



ONSIDE

Play

LIZ RAIN



Chapter 1

Melbourne, Australia *2023*

IN THE GREY HALF-LIGHT, I fumbled around on the floor for my clothes. Undies! Yes! Slung over the back of an armchair. I pulled them on and turned a full circle, looking for the remainder of my outfit.

Geez! This was the biggest hotel room I'd ever been in.

I tapped my phone screen, hoping the extra illumination might help me in my search. 6:15 a.m. A normal wake-up time for me but probably not for—

“Keeley?” A thick, muffled voice drifted from across the room.

I sat on the edge of the bed. The woman lying there rolled onto her back and swept the blonde hair out of her eyes. She cleared her throat and grimaced.

I handed her a plastic bottle of water from the bedside table, and she sat up and took one big swig, then another few gulps. She had the bedsheet swathed around her hips and was wearing a Kylie Minogue T-shirt.

I smiled. Amber Hatfield was an internationally famous pop singer, but right now she didn't look much like her magazine shoots or album covers.

I was into this bleary, tousled look though. “A bit dusty, hey?”

She squinted and nodded. “Totally. Whoever in my crew got that top-shelf bottle of bourbon half an hour before the bar closed is on

my shit list.” She leaned back against the neutral-toned headboard and raised an eyebrow. “Good night, though.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a summation. A kick of attraction made me blink. I’d had my share of one-night stands, especially the last couple of years since I’d been playing soccer at the highest level in Australia. Some were underwhelming, some were downright call-in-the-national-guard disasters, but some were awesome. This one had definitely been in the awesome category.

I enjoyed listening to her mixed-up accent. She’d been living over in the States for five years, trying to turn Australian pop music success into an international career. She’d told me she quite liked the hustle required to get a foot on the bottom rung of the American industry. Being a household name here at home was nice though, and being able to do a sold-out Aussie tour to pay the bills every now and then was very handy.

She hadn’t flinched at all when she’d said she was a household name. She had an unashamed grit to her—a confidence. It was sexy as hell.

“A very good night,” I said.

“But you’re heading off?”

“Yep. I’ve got training in less than two hours.”

She crinkled her nose. “Aw. You’re sure I can’t convince you to stay?”

She brushed her lips against my jawline.

I gave a full-body shiver. “I’m a weak woman. Do *not* tempt me.” I put my hand to the side of her face and kissed her lips gently. “But I do have to go. Can I turn this light on? I can’t for the life of me find my clothes.”

She grinned and switched on the lamp. I jumped up and kept on with my quest. My shirt was under the coffee table.

She propped up a couple of pillows and lay down again with a sigh. “I’d help, but I’m enjoying the spectacle.”

I picked up a cushion to throw at her. “Ooh, my jeans are under here.”

My throw landed way wide and bounced off the edge of the bed and onto the floor.

She shook her head. “Poor effort, McGee. Lucky you chose soccer and not netball. You’d never make the national team with that arm.”

I laughed as I pulled my jeans up. “You’re funny, you know. If this, uh, singing business doesn’t work out for you, you could always try stand-up.”

All right. Shoes on? Check. Phone in pocket? Running hideously late? Double check.

I sat back down next to her. She rolled onto her side toward me.

We did an identical tight-lipped half-smile.

“This bit is always awkward,” she said. “My one-night stands are never sure how to get the tone of their farewells right.”

I noted the use of the term “one-night stand.” It wasn’t the first time she’d used it since we’d met. She had also explicitly spelt out to me the night before that she was only after a casual hook-up.

I preferred to keep things simple too, so I was happy to go along with her terms. “Never? How many have you had?”

“Oh, hundreds. Same as you.”

“Hah! Well, I *never* get the tone of anything I say right, so I just tell the truth.” I took a big, loud breath in and opened my eyes very wide. And I did want to do right by her. The launch event the night before held by the TV station airing the Women’s World Cup had been boring until I had started chatting with Amber, who had recorded the official song for the tournament.

Amber smiled. “Yikes, I’m bracing myself.”

I exhaled, and my words came out in a rush. “You’re nice and funny and smart and good at sex, and I had a really good time. I’m glad I wandered over to your crazy entourage at the bar last night to see what the hell was going on.” I leaned over uncomfortably and lay my head on the pillow next to hers. “You’ve got my number, and I hope you’ll text me when you’re in Melbourne next. Or Brisbane or Stockholm because I live in those places sometimes too.”

