SHE KEEPS SCORE · HE NEVER STAYS

Off the Glass

a Lakeside Racquet Club novel



SUSAN McDOWELL

Thinking School

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Susan McDowell is a pen name.

Heat level: closed door. This book contains kissing and romantic tension on the page; intimate scenes take place off the page.

Content note: the death of a parent (in the past, off the page), panic attacks, and an emotionally neglectful parent.

For everyone who has ever been very good at being needed,
and is still learning how to be wanted.

In padel, the wall is your friend. The ball goes past you, it hits the glass, and it comes back. You don't chase it. You turn. You wait.

— Santi Vidal, to a woman who hated waiting

PART ONE

Kitchen's Closed

☹

January – February

CHAPTER

1

Kitchen's Closed

WREN

THERE ARE THREE KINDS of people on a pickleball court at six in the morning in January: the faithful, the insane, and Bev Kowalski, who is both and also holding a thermos of something that is definitely not coffee.

"It's Irish," she tells me, before I can ask. "Which is a kind of coffee."

"It's twenty-nine degrees, Bev."

"Which is why it's Irish."

I let it go. You pick your battles with the Dinkers, and I pick mine before sunrise, when I'm strong. I have eleven of them on court six this morning, bundled in fleece and those foam earmuffs you can buy at the Walgreens on Route 21, and every one of them has had a knee or a hip or a shoulder replaced, and every one of them would take you apart at the kitchen line without spilling their thermos.

I love them so much it makes my teeth hurt.

"Okay," I say, and clap my gloves together, which makes a sad, muffled sound, like applause at a funeral. "Third shot drops. We are going to stop hitting the ball as hard as we can at Walter's face."

"He's got a big face," says Hal Dunbar.

"It's a target-rich environment," says Marjorie Dunbar, who has been married to Hal for fifty-four years and finishes his sentences like it's a sport, which, at their level, it is.

Walter Ng adjusts his hearing aids. "I have turned these off," he announces, to no one.

The mist is coming off the cove behind the fence in slow white ribbons, the way it does on cold mornings, and the lights on their poles still have that gold haze around them. Lakeside Racquet Club doesn't look like much at this hour. Eight

old courts, two of them chopped into pickleball lines, two more out at the Annex, the clubhouse with its green shutters and its sagging gutter that I have called about four times. The lake beyond, gray as dishwater.

It's mine. Not on paper. On paper it belongs to Graham Lockwood, who is sixty-nine and kind and mostly retired to a recliner in Mooresville. But I'm the one who knows which breaker trips when you run the ball machine and the snack bar fryer at the same time. I'm the one who knows Walter can't play past seven-fifteen because he takes his pills with breakfast, and that Bev pretends she can't see the line on the left side because she had cataract surgery and refuses to admit it worked.

I'm the one who's here.

I set up the drill. Dink, dink, drop. The *pock* of the balls comes back clean off the frozen air, and for ten minutes it's beautiful, just the sound and the breath steaming and Hal muttering *mine, mine, yours* at Marjorie, who ignores him and makes every shot.

That's when the man walks onto my court.

He comes in through the gate by the Annex like he owns the gate. Tall, a dark wool coat over track pants, a paper coffee cup in one hand and a duffel bag in the other. He has the kind of hair that has clearly been slept on and still looks good, which feels unfair to the rest of us. He stops at the baseline of court six, sets the duffel down, and watches Hal hit a drop shot into the net.

Then he smiles. Not at Hal. At the net. Like it told him a joke.

"Can I help you?" I call.

"Oh, no, no." His voice is warm and low and has an accent I can't place at this hour, something that rounds off the edges. "Please. Continue. I'm only watching the little game."

The Dinkers go silent. Somewhere behind me, Bev unscrews her thermos.

"The little game," I repeat.

"It's charming." He gestures with the coffee. "Like tennis, but on a patio. For people who want to play tennis but also want to talk."

Marjorie says, very quietly, "Oh, honey."

I've been doing this six years. I've heard all of it. Pickleball is for retirees. Pickleball is ping-pong standing on the table. Pickleball is ruining the neighborhood, it's too loud, it's a fad, it's what happens when tennis players give up. I've heard it from tennis dads and HOA presidents and one very drunk orthodontist at a

Christmas party. Usually I smile. Usually I say, *Come try it sometime*, and mean it.

