

LOVE GAME
Season 2011

m.b. gerard

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LOVE GAME

Season 2011

by M.B. Gerard

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For R.L.

*Shout-outs
to Dory Turner for everything,
to Catherine Prendergast,
to Stevo, Sian-Marie and Ariane.*

PROLOGUE	2
READY? PLAY!	8
MOTHER'S FINEST	26
EAVESDROPPING ON THE HEART	40
REVELATIONS	57
A CHANGE IS GONNA COME	73
KEEPING UP WITH THE JANUSES	90
AD VENTURES AND BREAK POINTS	109
WHEN IN ROME... FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
DE POINT EN POINT FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
SERVING A LOVE GAME FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
ON A SECRET MISSION FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
DOG & FOX FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
LET'S HAVE A BALL FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
DOUBLE TROUBLE FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
BENEATH THE MOON AND UNDER THE SUN FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
BETWEEN THE LINES FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
BREAK, MAKE AND HOLD FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	
HAVE YOUR BODY SERVE AND EAT IT, TOO FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT DEFINIERT.	

WALKING A FINE LINE
DEFINIERT.

FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT

BLOOD, PUNCH AND TEARS
DEFINIERT.

FEHLER! TEXTMARKE NICHT

PROLOGUE

The Tampa airport looked magnified in its clean emptiness. As always at 4 a.m., Elise Renard thought. Nothing to worry about. She knew it was only the silent terminal and its covered-up restlessness that triggered her own concealed agitation. She wished to push it away like she pushed the trolley in front of her but she couldn't help feeling the undeniable inanity of her doings. Again she set out for another season on the tennis tour. Again she set out for another attempt to get back where she used to be when she made a splash in the tennis world two years ago.

Get back to where you belong. Rick Salieri, her mentor, had tried to drum the words into her head during the off-season weeks she had spent at his tennis academy, but Elise wasn't so sure anymore if she could make it back, let alone to the very top. During the time she was away nursing her knee all her peers had been making huge steps up the ranking, while she had to witness her ranking tumbling down week after week. But she hadn't given up when the doctors had told her the bad news. Instead she had worked meticulously to get her body in shape again, and as soon as the doctors gave her the word she had begun training with the same burning ambition and focus as she had before her injury. Of course, she could get back to the top. She hadn't lost any of her skills or her drive. She only had to win some matches along

the way to get back where she belonged and this had proven to be rather difficult since she had started on the tour again in October.

As often as she had repeated Rick's words over the last months like an old mantra something else had begun to occupy her mind. A tiny fact which – apparently and strangely enough – seemed invisible to everyone else. However, she herself was well aware of it. Slowed down by her knee injury she had enough time during long hours of physiotherapy and involuntary idleness to get a clearer picture of herself. The injury time-out had triggered a new self-awareness, and yet she didn't know what to do with this new-found clarity, nor the following turmoil of emotions that now lurked around every corner of her soul.

This odd feeling of belonging nowhere, her inability to win more than two matches in a row as well as the nagging thought that she might get injured again had driven a small, yet painful thorn into her optimism. After witnessing her ranking drop below the Top 100 and finding herself in the chasms of challenger tournaments, she dreaded the thought that another injury might end her tennis ambitions for good.

She also thought about her parents who had given up so much so she could pursue her dreams and who both worked hard for her success. She gave the trolley another angry push. No, she wouldn't let her doubts get the better of her. Instead she would get back where she belonged and she would prove to herself that she could make it. Not just on the tennis court – but in life. Because her tennis career could be over in a second and there was a part of her soul that was craving for new experiences which had nothing to do with fuzzy, yellow balls. She had to be open to adventure. And why shouldn't she give it a go, if a chance ever came along? Suddenly she felt excited about the new year. She turned around to her parents who walked behind her pushing an additional trolley with several huge bags piled on top of it. They had stopped in front of the security gate.

“Don't get pouched by a kangaroo,” Elise's mother said. When she stroked over Elise's long blonde hair and hugged her tightly, Elise already began to miss her. Her mother would stay at

home in Florida and would join them later when the tour hit American soil again in Indian Wells.

“No,” Elise mumbled, fighting back tears. Then she broke free of the embrace and quickly turned to the waiting security officer. Behind the security gate she turned around to look at her parents. They were saying good-bye to each other outside the gate. Elise had nobody to smile at like that, and at this moment she realized she wanted someone to smile at with all her heart.

“Only five minutes,” Candice Crantz chirped, winking at Paola Scetti who had opened the door of the bleak room Candice was setting up as her office at the Brisbane tournament. Before the TV journalist could apologize for her late arrival Candice waved her in.

“Sorry, you need to settle for the window sill,” Candice sighed. “They haven’t brought my chairs yet.” In two days the communications manager’s little office would be buzzing and the printer running hot with press releases and information sheets but right now it looked like a storage room for cardboard boxes.