“Weird flex mentioning all your residences, but thanks. I’m glad you bumbled over too. You’re really good at flirting and equally good at everything that came after too.” She kissed my mouth, lingering just a little and taking a hold of the sleeve of my shirt. Then she rested her head back on the pillow.

I stood. "See you around?"

"You betcha."

I turned back at the door and held up my hand as a good-bye.

She stretched her long legs out. "Hit me up if you're ever in LA, Nashville, or Sydney. See, other people can have three houses too."

I grinned and shook my head as I walked down the silent hallway toward the lifts. My blurred reflection in the burnished metal of the lift doors showed I was pretty dishevelled. I thanked all the lesbian deities that my night-on-the-town look was jeans, expensive sneakers, and a T-shirt. I was on a pretty classic walk of shame right now, but it wasn't as obvious as if I had been wearing a little black dress, stilettos, and inch-thick make-up.

I yawned, then grimaced. At twenty-five I was getting way too old for this. I needed to take everyone's advice and cut out the late nights before training. It was against team rules to drink while the season was in full swing, so I never did. But that didn't ever stop a late dinner with mates turning into barhopping and dancing. And if an attractive girl ever made eyes at me, well, I was only human after all.

I walked quickly through the lobby but stopped short. A group of a few dozen people hung around the entryway. Was it some kind of protest? Maybe the hotel was owned by a conglomerate that dumped toxic waste on seals, then clubbed them for good measure.

A few of them had signs. The closest was a piece of pink cardboard with a picture of Amber's face with a big glitter love heart around it.

Uh-oh. I considered heading out into the throng, not making eye contact, and hurrying through and away. It seemed like it could be easy, but my brain was a bit fuzzy from tiredness, and it was hard to think.

Just then, behind the gathered crowd, a bus rolled by with my picture on it, my big white face smiling, my big body wearing the distinctive green-and-gold jersey of the Australian Matildas national soccer team, an electricity company's logo floating in thin air to the left of my artfully ruffled short hairdo. I closed my eyes and lowered my head. *Think, Keeley.*

It was likely someone in this crowd would recognise me. I'd been playing for one of the Melbourne soccer teams for three years now

and for the Australian team for two. Interest in women's soccer was reaching an all-time high in the lead-up to the World Cup, which was starting in a few weeks. It used to be that I would get recognised at about a third of the places I went, but the advertising blitz for the World Cup—I was on the telly, spruiking everything from major supermarket chains to obscure protein powders—meant it was happening more and more.

If I was seen leaving the hotel Amber Hatfield was staying at in the early morning—that wasn't weird, right? I could have any number of reasons to be there.

But a memory surfaced of a little clutch of people gathered outside the bar as we were trying to leave the night before. Amber had told me there were a few fans who studied her entourage's social media stories and tried to piece together where she was. Or sometimes some rando would snap a photo and put it on social media, and if they tagged her or used the right hashtag, the fans would find her.

"Wow, um, what do you think about all that?" I'd asked her. It sounded like a living nightmare to me, and that might have come across in my voice.

She shrugged. "Par for the course, I guess. I've been at this since I was seventeen, so a few of them are pretty rusted on."

Security had moved that crowd on before we went outside, but if any of them were still hanging around, they would have seen me with her the night before.

Shit. I didn't know if it would be a big deal for her if these people knew we'd hooked up. She had kind of a clean-cut image. Super clean, in fact—one of her big hits of about five years ago had just been used for a laundry detergent TV ad.

Back toward the lifts, a woman in a dark polo pushed a cleaner's trolley.

I half-jogged over to her. "Hi. Um, is there another way out of here? I'm, er, in a hurry and want to avoid that crowd out there."

She shrugged. "Yeah, there's another way. Come on." She pressed the lift button. "Hey, I know you. You play tennis?"

I glanced over my shoulder at the front desk. The well-groomed man behind it was staring at his computer screen. "Soccer."

“Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. You’re on the supermarket ad. You kick the orange, and the cricket lady catches it. I love that ad! Hey, can I get a selfie?”

“Sure thing.” She pulled out her phone, and we took the pic.