It's 6:14 a.m. My fingers are numb. The gutter guy didn't call back.

"You play?" I ask.

He tilts his head. "Tennis? A little. Other things. Not this."

"Great." I pick up a spare paddle from the bin and hold it out, handle first. "Game to eleven. You serve."

He looks at the paddle, then at me, and his smile goes slow and pleased, like I've just offered him a second coffee. "You're sure? I don't want to embarrass you in front of your—" He looks at the Dinkers. "Team."

"They've seen worse."

"We have," says Walter, who has supposedly turned off his hearing aids. "Nineteen eighty-two. Myrtle Beach."

The man sets down the coffee. He takes off the coat. Underneath he's wearing a gray sweatshirt with no logo and no shape to it, and he moves like someone who has spent his whole life knowing exactly where his feet are. He rolls his shoulders once, swings the paddle twice to feel the weight, and something in my stomach goes cold and alert. He's not a tennis dad.

He's an athlete. A real one.

Okay. Fine. So am I.

"Underhand," I tell him. "Below the waist. Has to bounce once on each side before anybody volleys. And you can't volley in the kitchen."

"The kitchen."

I point at the seven-foot strip in front of the net. "Non-volley zone. Kitchen."

"You call it a *kitchen*." He seems delighted. "Why?"

"Nobody knows," says Hal.

"Shuffleboard," says Marjorie.

"Nobody knows," Hal says again, firmly.

He serves. It's a good serve, deep and heavy, more topspin than anybody needs on a ball with holes in it. I return it long and come in behind it, and he does exactly what every strong, fast, beautiful tennis player does the first time they play pickleball.

He tries to win the point.

He crushes the third ball at my feet. I block it into the kitchen, soft, dead, the ball barely clearing the tape and dying on the far side like a sigh. He lunges for it, gets there, gets it back, and for a second he's very pleased with himself, until he

realizes he's standing in the kitchen and I'm standing at the line, and I tap the ball past his hip so gently that it doesn't even make a sound.

"One-zero," I say. "Zero-one-two. Server number one, I mean. Never mind. One for me."

He looks down at his feet, at the line. Then up at me, and that smile flickers, curious now.

He gets the next point with pure speed. I take the next three. He's learning, visibly, he's quick and he listens to the ball, but he can't make himself hit soft. Every time I dink him into the kitchen his whole body wants to come forward and fight it, and every time he does, he ends up with his toes over the line and me tapping the ball by.

At seven-two he volleys a ball out of the air with both feet planted in the non-volley zone.

"Fault," I say.

"It was a great shot."

"It was a great shot from the kitchen."

He spreads his hands. "So?"

The Dinkers answer before I can. All eleven of them. I've trained them well.

"*Kitchen's closed!*"

He actually laughs. Out loud, head back, a big unembarrassed laugh that fogs in the air, and it is so unexpected that I almost miss the next ball.

Almost.

I win eleven-four. I'd like to say I'm gracious about it. I walk to the net and tap his paddle with mine, which is the custom, and I say, "Good game," which is the custom, and then I say, "Kitchen's closed, señor," which is not the custom, but the Dinkers expect a certain level of showmanship.

He doesn't look offended. He looks like a man who has just been handed something interesting and wants to turn it over in the light.

"Who taught you that?" he asks. "The soft ball. The—" He makes a little lifting gesture with his paddle hand.

"The dink."

"The *dink*." He says it like a word in a new language, carefully. "Who taught you?"

"Nobody. I figured it out."

"No." He shakes his head, slow. "Somebody taught you to hit very hard first. A long time. And then you taught yourself to not." He hands me back the paddle. "That's more difficult. I know."

I take the paddle. I don't say anything, because there is nothing to say to a stranger who has read the first nineteen years of your life off a drop shot in under five minutes. My heart is doing something stupid. It's the cold.

"Do you need something?" I say, finally, in my front-desk voice. "The club's members-only before eight. If you're looking for the public courts, they're at Ramsey Park, off Highway 150."

"No. I'm where I'm supposed to be." He picks up his coat, his duffel, his coffee, which must be ice by now. He takes a sip anyway and makes a face like it's tragic. "Thank you for the lesson, Capitana."

"It's Wren."

"Wren." He tries it. In his mouth it sounds like it's got an extra letter somewhere. "Like the little bird."