Spreading her arms, Candice presented a lonely table stacked with copy paper she had already unpacked along with her laptop, then she walked over to open the window to the backside of the tournament building. The regular sound of racquets hitting balls drifted over from the practice courts and mingled with the humming sound of the building’s ventilation system. A few players were chatting in the sun behind the players’ lounge while waiting for their turns on the practice courts.

With a loud sigh Candice turned away from the window and sat down next to Paola on the window sill. Her day had been stressful and hectic so far and it was far from over. In the morning she had arranged the furniture for the press conference room and had instructed the Australian volunteers who were assigned to the backstage and press area.

She then had time to get back to one of her freelancers who had tried to reach her all morning. Archie was scheduled to join them in a week in Sydney and then travel with the tour for most of the year doing short video tidbits and fun interviews with the players. But what he had to say wasn't making Candice's day any better.

"I'm going to be a dad!" he had blurted into the phone. Dutifully, Candice had congratulated the enthusiastic video producer but had anticipated the bad news that followed on the spot.

"I can't possibly go on with the tour," Archie had explained. And that was that.

Candice offered Paola a bottle of cold water and told her the news.

"Now I need to find another adventurer who's willing to join this erratic life," she moaned. Paola nodded heavily. Traveling with the tennis tour to exotic and mostly sunny places sounded intriguing at first but the never-ending life on the road between tournament sites, hotel rooms and airports could wear you out easily.

"You don't happen to know someone who's capable of producing these videos and uploading them to the web, and who's generally nice so I can let him loose on the players?" Candice asked Paola. After the bad surprise the TV journalist was the only person Candice could come up with quickly who might know someone with the skills to take Archie's spot.

"Someone who could start on short notice?" she added carefully, knowing full well that she would rather live to see Paola arriving on time than get a new video producer until Sydney. Candice observed Paola take a large sip from the bottle while she was thinking of a solution.

Finally, Paola opened her mouth. "I actually might know someone."

Looking outside the airplane window Elise watched the sun rise over the airport field. While other passengers were edging through to their seats, her father stuffed the last item of luggage into the overhead compartment and sitting down next to her he squeezed her right shoulder. She gave him a quick smile but then turned back to the window. The plane began to roll on the tarmac and for a while Elise tried to listen to the flight attendant's safety instructions. But knowing them by heart she fell back into brooding.

She needed distraction from her wandering thoughts, and as soon as the plane was airborne Elise got up and pulled out her trolley case from the baggage compartment. But the moment she opened her suitcase she felt her heart skip a beat. Elise was looking at two carefully packed heaps of training shorts and tops. Apparently she had mixed up her bags at the counter and had checked-in the trolley case with her hand luggage.

What had she been thinking? Well, she didn't know anymore what she'd been thinking. She sighed. She couldn't even tell what went wrong and why. How could she expect to win any matches if she was distracted so easily by – well, by what exactly? She didn't know.

Now her hand luggage with her laptop, her books and clothes to change into were buried in the airplane belly. Sheepishly she closed the lid again, about to haul the bag up to the luggage compartment when she felt something bulky in the front pocket. She opened the zipper and pulled out a copy of *Tennis Nurse*.

Agnes, her friend from France, had lent her the cheesy novel two months ago at the end of her last tournament. Elise had begun reading it around Christmas time and had found the writing awfully over the top and the characters unbearably corny. After five pages she had given up, left it underneath the bed and had forgotten about it. This morning, just when she was about to switch off the lights in her bedroom, leaving it tidy and quiescent for the next month, she remembered the book Agnes had gone into raptures about. The older player might decapitate her with a furious swing of her racquet if she didn't get her book back. In a

hurry Elise had grabbed it from under the bed and had stuffed it into the next best suitcase.

Now she had nothing else to do during a fifteen hour journey to Australia. She took a look at the front cover again. *Tennis Nurse and The Girl Who Preferred The Grass*. This was ridiculous. Who would write such nonsense? The author's name was clearly a pseudonym and it was probably the best two words this woman had ever come up with. Elise chuckled. She opened the first page and began to read.

READY? PLAY!

Perth, Australia

Lynn Pebblestone made her way down the stairs of the arena and took a look around. The roof reminded her of a giant bubble, as if they were about to play tennis in an inflated balloon. Entering through the gate at the bottom, Lynn stepped onto the court to inspect the high umpire's chair that would be her work place for the next week. She was still quick up and down the ladder when necessary, even at sixty-two. Usually people thought she was younger and except during the Grand Slams she didn't bother to dye the few treacherous grey hairs which had been teasing her for a couple of years now.