The lift dinged, and the doors opened. I went in, and she followed but left her trolley outside. She swiped a card on a stretchy string attached to her belt and hit the button for car park 1.

“Look for the big car gates. There’s a door next to it, then some steps up to street level. If you turn the handle, the door will open. There’s big red letters saying an alarm will sound and you should use it only in an emergency, but it’s not true. You’ll be right.”

The lift door threatened to close on her.

“Oh my God, thank you so much. You’re a legend,” I said.

She stepped back from the door and grabbed hold of her trolley. The doors started closing.

“Yeah, no worries at all. And good luck at the World Cup.”

When the lift dinged open again, I walked out into the grey undercover carpark.

“Oof,” I said as the cold hit me.

I picked up my pace and followed the big arrows that pointed toward the exit. The door was right where my new mate had said it would be, and I pushed through it and jogged up the concrete steps. When I neared the top, I pulled out my phone to check the time again. *Bugger!* There was no way I wasn’t going to be late.

“Oi, watch it!” said a male voice.

I’d walked into the back of someone wearing a big puffy jacket. “Sorry!”

Uh-oh. Puffer-jacket guy was one of a crowd of about ten people. Ten people wearing Amber Hatfield tour T-shirts and hoodies. They all turned to look at me. One held a framed A3 poster of Amber, and one teenage girl even had a full-size cardboard cut-out of her. A woman held two CD cases in each hand and a permanent marker in her mouth.

I had no filter at the best of times, but it did an even worse job when I was surprised or stressed. “Aren’t you meant to be out the front?” *And who still has CDs? How long have you had these albums?*

Puffer-jacket guy narrowed his eyes. “A few of us always set up near the back gate in case she leaves by car.”

I got a little chill down the back of my neck at the way he said *always*, followed by a flash of annoyance at my new mate on the hotel cleaning crew. Surely she hadn’t set me up to walk into this small but passionate mob at the back entrance? I dismissed the idea—she had liked my dumb grocery ad! And that one had been particularly irritating.

“Hey,” said CD woman. “Don’t you play cricket or something?”

I tensed. “Errrrrr...”

“Yeah,” puffer-jacket guy said. “I know you. You’re on that ad for milk where the cow’s wearing a tutu.”

My heart pounded. He was right.

A few people nodded, including cardboard cut-out girl. “Gimme a second. It’ll come to me. Kasey MacWhirter!”

My pits began to sweat despite the early morning cold.

“No, that’s not it,” said CD woman. “Katie something?”

“Kylie! Kylie? Nope, that’s not it.”

I turned tail and ran down the narrow, cobbled alleyway Melbourne had so many of.

“Hey, where’s she going?” someone yelled.

Footsteps pounded behind me. I swore under my breath. The mob was probably bored out of their brains waiting around for a possible sighting of Amber. A chase was the most exciting thing that could happen—second only to getting a wave from Amber through a tinted car window.

I made a right into an even smaller alleyway. “Ah, bollocks!” It was a dead end, with a big dumpster in front of an old brick wall.

The footsteps behind me grew louder.

I ran forward and stumbled on the old cobblestones. “Shit! Stupid bloody Melbourne and its stupid bloody old-timey alleyways. Get real streets, why dontcha.”

I righted myself and took a flying leap onto the closed lid of the bin.

“What the hell?” said a winded voice behind me.

It sounded like puffer-jacket guy, but I didn't look around to check. I hauled myself up and sat on top of the wall. The other side was a sheer drop. I closed my eyes, trying not to think about how mad the team physios would be if I broke both my ankles, and jumped. I landed in a crouch on the cement. I took a deep breath and gave myself a check over for any major injury. I was ok! I jumped up and looked skyward. Adrenaline still pumped around my body as well as a surge of elation. Escape! It was primal, like I was a cavewoman who'd outrun a sabre-tooth tiger.

I took off at a jog toward Lonsdale Street. I put a bit of distance between me and Amber's crazy fans before calling an Uber to take me home for the quickest costume change ever. And she wouldn't even have to know the lengths I'd gone to in an attempt to protect her privacy.

I smiled to myself. Success!

Chapter 2

I WAS TEN MINUTES LATE to training, but otherwise the session had gone off without a hitch. Back at home, my head full of cotton-wool after a long nap, I reached for my phone to check the time. I almost dropped it again. My lock screen was chock full of message notifications.