"Like the name."

"Like the little bird," he agrees, smiling, and walks off toward the clubhouse like he has an appointment there, which he can't, because I keep the calendar, and the only appointment on it today is mine.

— ☹ —

"So that was hot," says Priya.

She's been watching from the clubhouse deck the whole time, apparently, wrapped in a blanket she stole from the lost-and-found, with her glitter pens and the membership binder and a Pop-Tart. Priya Raman runs our events and the front desk and, in a less formal but more important sense, me. We've been best friends since ninth-grade chemistry, when she set her own sleeve on fire and I put it out with my lab partner's Gatorade.

"It was a tourist," I say. I'm stacking ball hoppers. "Some guy who wandered off the greenway."

"In a cashmere coat."

"It wasn't cashmere."

"Wren. I touch cashmere for a living. At Belk. On my days off. It was cashmere." She licks frosting off her thumb. "He looked at you like you were a pastry case."

"He looked at me like I'd embarrassed him in front of eleven senior citizens."

"Those aren't mutually exclusive." She waits. "Did you get a name?"

"No."

"Did you give a name?"

"No," I lie.

Priya just looks at me over the Pop-Tart until I go inside to check the ball machine, which doesn't need checking.

I'm not thinking about him. I'm thinking about ten o'clock.

Graham texted me last night, which Graham doesn't do. He calls. He leaves voicemails that start with *Wren, it's Graham, Graham Lockwood*, as if there are several Grahams in my life and I might confuse him with one of the others. But last night, at 9:52 p.m., my phone lit up with a text.

Can you come by the office at 10 tomorrow? Have some news. Good news I think. G.

Good news I think. I've read it maybe forty times. Graham has been saying for four years that when he finally steps back, the club will need a general manager, a real one, with a title and a salary and the authority to fix a gutter without calling him first. He's been saying, *When the time comes, Wren, it's yours. Who else would it be?*

Who else would it be.

I take out my notebook. It's red and soft at the corners and held together with a hair tie, and Priya calls it the Ledger because she thinks it's funny. It's not a diary. It's a record. Scores, mostly. Who owes who a favor. How many times the fryer breaker tripped this month. Wins and losses. I've kept one since I was eleven years old. The habit stayed after the tennis didn't.

I open it to today's date and write:

Tourist (cashmere?): 4. Calloway: 11.

Then, under it, smaller, because nobody's looking:

10 a.m. Graham. Good news (he thinks).

I underline *good news* twice. It looks needy. I close the book.

— ☹ —

At 9:58 I'm outside Graham's office door with my hair brushed and a clean Lakeside fleece on and my laptop under my arm, in case he wants to talk numbers. I have the numbers. Membership up from 361 to 410 in three years, almost entirely on pickleball. League revenue up thirty-one percent. A roof estimate. Two roof estimates, actually, because the first guy was a crook.

Graham's office smells like pipe tobacco, even though he quit in 2004, and like the dying fiddle-leaf fig that Elaine, his late wife, bought in 2019. Nobody has the heart to throw it out. Through the door I can hear him laughing, the big, wheezy laugh he only does when he's genuinely happy, and for a second I just stand there and let it fill me up. He hasn't laughed like that since Elaine.

Good news. He thinks.

I knock.

"Come in, come in!"

I open the door, and Graham is behind his desk, beaming, ruddy-faced, wearing the yellow cardigan he saves for occasions. And in the visitor's chair across from him, with his cashmere coat folded over his knee and a fresh coffee in his hand, is the tourist.

He sees me and his eyebrows go up, and then the smile comes, the slow pleased one, like he's just found out the ending of a joke he's been waiting all morning to hear.

"Wren!" says Graham. "Perfect timing. Wren, I want you to meet the future of Lakeside Racquet Club." He sweeps a big freckled hand at the chair. "This is Santi Vidal. He was the number nine padel player in the world, can you believe that? Number nine. In the world. And he's our new Director of Padel."

I stand there with my laptop under my arm and the numbers in it.

"Padel," I say.

"We're converting seven and eight," Graham says happily. "Three glass courts. The cages are already ordered. And Santi's going to live in the boathouse, in 2B, right next door to you. Isn't that fun?"