On the other side of the court two players and their teams were packing their bags having just finished a practice session. Lynn waved to them and they waved back with smiles on their faces. She enjoyed the respectful, friendly relationship between the umpires and the players, even though they mostly stuck to their respective groups.

The beginning of the season had a special flair to it which Lynn cherished and which reminded her of her own

beginnings on the tour back in the 1980s. The excitement of the players getting out on the court again was palpable. After weeks of grinding practice and fitness exercise the girls displayed the skittishness of racing horses. Lynn enjoyed seeing them flocking in one by one. It felt like they were hitting the road to a summer camp. It was in fact a ten-month summer camp moving all around the world and all of the players – some more than others – had a moment when they let loose and misbehaved exactly like the young folks they were. Behind the scenes of the players’ parties, where the cameras were not allowed to roll, was the place where the good stories originated.

It was these stories that kept the summer camp alive and buzzing. Moreover, they were the natural resource for the Love Game, as it was called. Lynn and most other umpires played it every year. They would pick several players and guessed who they would end up with. Every umpire had four guesses, the Grand Slams of the Love Game. Over the years Lynn had made it to her very own No. 1 ranking having won the title thirteen times. She was the queen of the Love Game.

The name was, of course, a play on words as a love game in tennis had nothing to do with the emotion. It was simply a game which the server was able to win without losing a point – or as Lynn would say ‘win at love’. ‘Love’ for tennis people was nothing but a number, meaning zero.

This year she had already placed her bets for the 2011 season and even though she had chosen a combination of players that were highly unlikely to ever make it she would chance it. If she was right and no other umpire had made the same pick it could be another successful year for her.

No risk, no fun, Lynn thought and quickly climbed up the high chair.

Oh, damn that bladder.

Amanda Auster pushed open the door to the bathroom, glad to find nobody inside, and leapt into the nearest stall. With a little sigh she dropped her training clothes and sank onto the toilet seat. Of course, nothing happened. The sun, the earth, the water in the shower – everything on this continent moved in the wrong direction. It was only natural that her bladder seemed to stop working properly when playing in Australia. It only *felt* like she had to pee. And that feeling would stop as soon as she went through the tunnel and onto the court. It always did.

The door opened with a bang.

“ – can’t believe he brought his girlfriend!” a high-pitched British voice disturbed the peace. “Since when does he have a girlfriend?”

That was Robyn Lawrence, an up and coming youngster Amanda occasionally hit balls with but besides that considered too young and immature to hang out with. Robyn did have a good forehand though.

“He didn’t in November,” a calmer voice with a heavy KGB accent answered. Amanda had to grin. Tamara Parova was a nice person off the court but she spoke with a nasty Russian accent and had a terrifying presence on court. No wonder Amanda’s bladder was going haywire – she had to play Tamara tomorrow. As she didn’t want to meet her next opponent in the bathroom, Amanda decided to wait until the two girls had left again. But they didn’t enter the stalls.

“I so know that my prospects of having a grand Hopman Cup are going down the drain rapidly,” Robyn exclaimed and opened the tap as if to underline her point. “Why is she so beautiful and sweet? And funny? And nice?”

“You talked to her?”

“Are you joking?” Robyn snorted. “I don’t even know her name. I don’t even care! I only saw her from the distance. She looked perfect.” She spit out the last words. “They were giving a joint interview.”

“How disgusting!” Tamara mocked the young Brit. Amanda suppressed a chuckle and cocked her ears to hear

Robyn's answer through the stall wall and the running water but apparently the young player had missed the tease.

"And why must there be a terrible, red pimple on my nose?" she said more to herself than to Tamara. "And not to mention the horrible green dress from yesterday. Why did they make me wear that for the party?"

"Yes," Tamara admitted. "The wardrobe assistant must have been color blind. It really was an abomination against your brown hair and light skin."

"I know, right? This really is the outback and everything is so backward," Robyn sighed. "And I have no idea how to endure a whole press conference next to Teddy."

Ted Curry. Amanda silently cursed herself for not having left the cubicle when the two other girls had entered the bathroom. Ted Curry definitely wouldn't get her off the toilet any time soon, as he was a subject most female players never grew tired chatting about – for hours. The twenty-four year old Brit was the No. 8 player of the ATP tour, but more important for most girls was the fact that he possessed masterful dancing skills and a radiant smile. He was quite dashing with his dark hair, Amanda had to admit, and although she rarely gave thought to dashing young men even she could understand Robyn's initial excitement to play on the same team with Ted – and her subsequent disappointment after finding out that Ted had found himself a girlfriend.

Contrary to most other tournaments, the Hopman Cup, held in Perth in the first week of the season, was a team competition. Eight teams, each consisting of a female and a male player of the same country, competed first in a group stage against each other, and lastly in a final. In every round two singles matches and one mixed doubles match were played. Receiving an invitation for the prestigious mixed event was considered an honor.