I sat up and fumbled, swiping to reveal them all. My adrenaline surged. Was Melbourne in some kind of emergency situation, and I had been snoozing so soundly I'd missed the whole thing?

Hahahaha! Bin' good knowing ya, mate! Coach is going to spit-roast you.

Bewildered, I scrolled through to the earliest text, where one of my teammates had sent me a link to a gossip website.

It turned out that the photos of me leaping over the industrial bin that morning had been put alongside photos of me and Amber at dinner the night before, and the story was doing the rounds of the internet. I scrolled through a few more texts roasting the hell out of me, then held my head in my hands.

I had to be an idiot to get everything so wrong. I should have gone home straight after dinner, or gotten Amber's number and phoned her many months from now when the World Cup was a distant memory. Or at least I should have left after we had sex, under the cover of darkness before her mob arrived. Or this morning I should have said

to her fans, “No, I’m nobody at all! I must just have one of those faces!” and walked off nonchalantly, instead of sprinting off like a criminal who’d been rumbled by the cops.

I shut my eyes as another stab of anxiety got me in the gut. *Amber*. I’d gotten her all mixed up in this mess too. I scrambled in my bedsheets to retrieve my phone, found her newly-entered contact details and hit the call button.

“Well hello there,” she said.

“Hi.”

“I hear you’ve taken up parkour. Or were you just so deathly ashamed of having spent the night with me that you would do anything to evade capture?”

“Oh geez, I am *so* sorry. I know how this must look—”

She laughed. “Dude, chill. I’m kidding around.”

I took a deep breath. My churn of worry and regret eased.

“I’m dying to know why you ran off from Darren, the esteemed Mr President of my fan club. Did he start on his rant about how it’s a national disgrace I’ve never been nominated for a Grammy?”

“Darren? Does he wear a puffy jacket?”

“Almost exclusively.”

Now I knew she wasn’t mad I started to enjoy the archness in her voice. She had a great voice—rich and melodious. I guess it *was* her full-time job after all.

“Well, I, uh... Your fans were all there this morning and I kind of freaked out. I didn’t know if they should know you brought strange people back to your hotel, especially strange, you know, women. Your fan club has kind of a wholesome, white picket fence vibe.”

I had to pull the phone away from my ear as she shouted with laughter. Then snorted. Then laughed some more.

“Aw bless your little heart. It’s so refreshing that you obviously have not followed my career, not for one second. The title track of my second album is called ‘Use My Body.’ The video was banned in eighteen countries. And I was engaged to a DJ named Alyssa Vixen for ten months in 2017.”

“Oh. I’ve heard of her. She’s played Coachella.” I sighed and looked at the ceiling. “I really am a moron.”

“Hey, no. You’re a bit of a dope, but it’s sweet you were trying to protect my honour. Totally unnecessary, but sweet. Hey, my publicity team is getting all kinds of calls. Do you need them to refute any of the story or are you happy to roll with it?”

“I haven’t even read the whole story.”

She gasped. “Oh, but you must! It’s sooooo funny. I mean, sorry... but it really is. Read it now.”

“All right, I’ll put you on speaker.”

“Google *dumpster jumper* and it should come up.”

I groaned. The first search result was a headline on the trashy website of the English *Daily Herald*.

Dumpster jumper at dawn—Steamy hotel tryst with sexy singer ends in soccer star’s bizarre escape.

The “story” consisted of blurry photos of me and Amber, taken through the window of the restaurant the night before, one of us leaving together, then about six action shots of me jumping up onto the bin and scaling the wall.

I slumped back down onto my bed. “I look so bloody sketchy. My eyes are bloodshot! Did they doctor the photos?”

“Look, probably. But, hey now, I think you look cute. Your arse looks great in that one captioned: *Keeley McGee fleeing the alley*. Do you think they meant it to rhyme?”

I chuckled. If Amber could see the funny side, at least that was something. “Thanks. At least my arse isn’t hanging out. Thank heavens I resisted when they tried to bring back low-rise jeans.”

“Do you need my people to deny it was a tryst? Say we spent the night playing backgammon and eating crumpets?”

“Crumpets? Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“Hah! I’m serious though. Are you in trouble with the team?”