Santi Vidal, the future of Lakeside Racquet Club, the former number nine padel player in the world, stands up out of the chair and holds out his hand to me. His grip is warm and dry and absolutely steady.

"Capitana," he says. "We've met."

CHAPTER

2

Patio Game

SANTI

I DID NOT MEAN to lose to her.

I want this understood. I am a very good loser. I have lost in Madrid in front of eleven thousand people and shaken the hands of the men who beat me and meant it. I have lost to my nephew at Mario Kart. But this morning, on a frozen green court beside a lake in North Carolina, at an hour when no person in Spain would be awake unless they were coming home, I did not mean to lose to a woman in an orange beanie, eleven to four, at a game that is played with a ball that has holes in it.

It happened anyway, and afterward I laughed, standing there with my breath smoking and my knee complaining, and I could not remember the last time I had laughed with my whole chest, which frightened me more than the losing.

I had not slept. This is the truth. My body was still in Valencia, where it was lunchtime, where my mother was probably standing at the stove scolding the rice. I got off the plane in Charlotte at ten at night, took a car to a hotel near the airport that smelled of carpet cleaner, lay on the bed with my shoes on, and watched the ceiling until five. Then I put on my coat and asked the driver to bring me here early, because I wanted to see the place before it saw me.

I have a habit, with every new club, of walking the courts alone before anyone shows me around, standing on them, letting the cold come up through my shoes, and listening. My father taught me that. *A court tells you who it belongs to, Santi. You only have to be quiet.*

These courts belonged to her.

I knew it in about three seconds, because the old people in their earmuffs were looking at her the way the boys at my father's club used to look at him, the way

you look at weather, at something you do not argue with but simply accept. And she was bossing them with this flat, dry voice, no music in it at all, and still they laughed at everything she said.

So I said something stupid about a patio. I wanted to see what she would do.

What she did was destroy me.

Now I'm sitting in Graham Lockwood's office, which smells like a pipe and a sad plant, and she is standing in the door holding her laptop against her chest like a shield, and I have just called her *Capitana* again, which—I can see it in her face—was a mistake.

"We've met," she agrees. She does not take my hand.

I leave it in the air one second too long, and then I put it in my pocket as if that was always the plan. Graham does not notice, because Graham is a happy man this morning, happy in the way of my uncle Paco at weddings, before the speeches.

"Sit, sit," he says. "Wren, sit. I want to tell you both together."

She sits on the edge of the other chair like someone who might need to leave quickly. She puts the laptop on her knees and folds her hands on top of it. Her nails are short and one of them is cracked, and there are old calluses on her right palm, at the base of the fingers, too thick for this little game. A racquet made those. A long time with a racquet.

"So," Graham says. He leans back, and his chair complains. "You both know Trent's been after me."

I don't know Trent, but I nod. Wren doesn't nod. Wren has gone quiet in her whole body, the way a player goes quiet before a serve she already knows she will have to return.

"My son," Graham explains to me. "He works for a bank in Charlotte. Very sharp. Very, ah—" He makes a gesture like squeezing an orange. "He thinks it's time I stop running this place from my recliner. He's right. Doctor says the same, my blood pressure, and so on. So. We're going to hire a general manager."

Beside me, Wren breathes in, only a little, like someone standing at the edge of a cold pool who has already decided to jump.

"A real one," says Graham. "With the title. And the salary, Wren, I know, I know." He smiles at her, fond. "And I've been telling you forever it would be you."

"You have," she says. Her voice is very calm. I am starting to understand that her calm is a kind of alarm.

"And it still might be! That's the good news." Graham spreads his hands toward both of us, like a priest. "Trent thinks we need somebody with a big name.

Somebody who brings in new people, new money, the young families. And here's Santi, who was number nine in the world, and who's going to build us the first padel program within fifty miles. So I said to Trent, I said, let's not decide now. Let's decide at the Spring Classic. Memorial Day weekend. Whoever makes this club stronger between now and then—that's my general manager."

There is a silence in the office. The radiator ticks. The plant drops a leaf, I swear to God, as if it is listening.

"Between the two of us," Wren says.

"Between the two of you!" Graham beams. "Friendly competition. Good for the club. Good for everybody."

I look at her. She doesn't look at me. She looks at the photograph on the wall behind Graham, an old color picture of a much younger Graham in very short shorts beside a woman with a wide laugh and a racquet over her shoulder, under a hand-painted sign: LAKESIDE RACQUET CLUB, EST. 1979.

