at ten years old? That wasn't something parents who gave a shit would do. The sparse phone calls in the years since had

only served to further prove that to Lia. But she knew she was better off without them. Her grandmother had treated her better than either Daniel or Vanessa ever had.

"I see you're in a bad mood today. Call me back when you're feeling more amiable." Vanessa hung up.

Lia shoved her phone back into her pocket and tried not to scream. Tears stung at her eyes, and she pressed her palms to them to scrub them away as she sank further into her chair. Call her back when she was feeling more amiable? What had Vanessa ever done to earn Lia's amiability?

Maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing to put some distance between them. Everything else in Lia's life had changed in the past month—why not finally cut all contact with her toxic stepmother as well?



"Have you seen this?" Erin waved her itinerary for Albion's pre-season tour at Alex as they ate breakfast in the Park Lane canteen. "How much bullshit can they cram into two weeks?"

"Some of us are excited to go to New York, you know."

Erin crunched a piece of melon before answering. "I would be if we were going to have any time to see it."

"There's plenty of time to see it." Alex smoothed a copy of their own itinerary on the table between them. "We've got an open-topped bus tour and the Empire State Building on Sunday. An ice hockey game *and* a Broadway show."

Ignoring the differences between their schedules—namely, the lack of any actual training or game time on Erin's—Erin shook her head. "All of those are as a group."

Alex chuckled. "Oh, Erin. You ever think maybe you should've gone into a different sport? Athletics, maybe? You're a fast runner."

"That would have been a waste of my footballing potential."

"Then I'm afraid you're going to have to suck it up and remember that we play a team sport."

Erin grumbled and leaned back in her chair. "I don't see why that means we have to do *everything* together."

"We have a whole"—Alex squinted at the piece of paper—"two afternoons off. I don't know what your problem is."

"My problem is I hate forced team bonding. It's bad enough that we already have to do it once a month." Be it group dinners, games nights, quizzes, bowling, or escape rooms, on the last Wednesday of the month, Shanice arranged an activity for them all to do together. "Now we're practically spending two full weeks together."

"We already spend all day, every day together." Alex shrugged. "What's the difference?"

"Speak for yourself. I spend all my time with Gregor."

Though she supposed it could be worse. Of all the physios, Gregor was the most tolerable. He pushed her without being condescending and didn't try to sugarcoat how difficult her recovery would be. He'd steered a lot of players through the same injury through the years.

The fact that he wasn't one for idle small talk helped, too.

"You should be happy to be with some familiar faces!"

Erin levelled Alex with her best unimpressed look.

Like always, it made them smile. "Besides, it's not really for us. It's to help the newbies get fully integrated."

Yes. The newbies. Along with Lia, they'd signed a new midfielder and a young goalkeeper. Erin grasped for their names. She was sure the midfielder was called Kennedy. Or was it Kiara? Kara?

Maybe she did need some enforced team bonding.

"Speaking of"—Alex shifted uneasily in their seat—"have you spoken much to any of them?"

Erin read between the lines. "You mean have I spoken to Lia?"

Lia Ashcroft, who seemed determined to corner Erin every chance she got. Erin was running out of escape routes—once she'd ducked into a cleaner's cupboard to avoid her. Childish? Yes, but Erin still hadn't processed Lia's arrival. She didn't *want* to speak to her. What would the woman possibly have to say? *Sorry for stealing your place*? Worse—she might rub it in. Gloat.

And Erin didn't entirely trust herself not to let out the bitterness she felt whenever she saw Lia across a room. Despite Ayla's assurances that they would both have a place in the team, Erin wasn't sold.

She didn't want to risk their paths crossing until she had a better hold on her anger because taking it out on Lia wasn't fair. Plus, Erin didn't

want to get in trouble with Ayla or Shanice for not playing nice. They'd probably organise enforced team bonding *just* for her and Lia, and Erin would rather gnaw off her own arm than be forced to endure that.

"No." Erin pushed the last piece of melon around her bowl. "I haven't talked to her."

"Don't you think you should?"

"Probably."

"But you're not going to." It wasn't a question. Alex shook their head. "You know you don't have to be such an arsehole all the time, right? All she's done is sign a contract. Like you did when you came here."

"I wasn't replacing anyone."

"She's not replacing you. You're still here, aren't you?"

For now. But if Erin couldn't recover? Couldn't get back to her best quickly enough to keep Ayla or the directors or the owners happy? Erin would be shipped out the door. She wasn't naïve. Football was a business. She was an investment. And right now, she was one that wasn't making any money.

Erin changed the subject. "Do we know why she left Wanderers? Why she came here?" She couldn't make sense of it. Sure, she loved Albion, and she knew what they were capable of. But Albion had been knocked off their perch by Wanderers last season. Wanderers were on the cusp of a run of dominance like Albion had been lucky enough to be on the last few years.

Why would Lia give that up? Why take a step backwards? Lia could have gone to any club in the world, domestically or abroad. Walk into any team. So why had she stayed in Manchester?

"No idea. I don't think anyone knows."

"Someone must have asked her."

"If they have, I haven't been privy to the answer."