I grimaced. “I think I’ll get a stern talking-to, but I didn’t breach any team rules. I’m not doing any more dumb shit until *after* the World Cup, though. The worst thing we can do is get caught out in a lie. Because, if I remember rightly, we didn’t play backgammon and put the kettle on. We...”

“We banged.”

“We totally banged.”

She laughed again. “My manager’s thrilled. No such thing as bad publicity in his book. He thinks we might get a bump in ticket sales for the rest of the tour.”

I smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. Apparently everyone on lesbian twitter reckons I like to play the field a bit. That fact has never made it into the mainstream media before, but no harm done as far as I’m concerned.”

“‘Play the field’—I like what you did there.”

“Oh yeah. Puns are how I reel all the girls in.”

She scoffed. “Hey, I’ve gotta go. They’re calling me for sound check. It takes ages to get the levels right in an arena.”

“Is that meant to impress me? Because it does.”

“You don’t fool me. Millions of people are going to watch you play in the World Cup. I’ll be there cheering you on.”

“Starting up a ‘dumpster jumper’ chant in the crowd, I bet.”

“Hah! Something like that. Does the *Daily Herald* not know they’re called skip bins in this country? They missed a trick with ‘skip skipper.’”

“Just another sign real journalism is down the toilet. Hey, I’ll let you get to your sound check.”

“Okay, see ya. Make sure you call me again, if you’ve got the time to hang out for a night while jetsetting between your three residences.”

“I’ll make the time. Sure thing. Bye.”

The one shining light in this shit storm was the discovery that Amber Hatfield was a class act. I was attracted to her, but it was like she drew me in by being funny and sexy and cool on the one hand, and at the same time insisted on keeping me at arm’s length. Being with her on more than a “casual hook-up” basis would probably mean an epic case of emotional whiplash.

To many of my serial monogamist friends, a first date as good as last night’s would have put them automatically into girlfriend mode. I’d seen it again and again—the robot voice sounding the alarm in their heads: *‘Lock it down. Lock it down.’* That game wasn’t for me, though. When I cared and tried, it ended in heartbreak.

A name came unbidden into my head. *Christine*. I tapped into Instagram and started to type the name in. I only needed to type the first two letters. It was my guilty little secret how often I looked up my ex on socials, but my search history knew exactly why I was there.

The first photo was one I hadn't seen before. I sighed. Christine Delacourt, a stunning black woman, smiled into the camera as her girlfriend Cora Helgesen, a stunning white woman, planted a kiss on her cheek. They were dressed casually with the ocean in the background. I went into the kitchen and started to fill up the biggest glass we had with water.

The little trip down memory lane had lowered my spirits even further. I shook my head. Wasn't the definition of insanity doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result? But I had been checking in on Christine's posts more often as the days counted down until I would see her again.

Christine and I had dated when we were both on the Florida State University soccer team years before. She had made a meteoric rise from college soccer to the US National Team in record time.

Australia would play the US in our first match of the upcoming World Cup. And it would be the first time I'd had any contact with Christine since we broke up.

I stared out the window at the tiny patch of lawn at the back of the old two-storey terrace I shared with a couple of housemates in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray. I shook my head. It was actually nuts that I was thinking about Christine right now instead of the fact I was probably in big trouble with the leadership team at the Matildas. I would put her out of my mind completely, and work on a plan to get back in the good books.

"Christine freaking Delacourt," said a voice behind me.

I whirled, spilling water from my overfilled glass.

Viv, my former college roommate and current Footscray housemate stood brandishing my phone, which I had left unlocked on the bench. She had gotten a Bachelor of Fine Arts in musical theatre in college and I had done marketing on a full international soccer scholarship. We were like chalk and cheese in a lot of ways but we had been tight back in college and over the years she had become my best friend in

the whole world. She was tiny and fair like a modern-day Tinkerbell, but my adrenaline spiked at the sight of her.

“Oi, give that back or I’ll called the privacy police. You’ve breached all my rights!” I said.

“Sprung, sprung, sprung. Creeping on the ex. How many times have we talked about this, Keels?”

“Me creeping? You’re the one spying on my defenceless and unsuspecting phone!”

She held up her hand like she was reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. She was from North Carolina so definitely knew it. “I take no responsibility. You know I’m drawn to shiny, colourful things.”