"I really thought we could have a wonderful time together," Robyn lamented. "I thought he could take me out one night."

Amanda knew that Ted had quite a reputation and Australia seemed to bring out the worst in him – which probably promised a really good time in Robyn's book.

With a loud bang the door opened again, causing Tamara to yelp a little and thankfully bringing Robyn back to her pimply reality.

“Robyn, are you coming?” an Australian girl asked. “The press conference will be starting in five minutes.”

“Just a second,” the British player begged, and the door was closed again.

“God, is she getting paid by the tennis federation to ruin my rare moments of quietude?” Robyn moaned. Tamara giggled.

“Constantly sporting a big, sunny smile. How I hate sunny, smiling twenty-something girls from Australia! I heard Ted's new girl is from Melbourne,” Robyn explained to Tamara.

So Ted Curry's girlfriend would probably be around for the whole Australian Open which started in two weeks. A nightmare for Ted's female fans, Amanda concluded.

“I was dreaming of going to a dance with him,” Robyn continued, and Amanda closed her eyes in desperation. If this adoration marathon continued she'd probably fall asleep in the stall – with her pants down! How embarrassing that would be for Amanda, the Australian home favorite. But before Robyn's puppy love babbling could drowse Amanda even more another knock from the sunny, smiling Australian who escorted Robyn out of the bathroom saved Amanda from a sleepy fate.

Whether the injury was serious or not the physiotherapist couldn't tell yet. But the ankle was swollen like a balloon and it didn't look like it should bear the slightest weight.

Elise Renard was sitting in the small infirmary next to the center court and observing the clock above the door. When would a doctor come and give them a diagnosis?

It had happened during their practice. They were trying out different combinations and doubles tactics when her German partner Christoph Franke had made a quick step backwards to reach for a ball flying over his head. He tried to smash it, jumped up a little and swung his racquet – and thereby twisted his right ankle. Sitting down on the ground immediately he had reached out for his foot and carefully moved the joint. When he finally looked up to Elise and his coach he had a desperate look in his eyes. Sometimes a player just knew without the expertise of a doctor that the injury was serious. Elise's heart had sunk. Not only because she knew how Christoph had to feel as she had experienced it herself, but also because a serious injury meant that Christoph wouldn't be able to play the tournament. What would she do then, as this was a team competition?

After waiting another five minutes she finally got up and walked into the treatment room where Christoph was lying on a bench. He was covering his face with his hands and his coach was pressing a bag of ice against his injured ankle.

"How does it feel?" Elise asked her partner, hoping that her words sounded cheerful. Christoph lifted his hands and managed to give her a quick smile. But his voice was shaking.

"Terrible," he answered.

Elise stayed silent. They hadn't even played a match yet as they were scheduled for the next day along with the Russians and the team from the United States. And the Australian team. She had seen Amanda and Angus on the practice courts this morning but she couldn't work up the courage to talk to them – or Amanda, as she didn't know Angus. It had been a while now since she had talked to Amanda. And what should she say? The Australian probably couldn't remember her anyway.

In that moment a doctor came in and Elise decided it was best to leave the room again. She gave Christoph a little pat on the shoulder and walked to the door, only to bump into the tournament director who rushed into the infirmary with a very worried look on his face.

“Time,” Lynn said. Sitting high above the court the chair umpire pressed the button of the microphone while Yelena Kovalenko from the Ukraine and Sasha Mrachova of the Czech Republic got up from their chairs and headed to the baselines.

Yelena was a crafty left-hander who was able to exasperate opponents with her tricky lefty serve and to come to the net to finish the points in magnificent fashion. She also never failed to provide some drama, amusing the audience whenever she asked for ludicrous challenges with the electronic review system. When a player believed a call by the line judges had unjustifiably gone against them they could challenge it – and Yelena was so often wrong that Lynn sometimes wondered whether the Ukrainian had problems with her eyesight. Whenever an electronic review had gone against her Yelena raised her hands to her forehead in utter disbelief and began to lament and look at the roof. Not only the spectators enjoyed the entertainment, Lynn too loved the excitement, even though her face never revealed her delight when Yelena threw one of her tantrums over a bad challenge.

The players got ready at the baselines and a quick look at the players’ teams confirmed that none of the coaches tried to give the players forbidden hints or advice. Only Yelena’s teammate and doubles partner, Alexandr – and her new boyfriend as some sources had whispered – made three quick claps with his hands. Encouragement was within the rules and much needed. Yelena had already lost the first set and the score in the second set indicated that the match could be over soon. Unfazed by Yelena’s serve Sasha Mrachova had broken the Ukrainian’s service twice and was leading now by 5-2.