"Of course," she says. "That makes sense."

I know nothing about this woman, having known her for four hours, three of them jet-lagged and the fourth spent losing, but I know this much: it does not make sense to her. She has been told for a long time that something was hers, and now a man in a cardigan has handed half of it to a stranger, and she is saying *of course* in a voice like a door closing quietly so nobody hears it.

And I understand that I am the stranger.

"Mr. Lockwood," I say. "Graham. Nobody told me there would be a—" What is the word. "A competition. I came for the padel. Only the padel."

"Sure, sure. And you'll do the padel." He waves this away. "But you'll want to think about it, Santi. Director of Padel is a nice job. General manager is a career. You could put down roots here." He winks. "Your visa people would like that too, I imagine."

My visa people would very much like it, and this is the problem with kind men, that they always know exactly where you are weak and press there very gently, by accident, the way you test a bruise to see if it is still there.

"I'll think," I say.

Wren stands. She does it smoothly, like the meeting has ended because she has decided so. "I should get back to the courts. The ten-thirty ladies' clinic." She turns to me with a smile that is very polished, professional, the smile of a hotel. "Welcome to Lakeside, Mr. Vidal."

"Santi."

"I'll have Priya get you a key fob and a parking pass." She's already at the door. "And a copy of the court schedule. Which is full."

The door closes. Graham chuckles to himself.

"She'll warm up," he says. "She's like that. Wren's the best thing that ever happened to this place, you know. She just doesn't like change."

I look at the door. I think, *No. She doesn't like losing.* Which I understand better than anybody alive.

—— ☉ ——

The boathouse is at the bottom of a path made of broken white shells that crunch under my shoes like sugar. It is a long wooden building, gray-green, with the boat slips underneath full of dark water and two old canoes, and stairs on the outside going up to a deck that runs the whole length of the second floor. Two doors on the deck. 2A, 2B. Between them, a string of café lights, two chairs that do not match, a ceramic pot with a dead geranium, and wind chimes made of what looks like old tennis-racquet strings and seashells. They make a dry, bony music when the wind comes off the water.

My door is 2B. Inside, the apartment is small and clean and smells like lemon cleaner. A kitchen in the corner with a gas stove, which is a miracle in America. A couch. A bed under a slanted ceiling. A window that is almost the whole wall, looking over the cove, where the mist has burned off and the water is now the color of an old knife.

I put my suitcase on the chair by the window, the way I always do.

It's a navy hard-shell case with one wheel that squeaks and a sticker of the Valencia CF bat on the side, half peeled. I bought it in Madrid when I was twenty-two. It has been to forty countries. It has been on the chair by the window of every hotel and every rented apartment for four years, and I have not unpacked it in any of them. Not properly. I take out what I need. I put it back. The case stays open on a chair like a mouth.

Laia says this is a sickness. Laia is my sister and she is a pharmacist, so she believes everything is a sickness. I tell her it is efficiency. I tell her it is bad luck to unpack, that you are telling a place you will stay, and places hear you.

I take out my toiletries bag and a sweater. I leave the rest.

My phone buzzes with a voice note from my mother, forty-one seconds, the little preview showing only the first wave of her voice, and I know what will be in it, because it is always the same, the way the tide is always the same. *Did you*

eat. Did you arrive. It's cold there, I saw on the television. Your sister says hello. Your father would be so—

I don't play it. I put the phone face down on the counter, beside the coffee maker, which is the kind with the plastic pods. *Madre mía.* I will have to find a real coffee pot or I will die in this country.

There is a sound on the deck. Footsteps, quick, light, and then a soft tap on my door, and then the footsteps going away again, fast, like a child ringing a doorbell and running.

When I open the door, nobody is there. The heron is there—a huge gray bird standing on the end of the dock below, with a neck like a question mark, watching me with one yellow eye. It looks deeply unimpressed. On my door, held with a blue thumbtack, there is an index card.

The handwriting is small and square and pressed so hard into the card it has made dents.

BOATHOUSE — HOUSE RULES 1. Quiet hours 10 p.m. – 5 a.m. 2. Deck is shared. Chairs are first come first served. The blue chair is mine. 3. Don't feed Gerald. 4. The washer is in the slip room downstairs. Don't leave wet laundry in it. I will find you. 5. The wall is thin. — W.C., 2A

I read it twice. I look at the bird.