I slumped.

Viv shook her head and put her hands on my shoulders. “Look, you know I’ve never gotten to play a villain in any of my productions because—”

“Because you’re too sweet-looking. Yes, I know.” I scowled, knowing exactly where this was going.

“But I know a thing or two about them. Now, I am not going to stand here and say that Christine Delacourt is evil to the core.” She lifted her eyebrows and leaned toward me, telegraphing to the audience in the very back row that there was a very good chance Christine was, in fact, evil to the core. “It’s like that line from *Forrest Gump*.”

“Life is like a box of chocolates?”

“No, Keeley,” she rolled her eyes. “Stupid is as stupid does,” she said in a cadence that was straight from Alabama.

My mouth dropped open. “Whoa, whoa, whoa! I may be a little weak but I’m not stupid.”

“No, look, stop interrupting and let me get to my point. Forrest’s mom makes the point that nobody *is* anything. It’s how they act that you judge them on. Christine treated you in a thoughtless and mean way, and I for one am not in a hurry to forget it.

“When someone shows you who they are, you best believe them. I sometimes think she showed you her true self right from the beginning and you’ve been making excuses to yourself about her ever since.”

She pressed her lips together and patted my shoulder.

I was happy the pity party was interrupted by the return of our other housemate Fletch. They loped into the room and grinned. Lanky, non-binary, and easily the most easygoing person I had in my life, they were a welcome sight, as usual. They'd joined the Matildas the same year as me, and we'd hit it off right away. When they were traded from Adelaide United to Melbourne Victory the year before, I'd invited them to move in with me and Viv.

"What are we talking about?" Fletch asked.

"Christine Delacourt," said Viv.

"Oh yeah?" They opened up the fridge and stuck their head in.

I scowled at Viv.

She poked her tongue out at me.

"You've never played against her, have you Mac?" asked Fletch, perching on a bar stool at the counter.

"Nope. I went over to the Olympics with the team but didn't play the game against the US. And she had a calf strain or something and didn't play in those two friendly matches in Portland a couple of years ago."

"She's a deadset gun, mate. She tore us up at the Olympics. You'll have the main job on her at the Cup if you're at right-back."

"Keeley can take her. They played together at Florida State."

"Really? I didn't know that," said Fletch.

"Just for one semester. We didn't know each other well. Anyway." I scanned the room and caught sight of a pile of dishes on the bench. "It's my turn to clean the kitchen. I'd better, you know, make a start. On that."

"Yeah, mate. We'll leave you to it," said Fletch. "Hey, does your new-found interest in waste disposal mean you want to take the bins out too?"

"Oh, ha, ha, ha," I said at Fletch's and Viv's retreating backs.

I reached to switch my phone off, glancing quickly at the photo on the screen.

Had Christine shown me her true self right from the beginning? When I thought back to that senior year of college, the actual events got all muddled up and overpowered by the intense emotions of that time.

Chapter 3

2019

I HAD FIRST MET CHRISTINE a few weeks into my final year at Florida State. I had been running late for training. Being roommates with Viv meant I was dragged to many a community theatre production, and that day's matinee performance of *Sweeney Todd* had run late.

When I arrived Coach already had the team grouped in the centre of the pitch.

I had thrown my bag down and run toward them, slowing to an ungainly hop to fasten my left shinguard. Coach's authoritative voice carried through the still air as I reached the group.

"...and *this* is Keeley McGee," she said.

Every eye turned toward me. For a moment the only sound was the cicadas starting up for the evening.

"Keeley, I was just taking our new recruit through our team expectations. Would you be so kind as to fill her in please?"

My insides withered. Although Coach looked cool as a cucumber, I had thrown off the rhythm of her opening address to the newbie, and she wasn't happy about it.

"Um, Responsibility, Accountability and Excellence," I said.

"That's right! Now, FSU was lucky enough to get our new team member on a full scholarship, and I was kind and generous enough to loan her to team US to compete in the recent under-23's World Cup

in Reykjavik, which they won without dropping a single game. But now she's back, she's here, and she's ready to help us win the pennant this year. Christine Delacourt!" Coach started clapping, and everyone joined in.

