

***Queen's Club Championships, 1984.***

“Oh, for *fuck's* sake, mate! Hit the ball properly!”

Across the court from Dave, the 16-year-old kid flinched. Well, it was funny to say kid, since he couldn't have been more than a year or two younger than Dave. He hadn't bothered to learn the kid's name - he was just the poor sacrificial junior that the tournament had given Dave after all the other competitors refused to hit with him.

“I'm sorry, Dave!” The kid called out, although Dave barely noticed. He could swear that Dvorak, on the next practice court, had that same maddening smirk on his face as he watched this whole shitshow unfold. He'd brushed past Dave in the locker room earlier, with the same look of contempt in his eyes that the posh types used to give him at the tennis clubs in Melbourne. Well, fuck him.

He gritted his teeth and returned his attention to his hitting partner. Dave tossed the ball in the air, drawing his right shoulder back, and sent the ball rocketing across the net. It ricocheted right off the far fence. The kid stood there like a deer in headlights, clutching his racket like a lifeline.

“It's *useless*, mate! It's useless!” Dave slammed his racket straight down onto the wet grass. The *thwack* echoed around the courts. Over to his left, he caught sight of McEnroe shaking his head at Connors. Pot, meet kettle. “Fuckin' forget it! There's no point!” He spun on his heel, grabbing his racket bag and slinging it over his shoulder as he muttered under his breath. “What kind of fuckin' tournament is this? Can't give me someone who can return my bloody serve!”

He pointedly stared down at his shoes on the long walk back to the locker room, desperately trying not to make eye contact with the other players. Maybe he'd gotten lucky when Noah agreed to hit with him on the first day, but then the Frenchman had gone and lost in the first round. Now Dave was alone, like a kid at a brand new school. It *sucked*.

He'd mustered up the courage to ask Wilander earlier, but he was “busy” in his polite, Swedish way. Yeah, right. Dvorak? Forget it. And Connors was a much bigger asshole than he'd imagined. He was a Slam winner, for fuck's sake. Just as good as the rest of them. And *this* is how they treated him?

“*Hej.*”

Dave nearly walked into the stranger. “What do you want?”

“Do you want to practice?” He was almost the same height as Dave - tall, and lean, tousled blond hair falling across his forehead. His tennis whites gleamed in the weak English sun. Probably one of the million Swedes they had on tour.

“Why? Did you lose a bet or somethin’?” Part of Dave wanted to brush past him and retreat to the locker room.

“No. I saw you play in the first round. I like your style.” The Swede spoke matter-of-factly. Clipped. Direct.

“Why?”

“What? *Why*?” He almost laughed. “I don’t know, do I need to do an interview to hit with you?”

Dave, belatedly realizing the ridiculousness of his question, found himself smiling. “No, not really. Sorry, uh, I’m just not used to people wanting anythin’ to do with me.” He extended his hand. “I’m Dave, but you can call me Davo. Everyone does.”

“I know who you are. Everyone knows who you are.” The Swede returned with a firm handshake. “Leo. Leo Kristensen. You can call me... Leo.”

“Are you new on the tour?” Dave didn’t know why, but it instantly felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He unclenched his fists, the tension melting away from the rest of his body.

“No, not new. Just not famous.” Leo shrugged. It didn’t seem to bother him. Fat lot of good being famous did for Dave, anyway.

“Well, the famous ones are the assholes anyway. Ask me how I fuckin’ know.”

“Ah, don’t mind them. They’re not sure what to think about you.”

“They’ll know what to think when I win this whole bloody thing.”

Leo gave him a half-smile. Dave didn’t know how to read it. Encouragement? Skepticism? At least it wasn’t contempt. “Sure.” That was all he said, as they made their way back down to the practice court.

“Can you keep up with me, Leo?” He set his racket bag back down, looking over to make sure that Dvorak saw him this time. “I just sent this poor junior runnin’ for his life because he couldn’t return. I reckon I oughta go and apologize to him later, actually...” He ran a hand through his sweaty ginger hair. He did feel bad, but not bad enough to apologize right then and there.

“Of course I can.” Leo’s accent actually made Dave want to laugh, the way he spoke English in an almost sing-song way. “You will see.” He had a methodical way of setting up his bottles on the table, each one neatly labelled in elegant cursive. Dave was lucky if he remembered to bring his hydration.

“We’ll see about that.” Dave flashed his newfound friend (friend?) a cheeky smile. He returned to the baseline, now sure that Dvorak was looking, and stood up taller. If Dvorak wanted a show, he’d get one. He sent the same rocket-speed serve flying towards Leo. It came cruising back over the net as if Leo was just hitting around at the country club.

Game on. Dave returned, cracking the ball back and dashing towards the net. A volley, and then - Leo’s point.

That was more like it. “Mate, I’m impressed!” He called.

“It’s nothing.” Leo fiddled with the strings on his racket. “Told you I could manage.”

The two men eased into a rhythm of rallies and volleys, each of them studying the other as a potential opponent, as pros often did. Somehow, Leo always found a way to get to the ball, no matter what Dave did. The rush of adrenaline coursed through Dave as he rushed back and forth across the grass, trying his best to get his racket on every return.