"You are Gerald?" I ask him.

Gerald does not answer. He does not need to. He has the expression of every man named Gerald I have ever met.

I take the card off the door instead of leaving it, for no reason I could defend in either language, and I carry it inside and prop it on the window ledge against the glass, next to the open suitcase, where I can see it from the bed. *The wall is thin.* I like that one the best. It doesn't sound like a rule. It sounds like a warning, or a confession.

I lie down on the bed in my clothes, the way I do. The ceiling slopes over me, white boards with a water stain shaped like Portugal. Through the wall, very faintly, I can hear her moving—a cabinet, water running, a drawer closing harder than it needs to.

I think about the ball dying in the kitchen. Her toes exactly on the line. Not one centimeter over. I think about her saying *of course*, and Graham saying *friendly competition*, and how in my experience there is no such thing. Not if you want something. Not if you have built it with your hands.

I know about building a thing with your hands. I know what it costs to lose it. This is the one thing I promised myself, coming here: I would not be the reason anybody lost anything again.

And I have been in the country for twelve hours.

—— ☹ ——

I sleep, finally, around eleven at night, which is five in the morning in Valencia, which is the time I have been waking up for four years.

I wake at 5:01 a.m. to the sound of what I can only describe as an airplane engine being fed rocks.

It comes through the wall, very loud and very close, and then it stops, and then it starts again with more rocks, and I sit up in the dark with my heart slamming against my ribs and my hands already cold. I think, for one second, that I am in a hotel in Buenos Aires and the sound is the crowd.

Then I hear her voice through the wall, flat and calm and only a little muffled:

"Quiet hours end at five."

It is a blender, and she is making a smoothie at five in the morning through the thin wall, on purpose, of which I am completely sure.

I lie back down on the pillow in the dark and, for the second time in twenty-four hours, I laugh with my whole chest.

Vale, Capitana, I think. *Vale.*

CHAPTER

3

House Rules

WREN

FOR THE RECORD, THE blender was not petty.

The blender was a scheduling decision. I make a smoothie every morning at five. Spinach, frozen banana, peanut butter, a scoop of protein powder that tastes like vanilla-flavored chalk. I have made this smoothie every morning at five for four years, through two blenders and a kitchen fire that was not my fault. He moved in next to a woman with a routine. That's on him.

I'm just saying I didn't have to put it on the counter by the shared wall. That was the petty part.

At 5:40 I step out onto the deck with my travel mug and my keys and my headlamp, and he's already there. In my chair.

The blue one.

He's wearing a hoodie and sweatpants and thick wool socks, no shoes, his feet up on the railing, and he's drinking something out of a tiny metal cup. On the deck boards next to him sits a little aluminum pot shaped like an hourglass, steaming, and the whole deck smells like coffee. Real coffee. Coffee like a fist.

"Good morning," he says, without turning around. "Your bird is here."

Gerald is on the end of the dock in the blue dark, a gray smudge, perfectly still. He's there every morning. He has been there every morning for two years. I named him after my seventh-grade vice principal, who stood like that outside the cafeteria.

"That's my chair," I say.

"I know. I read the rules." He holds up a finger. "First come, first served. I came first."

"Rule two says the blue chair is mine."

"Rule two contradicts itself." He finally looks over his shoulder at me. His hair is flat on one side. He looks like he slept four hours, which, if he slept next to my wall, he did. "Is it first come first served? Or is the blue chair yours? It can't be both. In Spain we would call this a legal problem."

"In America we call it a rule."

"Ah." He nods, wise, like I've explained something deep about my culture. He doesn't move. "Coffee?"

"I have coffee."

He looks at my travel mug. I made the coffee in the pod machine in 2A. It's fine. It's hot. He looks at it the way you'd look at a dog that's been left in a car.

"I have a second cup," he says.

"I'm good."

"*Vale.*" He shrugs and pours his own refill from the little pot, and the smell comes up off it, dark and nutty and a little burned, and I walk past him and down the stairs with my headlamp on, and I do not look back, and I do not regret the pod coffee, and the shells crunch under my sneakers all the way to the courts.