Christine appeared unfazed by this WWE-level introduction. She looked about my age, tall, and insanely fit-looking. She could have just stepped out of a Nike catalogue. Her hair was pulled back into a short ponytail, and her headband matched her shoelaces. She was all class, and I suddenly felt even more red-faced and flustered by comparison.

"Thanks, Coach. I'm glad to be here." Her voice was clear and resonant.

"Now, because Keeley did not demonstrate enough 'Responsibility' in terms of being here on time," Coach said, "instead of the exciting drills I had planned, you are all going to run laps."

There was a muted chorus of groans.

I wasn't even a lap and a half around before I was drenched in sweat. You would think being from Logan, Queensland, Australia—a city wedged between the sub-tropical city of Brisbane and the beaches of the Gold Coast—that I was built for heat and humidity. However, my sandy complexion, pre-disposition to red-facedness and sweatiness were irrefutable proof that my ancestors had made a grave error when they emigrated from Scotland. My uncle's *ancestry.com* research had revealed a number of them had died of "exposure" while trying to establish farms in the outback.

This was my fourth and final year at Florida State University and I was just shy of my twenty-second birthday. I had showed enough in the under-18 comps back home, and been able to come to FSU on a coveted full scholarship for soccer.

I had managed to start the school year off on a good note, but now it looked like now I had taken a giant step backwards.

When the training session was over and we were walking back to the dorms, I fell into step with the new girl, Christine. She had managed to run more laps than anyone in the time Coach had given us.

"Hi," I began.

She didn't answer but turned her head to look at me.

“I’m Keeley.”

“Yes, I remember Coach introducing you when you arrived.” She didn’t say it, but the “...late” hung in the air.

“Uhhh, yeah. So, you’re on a scholarship?” She didn’t reply so I continued. “Me too. Full international scholarship. I’m studying marketing. How about you?”

“Sports science.”

“Oh, cool. Those guys always throw the best parties. They’re all so fit and strong though, it’s hard to keep up on the dance floor. Hey, let me know if you want me to introduce you around.” The group had stopped at one of the quads, about to disperse.

“Thanks, but I’m not here to go to parties. Just because my tuition’s free doesn’t mean I’m not going to take it seriously. And I take my soccer equally as seriously.” And with that she walked off, not waiting for anyone who might happen to be walking the same way.

* * *

A few weeks later I dropped my gym bag on the floor of the University of Virginia “Away” change room in Charlottesville. A freshman named Renee dropped hers too and sat down on the bench. She rubbed her hands up and down the tops of her thighs.

I smiled at her. “Nervous?”

She nodded and her face turned from pale to a slight tinge of green.

I sat down next to her and put my arm on her shoulder. “Hey, it’s going to be all right.”

Her eyebrows creased. “I just wish Coach wouldn’t keep going on about how we have to win this comp to make the NCAA this year. It’s been my dream since I was five to win that comp, and today’s the day I can start to make it happen.” She breathed out and gave a little shudder. “Or fuck it up entirely.”

“Can I give you some advice?”

She rested her elbows on her knees and held her head, but gave a small nod.

“Don’t try to fight your nerves. Feel them, acknowledge them—but don’t worry about them. Just go through your prep and warm-up

and listen to Coach. The extra adrenaline will supercharge your speed and endurance if you harness it and use it.”

She lifted her head and pressed her lips together in a tight smile, looking a shade more normal. “Thanks, I’ll try.”

The physio called her over and she jumped up.

“The inexperienced ones don’t need more power, they need more control.”

I hadn’t noticed Christine unpacking her bag next to me. I sighed, not caring if she heard me. “Is that so?”

She glanced sideways at me and shrugged. “I just thought if you’re going to go around offering free sports psychology it might as well be right.”

My face burned. I stood up. “What is your problem? I was just trying to make her feel better.”

She stopped rummaging and looked square at me. “In my experience, teams operate better if everyone focusses on their own performance and doesn’t mess with one another’s feelings.”

“Well, that must be very easy for you because you don’t have any!”

I picked up my bag and huffed to the other side of the changeroom, putting it down next to our team captain, Naomi, a bit harder and more noisily than I’d meant to.

“Jeez, Keeley. Save that aggro for the opposition.”

“I’m sorry, I know. It’s just that Christine is, like, the literal worst. Bloody hell. It’s like she’s a robotic prototype developed secretly to win soccer matches. But they messed up and didn’t give her any feelings, so no one will believe she’s human.”