Lynn watched Sasha giving the ball boy her towel and accepting the balls he handed her. The Czech was only twenty-five years of age but considered already a veteran player as she had won two Grand Slam tournaments so far. However, it was four years now since she had won her last major title. After

nagging shoulder injuries her serve was past its prime and most experts would have said, so was she.

As Sasha always took her time choosing the balls she wanted to serve with, so Lynn allowed herself a look at the stands and noticed a familiar player with flaming red hair sitting down quickly in a chair in the upper stands – Amanda Auster, a Top 10 player from Australia. Playing in two different groups in the group stage of the tournament the Australians wouldn't have to play the Czechs until the final. *If* they made it to the final. And if they made it there, there was only small hope that the Australian team could take home this title. As if Amanda's struggle to play in front of the home crowd wasn't distressing enough she had a terrible record against Sasha. The Australian had never even won a set against the tall brunette from the Czech Republic.

More than once Lynn had chosen the Australian redhead as one of her girls in the Love Game and it had proven costly. Whenever Lynn had given Amanda another chance she had lost the title. Amanda never ended up with the girls the umpire had predicted. Mostly she stayed alone or was really good at keeping her relationships private. There had never been players' party stories about Amanda and most of Lynn's colleagues considered her boring and had never chosen her for the Love Game. Nevertheless, Lynn liked Amanda. The Australian was one of the nicest players on tour. She was also a pleasure to watch on the court with her strong serve and impeccable forehand. She had entered the Top 10 two years ago and if it wasn't for the Australian season where she routinely succumbed to the pressure of playing at home, she'd even have a Top 5 ranking, the umpire concluded.

From the corner of her eye Lynn saw Sasha tossing the ball up into the air and turned her concentration back to the match. Today the Czech's serve seemed as good as it used to be in the beginning of her career when Sasha had steamrolled her opponents one after another. She hit an ace into the corner of the service box.

"15 – Love," Lynn said into the microphone.

Five minutes later, the two players had leveled the score.

“30 all,” Lynn announced, knowing that the next point would be crucial. If Yelena scored she would have a break point on Sasha’s serve and a chance to turn the match around. If Sasha won the next exchange she would have match point.

After another lengthy exchange of strokes Sasha sent a hard-hit groundstroke down the sideline. The ball was so fast that Lynn couldn’t judge whether it had landed on the white line or a little outside, but there was no call from the line judge who was standing only a couple of feet away. However, Yelena raised her hand immediately and nodded at Lynn to indicate she would challenge the shot which she thought the line umpire had incorrectly seen as in.

The video screen showed a slow-motion replay of the ball and the crowd accompanied the trajectory of the ball with excited Oh’s and Ah’s. Challenges set off a wave of adrenalin in the crowd as well as the players. But the ball was in. It had caught the line by a tiny margin. The crowd roared in excitement.

“40 - 30,” Lynn called the score. Match point for Sasha Mrachova.

In frustration Yelena swung her racquet and smashed it onto the ground. It bounced back right into her hand. It was a motion the Ukrainian used so often on court it had become her trademark move whenever things went against her. One point later the first match of the season was over. Sasha Mrachova had won with a brilliant forehand winner.

With the voice that never gave away her feelings, Lynn announced the winner and began thinking of the match ahead of her.

Ted Curry let his eyes wander across the room. Judging from the pastiness of the journalists’ skin, they were collectively shipped here straight from cold Blighty to follow the British tennis phenomenon Ted had become in the last two years and to get a glimpse at young British hopeful Robyn Lawrence, not anywhere

near the top yet, but a good-looker. Not a bad assignment one would think. However, they all looked gloomy and tired. And judging from their questions they were all jetlagged or perhaps just simple-minded.

Except for one guy seated on the right side. He had to be in his late twenties and was quite good-looking, and even though his face was slightly sunburned there was something about him that excited Ted. He was wearing surf trunks and a scruffy t-shirt. His clothes clearly set him apart from all the other scribblers and with his reddish, disheveled curls he gave the impression of an Aussie surfer out of water. Footloose somehow, but with maturity. Ted imagined him having travelled all over the world with a backpack and a surfboard under his arm. What was someone like him doing at a tennis tournament? He had to be a journalist to get accreditation for the press conference, but Ted couldn't remember seeing him on the tour before. So far he hadn't asked a thing. He just looked up occasionally at Ted and Robyn. Then typed words into his laptop. Ted hoped he would ask him a question. Just so he could hear the guy's voice. The voice was so important. He also hoped he could think of a witty answer. Perhaps the redhead would come up after the presser for a little chat.

After ten minutes of boredom the good-looking surfer dude raised his hand. Ted's heart skipped a beat. He glanced around the room checking if there was anyone else who wanted to ask a question but the journalists seemed to have communally fallen asleep. He was about to give the guy a nod. But Robyn was faster.

"Yes!" She gave the surfer a wide smile. The reporter smiled back and addressed her.