In the Ledger, while I'm waiting for the Dinkers, I write: *Chair: Vidal. Blender: Calloway.*

It's a tie. I hate a tie.

— ☹ —

By eight the war has a front.

"Courts seven and eight close Monday," Priya says, reading off the iPad at the front desk. "Construction crew from nine to five. And Cole says they need the Annex parking lot for the glass trucks, because the cages come in pieces. Big pieces. Like, Ikea for giants."

"How long?"

"Three to five weeks, weather permitting."

"The Thursday night league plays on seven and eight."

"I know." Priya winces. "And the Annex. Where are you going to put forty-two people?"

"Courts five and six."

"Those are booked for the Tuesday-Thursday ladder."

"Then I'll move the ladder to the morning."

"The ladder people work."

"Then I'll—" I put my hands flat on the desk. The desk is old laminate, and somebody, years ago, carved *L+E 4EVER* into the edge with a key. Lockwood plus Elaine. I always put my thumb over it when I'm upset. I don't know why. "I'll figure it out."

"You'll figure it out," Priya agrees. She's watching me. "You know you could just say this sucks."

"This doesn't suck. This is a growth opportunity."

"Okay, now you sound like a LinkedIn post."

"I'm going to go look at the schedule."

"You've looked at the schedule. You *made* the schedule. The schedule is tattooed on your—"

"*Priya.*"

"Good morning," says a warm voice behind me, and Priya's face does something I have only ever seen it do for Lin-Manuel Miranda and very good croissants.

He's showered. He's in a navy quarter-zip and dark joggers and court shoes that cost more than my car payment, and his hair is doing the thing again, and he's carrying a paper bag that smells like butter. He sets the bag on the desk between us.

"For the front desk," he says. "I found a bakery. Only a little one, on Main Street. There's a woman, she's from Lyon—"

"Colette's," Priya breathes. "You went to Colette's. Colette doesn't open until seven."

"She opened at six for me."

"Colette doesn't open early for *God*."

"I told her I was very sad and from Valencia." He smiles. He holds out his hand to Priya across the desk. "Santi."

"Priya." She shakes it like a woman being knighted. "Events and front desk. And chaos. You've met Wren."

"I've met Wren," he says. "She beat me eleven-four and then woke me up at five with a weapon."

"It's a blender," I say.

"It was a weapon of the war crime kind."

"We have rules about that. They're on your door."

"They were on my door," he says. "I took them inside. For study."

Priya looks from him to me and back with an expression of such pure joy that I want to put the bakery bag over her head.

"So," Priya says. "Santi. Do you want the tour? The official tour? I give a very good tour. Wren gives a terrible tour, she just points at things and tells you their maintenance history."

"That's useful information," I say.

"It's a tour, not an inspection."

"I'd love the tour," Santi says. "But first I need to talk to Wren about courts."

He turns to me, and he's not smiling now, not exactly. He looks almost careful. Like a man who knows he's stepped onto somebody else's lawn.

"Graham says the Thursday league is on seven and eight," he says. "I'm sorry. I didn't know when he made the plan. I can ask the crew to start on the Annex side and leave seven and eight until—"

"The Annex is the second-busiest part of the club."

"Then we start on eight and leave seven. You keep one court."

"One court is not enough for forty-two people."

"Then we put some on tennis. Four tennis courts, there's nobody on tennis at night in the winter, I looked—"

"You *looked*?"

"I walked the courts. It's a habit." He tips his head. "Jonah, the tennis pro—he told me Thursday nights are dead in January. Tape some lines on courts one and two. Temporary. I'll help."

"You can't just tape pickleball lines on tennis courts."

"Why not?"

I open my mouth. I close it. You can, actually. People do it all the time. I've done it. I've *proposed* doing it, to Graham, three winters in a row, and he always says the tennis members would riot.

"The tennis members will riot," I say.

"Jonah says there are four tennis members who still come in winter, and three of them are in Florida."

Priya makes a small noise, like a teakettle starting.

I pick up the iPad. I look at the schedule I made. It's beautiful. It's color-coded. It took me six hours over Christmas. I could fix it in twenty minutes with courts one and two, and he knows that, and he knows that I know it, and he's standing there in his expensive shoes being reasonable at me.

"I'll think about it," I say.

"Okay." He nods. He picks up a croissant out of the bag and holds it out to me. "Breakfast?"