

EXCERPT FROM THE CHOSEN ONES BY LISA LUCIANO

Robby sat with his sneakers jammed against the seat in front of him. He'd picked the twelfth row in the center section of the arena that was now empty and silent, just about where his parents would have been sitting. He didn't hear the soft footsteps approaching, but soon became aware of the fact that a woman had crept up from behind. Her perfume preceded her. As he inhaled the scent of jasmine, his sensory memory sent a signal to his brain. Brigitta.

"How did you know I'd be here?" he asked, choosing not to look at her as she entered the row.

"Where else would you be?"

"She knew him too well."

"So, did you tear me limb from limb on every TV in the world?"

"I wanted to," she said, now only inches away as she turned to face him. "I tried to picture it in my mind. But then I thought about how beautiful your body is."

She leaned her spongy buttocks against the back of the next row and stroked his leg with her hand. The feel of it next to mine...

"Don't," he said, dropping his feet on the floor and sitting up straight.

She slipped into the seat beside him.

"Tell me you don't want me. That you never did."

"Things have changed," he said.

She took that as a small victory. He hadn't denied that he'd had feelings for her at some point. It was the opening she was hoping for. She sat back. Together, they stared at the frozen white oval before them. He couldn't see her smiling, but he could feel it just as he used to. Her emotions radiated from her.

"I still remember the first time I saw you," she said. It was at a World Championship years ago in Budapest. I had never seen such determination on someone's face before."

"I went there to win," he said with the same intensity he'd shown back then.

"I always wondered if you simply didn't know you weren't the chosen one, or if you were just too stubborn to give in and accept it."

She waited for a response. There was none. Afraid he would bolt, she continued, hoping to hold him there with the sound of her deep, velvety voice.

"As you headed for the ice I thought, who is this little boy who thinks he can take on the world?"

"I was eighteen," Robby said, indignantly.

"You were a child. Until you skated. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Suddenly, you were strong and so sure of yourself. And so I waited. Then finally, one day I looked up and you were a man. A man I could love. A man who made me laugh. A man who was not afraid to tell me the truth."

She took his hand in hers. He rubbed his thumb across her delicate white fingers, back and forth like a metronome, lulling her into a warm, safe place, if only in her mind.

"Can you tell me the truth?" he asked.

"If that's what you want."

"Juergen. What really happened?"

She pouted. He'd always found the way her bottom lip jutted out irresistible, but at that moment he felt nothing.

"I don't understand why you care," she said.

"I don't understand why you don't."

"Fine," she said, pulling her hand away. "You want to know? I slept with him. Once. I would have done anything that would have allowed us to be together."

"So you did the one thing that could tear us apart."

She sensed him slipping away. Again.

"You once told me that your deepest fear was letting the world see that you are not perfect."

Robby felt a knife tearing into his guts. How could she use something so personal against him? He wouldn't stop her. No one could.

"If you want to torture yourself, go ahead. But you have no right to place such a burden on me or anyone else. Being human and making mistakes gives me the passion I show in my performances. You might want to try it sometime, Robert."

She hesitated and scanned his face. She had lost him.

"I make no apologies. I did what I had to," she said.

His gaze slowly met hers.

"So did I," he said, not backing off an inch.

Neither wanted to stay, but neither could make their bodies move. They were so deep in their own thoughts, they didn't notice that someone had been watching from the back, but had left.

"Why do you call me that?" he asked.

"What?"

"Robert. No one else does."

"Because that's how I see you. Robert is a man. Courageous. Confident. Robby is a frightened child who allows himself to be told what to do and who cares what everyone thinks."

Now he could never tell Brigitta that the reason he referred to her by her nickname was not out of affection, but because it was a way to take her down off the pedestal. Brigitta Besch was a champion. Brigitta was simply the woman who shared his bed.

"You blame me for what happened," she said.

"Not anymore."

"Once we lost the tour, what was I to do? Hire myself out as entertainment for children's birthday parties?"

"You could've made plenty of money in professional competitions."

"Which ones? Only those controlled by WTL."

"You were still good enough to reinstate."

"To what end? I have nothing left to prove. I have my gold medal."

He knew she didn't mean to hurt him. It was just her way of expressing herself. Always direct to the point of being brutal.

"You didn't have to go with WTL," he insisted.

"And Glenn," she added. "Isn't that what's really bothering you? That I shared the ice with him on his tour."

"Not the way we did."

“No. It could never be that way with anyone else,” she admitted.

“You were so strong.”

“And facing reality makes me weak?”

“No. It just means you’re someone I can’t trust.”

Brigitta nodded, then stood slowly. She wouldn’t cry in front of him as she had many times before without fear.

“Wait,” Robby said.

Her heart jumped as she dared to hope there was still a chance.

“There’s something you should know about the people you work for... and what really happened to Juergen.”