"Robyn, you seemed to have had a good time tonight. Can we expect more of this pairing?" Robyn turned around to Ted while watching the good-looking reporter from the corner of her eye.

"No, absolutely not," Robyn answered with a straight face. "You see, he didn't even run back to try one lob. I honestly

tried to encourage him to do a little bit more but I am not sure he's one who listens to advice."

Ted couldn't believe his ears. What the hell had gotten into Robyn? There was some snickering in the back. Ted needed to think of words quickly.

"That's just the way our relationship is," he winked at the wild-haired reporter. "I don't listen to girls who don't moisturize their hands. Her hands are terribly callused. I told her that out of sympathy but she couldn't handle the truth. That's why she spanked me in the second set with that shanked return."

Robyn had redirected a ball from their opponents right onto Ted's butt. It would show tomorrow. With all the bickering going on in front the reporters were waking up. More importantly, the red-haired guy gave him a glorious smile. But Robyn was about to counterattack.

"No," she retorted with a sly smile, "that shot was for coordinating our outfits in matching colors."

Ted gulped. It was true, he had insisted on choosing the match outfits but his interest in colors and fashion wasn't something he wanted to discuss in a press conference. Luckily, nobody took Robyn's remark seriously. The reporters were now tittering and winking at each other. The redhead moved forward in his chair to ask another question.

"Ted, these were the first couple of matches this year. From your point of view, which particular aspect of your game needs improvement?"

As a Top 10 player he was already pretty good, wasn't he? But, of course, he needed to work on every part of his game. Ted was thinking quickly. He had hit a few great points, especially one fun shot – a between-the-leg shot called a 'hot dog' or 'tweener' – that had gained him loud applause by the spectators when it went in and won the British pair a game.

"Besides a moisturizing partner, I would say, my hot dog in particular. It's a shot I want to use more often from now on."

The room was roaring with laughter. Hands raised to the air. This press conference had become a blast. Ted smiled, while the red-haired reporter leaned back and enjoyed the rest of the

show. When it was over, the guy left quickly but not without flashing a smile in Ted's direction. Interesting evening, Ted thought when he left the media center. Stepping through the player's exit into the night air, he gave Robyn a huge grin.

"That was fun," he said. "May I take the liberty of taking you out tonight? How about I get you a hot dog?"

"Thank you, Ted, but I have found a hot dog myself! I don't think yours will be as hot."

"Then you take me out, darling. I think we have the same taste after all!"

It was the first match on the second day of the tournament and the first singles match for the Australian team. And the stands were packed with Australian fans.

Amanda Auster sat down on her chair. She had just broken Tamara Parova's serve with two excellent forehand winners. Was this the beginning of one of Tamara's massive chokes? Amanda could not hope for it. She was still one set down and trailing 3-4 in the second set. She needed to stay focused. If she could win this singles match there might be a good chance for the Australian team to get a lead in the group stage of the tournament and perhaps advance to the final of the Hopman Cup, given the fact that she and her male partner Angus Leslie were both known for their doubles skills.

But there was a distraction she couldn't get out of her head. A glance to the left into the front row of the stands confirmed what she already knew. There was this blonde beauty smiling at her. Constantly. Who was this girl? Had they met before? Amanda shook her head. Business before pleasure, she told herself while sipping from her water bottle. She knew, it would make her even more nervous to think of the blonde girl. Instead she precautionarily began making a Top 10 list in her head of her favorite restaurants, which were scattered all over the world. It worked – for a minute at least. Now she was craving to

spend just one hour in Mr. Mochi's restaurant in Tokyo which always ended up on the top of the list. But the good times she had in Japan last year were far away now. Moreover, food was considered compensation, as her psychologist had informed her. Amanda sighed.

In the next game she had to serve with this blonde girl's eyes on her back. It would be an annoying distraction. Playing in Perth, in front of her home crowd already made her feel tight. Ever since she had started to play on the tour over ten years ago the Australian season had never been successful for her. The crowd's expectations and cheering had never helped her. Instead it put more pressure on her than she ever felt for the rest of the year. This was the reason why last fall her team had come up with the idea to accept the invitation for the Hopman Cup. It was team work to go further in the Hopman Cup as it involved playing doubles. Amanda was good in doubles. Really good. Sometimes she even won Grand Slams.

But even though playing with a partner could take some of the pressure off her shoulders, she knew that doubles didn't count anymore. Amanda wanted to reach the top of the singles game. But losing the first match of the year wouldn't help her achieve that goal. She exhaled and got up to walk to the baseline. She just had to get through the Australian tennis summer and then she'd feel better. Usually she tried to avoid looking at the crowd as it made her nervous to see the anxious faces, but this time Amanda turned her head and glanced into the front row. It seemed the blonde had never even looked away from Amanda. It seemed she was following Amanda's every step and when they locked eyes for a second the blonde girl winked at her. Quickly Amanda looked away and nodded to a ball boy to throw her new balls. She needed to concentrate or she could kiss the match good-bye.