Annoying. Erin wasn't one for gossip, but Alex usually kept her up to date with the biggest dramas and scandals. Not that there were many. Ayla and Shanice ran a tight ship.

"I know." Alex's eyes sparkled with mirth. "Maybe you can ask her when we're on top of the Empire State Building."

Erin allowed herself a rare laugh. "Not likely."

No, she'd continue to do her best to stay away from Lia at all costs—no matter which side of the Atlantic they were on.

Lia hauled her suitcase out of the lobby of her apartment building, wondering if she had crammed too much inside.

Oh well. Too late to do anything about it now. She stepped outside with a few minutes to spare before the car was due to pick her up.

A few metres away, someone else stood beside a suitcase, dressed in the same Albion hoodie and sweatpants Lia had pulled on that morning. Huh. She hadn't realised any of her fellow teammates also lived in the same apartment building. But at least it would mean she wouldn't have to make awkward small talk with the taxi driver.

Lia paused when she inched closer, recognising the angled cheek bones and the short blonde hair. Did she live in the same building as Erin Finch? Was she about to get into a car with the one teammate who had gone out of their way to *not* welcome Lia with open arms?

To not welcome her at all?

Things were about to get awkward. And fast.

As if able to sense Lia's unease, Erin turned her head. Her eyes widened when they met Lia's, and her nostrils flared. Erin's eyes darted from Lia, toward the lobby doors she'd exited, and back again.

"You live here?" Erin's voice was low, her Scouse accent pronounced despite the number of years she'd spent in Manchester.

Lia wasn't sure what she expected Erin's first words to her to be, but it hadn't been that. Especially after a week of silence. "Um, yeah. You might know that, if you hadn't been avoiding me." She tried not to sound defensive, curling her fingers tight around the handle of her suitcase.

"I am not avoiding you."

The lie wasn't remotely convincing. "Oh, please. It's been a week, and you haven't said so much as a hello to me."

Erin inspected her manicured nails, painted a vivid shade of red. "You haven't said hello to me, either."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" As a rule, it took a lot to rile Lia up. A short fuse didn't last long on a football pitch—unless you wanted to earn a

long list of bookings and sending offs. But being accused of not making an effort by someone who was actively keeping out of her way? Lia saw red. "I have *tried*. You're the one who has no interest."

Eyes flashing, Erin dropped her hand back to her side. "Look, I'm sorry, okay, but do you really think I want to be the best of friends with the woman who's been brought in to take my place in the starting eleven?"

Lia supposed, if their positions were reversed, she might feel some level of resentment. It couldn't be easy for Erin—first, to adapt to a potentially career-ending injury, then to watch someone come into the team who had outscored her last season. Footballing egos were fragile. Lia had seen enough evidence of that over the years.

"I don't want to be best friends." Even in just a week, Lia had noticed that Erin didn't seem to have many. She kept to herself, for the most part, though she sat with Alex at mealtimes. "I just don't want you to be outright hostile. And it won't be that long until we're playing together, right? You must be what, two months post-op? Nearly a quarter of the way through your recovery? I bet that time will fly by."

As Erin's jaw clenched, Lia wished that she'd kept her mouth shut.

"Fly by"? You think the past two months have been easy?" Erin hissed. "You think it's fun to not be able to do the one thing you love more than anything else in the world? To watch the rest of the team preparing for the season ahead and not know if you'll set foot on a pitch before the end of it?"

Okay, Lia had definitely said the wrong thing. "I—"

"Do you think it's fun watching everyone fawn over you? I know you're good. I know you're great for the team. I *know* I'm supposed to be a professional and act like I'm overjoyed that you're here. But every time I look at you, Lia, I'm reminded of all the things I can't do. So, yes, I have been avoiding you. But I've been far from hostile. Because believe me, if I wanted to be hostile, you'd know about it."

Erin breathed heavily, a look of surprise on her face like she couldn't believe what had come out of her mouth.

"I'm sorry." Though Lia didn't know what she was apologising for. "I didn't mean to—"

"Can we not do this?" Erin waved a hand between the two of them. "Let's just continue to ignore one another until we're forced to interact."

"Are you serious?"

“Yes.”

“You’re incapable of playing nice?”

Erin’s gaze trailed from Lia’s head to her feet. “With you? Right now? Yes, I think I am.”

Shaking her head, Lia bit her tongue so she didn’t say something she’d later regret. Maybe it *was* a good thing Erin had avoided her. She hadn’t expected the warmest of welcomes, but this? Lia couldn’t believe it. Well, they did say you should never meet your heroes.

Lia should have heeded that advice.

A black town car rounded the corner, and Lia breathed a sigh of relief when it pulled to a stop in front of them.

“Sorry I’m late,” the driver said as he hurried to grab their bags. “I’ll be sure to get you to the airport in time.”

Lia glanced at her watch. They still had over three hours before their plane was due to depart—plenty of time. “Do you mind if I sit in the front?” The thought of sitting next to Erin in stilted, weighty silence for forty minutes filled her with dread.

The driver looked surprised. “Of course. Give me a moment to clear the seat—most people prefer to sit in the back.”

As Erin slid into the back seat and slammed the car door closed behind her, Lia sighed. “Yeah, well, I’m not like most people.”

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