Naomi raised an eyebrow and shook her head.

“What? The whole plan will fall over because nobody will be fooled.”

She scoffed then took me by the shoulders. “You sound nuts. Can you get your head in the game please, before your nonsense starts to distract everyone?”

I dropped my head a little. “Yes, skipper.”

“Look, Blake gets along with her just fine.” She gestured to the two of them, smiling and chatting while they used big, hot-pink bands

to stretch their shoulders. “We all get on with her just fine. You’re a senior player, so it’s up to you to help her fit in.”

The stands were filling up with people decked out in Virginia’s navy blue and orange. A watery autumn afternoon sunshine tried to break through the misty mountain clouds but couldn’t quite manage it. I was glad, because a defender’s bane is afternoon sun in the eyes which can lead to an error that, from the shady stands or coach’s box, might look completely unforced. I started my last stretches and noticed Christine shielding her eyes and looking up toward the pale sun.

She had her arm outstretched and her hand upright, fingers splayed like she was checking her manicure. I narrowed my eyes then scoffed when I realised she was estimating how long it would take the sun to dip below the roof of the western stand.

“Hey Claire. Check out Copernicus over there.” I cocked my head toward Christine.

Christine inhaled sharply and dropped her hand. Claire, our best midfielder, rolled her eyes and shook her head at me before turning away to do some deep lunges.

“The wind’s picked up,” Christine said to nobody in particular. “Defence better hope the sun drops before those clouds clear. They’ll be looking right into it in the first half.”

I scowled and looked straight up. “Forwards better...um...make sure they don’t get too distracted by chatting about the weather with all their friends and forget where the goals are.” *Ok, so not my best zinger ever, but she’s being ridiculous!*

Christine narrowed her eyes, then ran off in the opposite direction and grabbed a ball from the net bag.

* * *

Back in the change rooms I whipped my jersey off and flung it onto the floor. My throat was tight and I sat, hung my head, and took a few deep breaths.

The game had been a disaster. A few times Christine had been open in our forward half, but I always misjudged which direction she was going to take, or whether she would slow down or speed up to

evade the defence. At one stage during a corner kick she had stepped on my foot. I'd been so steamed I didn't make it back to position in time which had led to an opposition goal. Transitioning the play to our forward line had always been my strength. I couldn't get it together today and we had lost.

"Everyone," Naomi said. "Before Coach gets in here I want to say some things. That was just one game. One. We can bounce back and win the whole damn comp from here. Champions don't let setbacks knock them on their ass!"

A flicker of hope lit the oppressive darkness in my chest. I took another deep breath and tried to keep my voice steady. "Yeah, we can see this as an opportunity to learn from our mistakes."

"You better be talking about *your* mistakes."

Silence descended with a *whoomp*. Everyone looked at the speaker. Christine. Of course.

I stood and rounded on her. My hands were shaking. Blood was pounding in my ears.

She stood too.

Naomi stepped in between us and held up her hands. "Hey, hey, hey now. Keeley's not the only one who made mistakes. We live and die as a team, yeah?"

"I don't see how we're going to *learn* from our mistakes if we don't shine a spotlight on them. I would never have let Number Six past me if McGee hadn't yelled nonsense at me about running at her. Plus," she raised her chin. "My mistake didn't cost us a goal."

Now my blood roared in my ears. Never in my life had somebody come at me so aggressively. "You don't think I already feel bad enough? I own my mistake, but it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been fucking whining about some shit after the corner!"

Her eyes widened. "Sure, so your loose checking is my fault now? That's a goddamned joke, McGee!"

"You've taken every opportunity to piss me off since you got here. And why? You're a bad apple. Bad for the team!"

Her voice rose to match mine. "There's one person in this room that lost us that game, and it sure as fuck isn't—"

“Keeley, Christine! What in hell’s name is going on in here?” Coach was standing in the doorway. Silence fell with an even bigger whoomp this time.

I snapped my mouth shut. I got a flash of what Coach must have just walked in to see—me in my bra screaming about apples and throwing my arms around. I ran my hand down my face. My cheeks were red-hot.

This is not me! I had never let anyone get to me so bad. And right then it seemed like she might cost me everything.

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