Tossing the ball up in the air, she went for a heavily sliced serve out wide. Too wide. Second serve. If there was one part of her game she could rely on with eyes closed it was her second serve. It kicked up high and was a problem for most of her opponents. But not this time. Tamara smacked it back to

Amanda's backhand. She could reach it but her ball went straight into the net. Back at the baseline Amanda turned around to the ball boy to receive new balls. She glanced up to the front row and almost missed catching the ball that was thrown at her. The girl's seat was empty. The blonde had left in the middle of Amanda's game!

All of a sudden the Australian felt as if she was in a slow motion haze. She simply couldn't concentrate anymore. She shanked the ball twice into the stands and double faulted at 0-40 handing the game to a satisfied Tamara. Up a double break at 5-3 the Russian had gained confidence again.

Elise was piling her clothes thoroughly on her bed after she had picked them up from the laundry. Over the years on the tennis tour she had developed her own system of packing and unpacking her bags without getting her belongings too mixed up. In the beginning she had lost or forgotten things in the hotel rooms, and the following fruitless search for them in the next city and the eventual realization she would never see them again had made her optimize her packing procedures.

Within twenty minutes her bags and suitcases were ready. Only the *Tennis Nurse* novel was still lying on her bed. Elise checked her watch. There were perhaps ten minutes left to finish the next chapter. She had read about half of the book, most of it on the plane to Australia. However, the more she had read the more she had realized how delicate the content was and after a while she began to wait until her father had fallen asleep before she pulled the novel out of her bag. She didn't want him to ask about the book with the blatant, colorful cover.

Lying back on her bed she opened the book and began to read. Jane, the nurse and main character, was hurrying to the Wimbledon infirmary. One of the top players had gotten injured and needed immediate assistance. Of course, no one knew that Jane was having a fervid affair with the player. Elise turned the

page and was just about to witness the encounter between Jane and her love interest in the empty infirmary when a knock on the door brought her back to reality. Elise stuffed the book into her bag and opened the door. Her father was waiting with a hotel trolley to load up Elise's suitcases. Their flight to Brisbane was in two hours.

Within a day the Hopman Cup had made a deal with the Brisbane tournament, which would exchange two of its players for Elise. She had gotten a last-minute wild card into the tournament along with a lucky Australian fellow, while French players Morgana Doré and Philippe Montis were on their way to Perth. They had probably gotten a good deal of money for their spontaneous cooperation while Elise had a chance to pick up well-needed ranking points in Brisbane. Even though playing the Hopman Cup was a good way to start the year and she had felt honored to be invited, she couldn't have gained points for her WTA ranking as the Hopman Cup was a tournament held by the International Tennis Federation.

It was luck, she thought while pushing her luggage trolley into the elevator. And maybe a little bit of luck was all she needed at the moment.

While her father checked them out at the reception desk Elise stole a glance at the TV in the hotel bar next door. It showed tennis, of course, and Australian Amanda Auster was playing against Tamara Parova. Or rather – losing.

Elise bit her lip watching Amanda struggle. An error later and the Australian was facing match point.

“Are you coming?” her father asked from behind her, and Elise quickly nodded. She didn't need to watch the last points of the match. Amanda's whole body language told her that the match was over.

It was already getting dark when Amanda left the building with Dan Metic, her coach. After she had lost her match, Angus had

won his match and which team would come out on top had to be decided by the doubles match. They had lost it – badly. Amanda had felt she had to do especially well in the doubles. The pressure she had put on herself was too much and she had gotten tight losing her service games twice in the first set and also in the second. After the disappointment she decided to hit for another half hour to let off steam. It usually helped. Her team could still win the next round and with some luck get to the first place in their group to reach the final.

“Will you come over?”

Dan stayed at a friend’s family’s house twenty minutes from the site, and it was good fun to catch up with them. But today Amanda felt more like an evening in front of her hotel room TV. She declined the offer, said good-bye to Dan and began walking over to the car park to get a driver.

The pavement was still hot and she could feel the heat through her slippers warming her feet. The flowers along the footpath effused a scent even sweeter than during the day. Or perhaps she just never became aware of these things in the bright sunlight. Her days were generally busy and meticulously scheduled by her team. There was no time to smell flowers, to relax her feet on the warm earth. No time to dream. She sighed, annoyed with her own thoughts. Dreaming wasn’t a good keyword at all. She had had the match on her racquet. She knew Tamara was about to choke, and then she had given away her own service game to love.