By the end of it, both men were breathing hard, but Dave couldn’t wipe the grin off his face. “Thanks, mate.” He panted, shaking Leo’s hand across the net. “I felt like I was actually playin’ a real match there.”

“You play like you’re really playing a real match.” Leo observed. He was smiling, too, and not the polite, detached smile that Wilander had given him.

“I reckon it’s just my style.” Dave ran a towel through his sweaty hair. “Well, thanks again. You were a great help.”

“No problem.” Leo grabbed his racket bag, ready to head back to the locker room. He turned on his heel, then paused again. “Hey. I’m going to eat some dinner after this. Last year, I was here and this guy showed me a really nice pub. Do you want to come?”

Dave froze. He was glad the towel hid most of his face, but he couldn’t conceal the way his eyes widened at the invitation. “Um-” He’d already mentally resigned himself to another night of room service and watching mindless drivel on the TV by himself. “Uh, sure. Thanks.”

Leo only responded with a small nod, before continuing on his way. Dave watched his departing figure until he was out of sight.

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“Yeah, it’s my first time in London. I like it, though. It reminds me of home in a lot of ways.” Dave mumbled through a mouthful of fish and chips. He’d been really glad that Leo had brought him along to this pub, with its familiar carpets and comforting smell of cigarette smoke. It was almost like home, although the pub was probably older than the nation of Australia itself.

“I like Melbourne. I always wish I had more time to see it when I’m there to play the Open, but it’s so hot in December. This-” Leo gestured to the grey drizzle outside the window. “This is more like home.”

“Oh, mate. The heat is the worst part. And I’m a bloody ginger from Australia. It’s God’s idea of a sick fuckin’ joke.” He pointed at his sunburnt skin. “I’m not fuckin’ laughin’.”

Leo barked with laughter, throwing his head back. It took Dave by surprise, the way his laugh was so at odds with the rest of his put-together image. “Yeah. I guess I never thought about that.”

“You know, I’d never been out of the country until a few months ago. Till I won. I flew here in first class. It was fuckin’ awesome, mate! Had all these gorgeous flight attendants waitin’ on my every need. Champagne all the way. Slept like a baby.”

“Well, I’ve never flown first class before.” Leo dug into his shepherd’s pie. “Just in business. I think first class, it’s a bit too much.”

“Really? Yeah, nah, it’s great. I’ll never fly any other way again.” Dave beamed with excitement. “Say-” He looked around, suddenly conspiratorial, and lowered his voice as he leaned across the table. “You find the sheilas come runnin’ now? Since you’ve been on tour?”

“Sheila? Who is Sheila?” Leo raised an eyebrow.

“No-” Dave broke into laughter. “Sorry. A sheila is just... a girl. That’s what we say in Australia. It’s been great. I used to not even get a second look, and now they can’t get enough of me!”

“Oh!” There came that barking laugh again. “No. I have a girlfriend back home.”

“Oh.” Dave’s enthusiasm dimmed slightly. “Good on ya, then.” A pause, then the cheeky grin returned. “Is she hot?”

Leo cackled. “I don’t know how to answer that question.”

“Well, what’s she like?”

“Her name’s Annika.” A cheesy smile came over his face. “I think I’ll marry her.”

“*Married?* Mate, how old are you? Nineteen? That’s like leavin’ the party at 7 o’clock!”

Leo shrugged. “I don’t think it’s like that. She understands me very well. And she doesn’t complain about all this.” He was quiet for a moment, staring out at the drizzle. He looked homesick, the way his eyes got a bit vacant, in a way that Dave could never understand. “She’s a teacher. She doesn’t know *anything* about tennis. It’s great.”

“Ah, my brother’s a teacher, too. He practically raised me. Good old Mark.”

“Oh, really? He’s in Melbourne?”

“Yeah. My old man died when I was really young, and my mum wasn’t much good with all of us kids. You know, I’ve got seven siblings. Seven! It was a fuckin’ madhouse, but we had fun. Thank fuck for Mark being the one who had his shit together.” A pause. “He reminds me a bit of you, actually.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Yeah.” Dave nodded, still munching on his fish and chips. “It is.”

Leo nodded as well, and a comfortable silence settled over the two. Dave could tell that Leo’s thoughts had wandered elsewhere - probably to Annika. He didn’t understand it, but the guy seemed happy, so whatever.

“Hey, Leo?” He began, hesitant. “Can I ask you somethin’?”

“Sure.” Leo twirled the nearly-empty pint of Guinness around on the table absentmindedly.

“Why are you nice to me?”

Leo stopped and looked up. “What kind of a question is that?”

“No, I mean-” Dave fumbled for the words, picking at the label on his beer bottle. “Just - I feel like no one likes me. And you’re so nice, why? Are you playin’ a prank? Did one of the Swedish blokes put you up to it?”

“Dave.” Leo’s voice got low. “I like the way you play, and you make me laugh. That’s all. There’s nothing else. It’s not a prank.” He leaned back in his seat. “Now relax. It’s not like everyone is out to get you all the time. They’re too busy with their own life.”

“Yeah, right on, mate.” Dave sat back as well, maybe not entirely satisfied with the answer, but it was good enough for now.