To love. Again, not a good keyword. Stupid, she scolded herself. Plain stupid. How could she get so sidetracked by a pretty face in the crowd? Moreover, she wasn’t given anything back. Nothing. Nada. Love, to speak in tennis terms. Yes, she got a lot of love today on the court, but no love off the court. She shouldn’t mix up these two. Business before pleasure? Now she had none of it.

She almost missed the junction that led to the car park and had to make a sharp turn. Feeling grumpier by the minute she kicked a stone with her sandal. To her surprise it flew high into the air. Following the trajectory Amanda looked over the parked

cars, and there she was, only twenty feet away – the girl from the match. Leaning playfully against a red roadster.

“You.”

Amanda didn’t know how to feel. This woman had cost her the match by leaving at a pivotal moment. And now she was back, smiling at her. Had she been waiting for her?

“Hey,” the tall blonde said with a smile. “You finished your press conference. Good. I’ve been waiting for two hours.”

There you go, Amanda thought. But her voice was quite lovely, she had to admit.

“Do we know each other?”

“Not yet.”

The blonde girl opened the passenger door and gestured to Amanda to hop in. Was this a joke? Amanda suddenly felt certain she was on Candid Camera. But then again, was that show still on? With only two months per year spent in Australia she was completely out of touch with the TV shows here. Well, if it was some sort of Candid Camera show – this much she knew – she had to play along. She smiled sheepishly, looking around for the hidden cameras and took a step toward the car. The girl replied with a huge smile. They got into the car and with a flick of the wrist the girl started the roaring engine and sped out of the parking lot.

“Are you going to tell me your name and our destination?” Amanda glanced over waiting for an answer.

“Of course. I’m Felicia. Felicia Del Castro. Our destination will be a surprise.”

Amanda wasn’t sure she would like the surprise given the fact that the revelation of the girl’s name almost made her fall out of the sports car’s seat. Felicia Del Castro. Of course. How could she not recognize the woman? She had seen her on TV on some annoying show a few weeks ago. Had she been singing a song? Amanda wasn’t sure anymore. But she remembered that as recently as Christmas some of her friends had talked about Felicia. There were a lot of rumors about the blonde girl who was now pushing the pedal to the metal. In skeptical amazement Amanda glanced over to the beautiful driver only to meet the

girl's dark blue eyes. They were mesmerizing and it felt like very long minutes that the girl held her gaze. Shouldn't she look at the road?

“There's a red light ahead!” Amanda squeaked.

Felicia just laughed at her before stopping with squealing tires at the junction. Her eyes were twinkling at her passenger. Amanda gasped. She wasn't on a TV show. This was something else coming out of nowhere leading to a surprise destination with a rumored gay celebrity.

This was a date.

MOTHER'S FINEST

Brisbane, Australia

Paola Scetti hurried down the palm-lined path that led to the lawn behind Brisbane's Queensland Tennis Centre. Contrary to what players and colleagues said, she was not always late. That was an exaggeration she had proven wrong on a booze-soaked night last October in Tokyo.

In a superhuman effort she had worked out her arrival stats, which undeniably verified that her interview delays were at 73%, while her delays for press conferences were only at 68%. Of course, her colleagues had argued that "always" was an elastic term – but once again were proven wrong in a linguistics battle. They seemed to be completely unaware of the fact that she had studied literature for a semester and a half. The successful wager had won her 10,000 yen which were spent on more saké bottles than she cared to be reminded of. Being the nice Austrian girl she was known for she had shared the bottles with the sore losers.

Today, she'd probably make her interview delay stat go up some points. She was late for an exclusive chat with the No. 1 player in the world, Carina Gnocchi.

Four years ago Paola had just started working for Supersport channel and one of her first assignments was to interview the French Open Junior Champion, Carina Gnocchi, from Germany. She remembered how surprised she was by the dark-haired, head-strong girl with the unfortunate Italian name.

The sixteen year old talent seemed unfazed by the media attention her win had stirred in her home country. In their interview she came across as a well-behaved, Catholic teenager with no other interests than her sport. Then again, at times her answers were quite brazen for a youngster. She was fourteen years old when she had left Germany and moved to Florida with her parents to attend Rick Salieri's famous tennis academy. In only a few years he had molded her into a formidable player with a bright future.

Her game was consistent. Stunning – not so much. It was a popular joke among the commentators that a winner from Carina's racquet was to be considered a once in a lifetime experience. But the young player was mounting the silverware more than any other girl on tour and by the end of 2010, only weeks after her twentieth birthday, had reached her career high ranking of world No. 1.

Coming down the path Paola spotted Lars, her camera man, who was waiting in the shadow of a tree. He smoked a cigarette and watched a photographer snapping shots of Carina Gnocchi wearing a white summer dress. Alongside Carina were three other girls Paola recognized as the rest of Germany's new dream team – Stephanie Moeller, Angela Porovski and Elise Renard. All four girls were promising tennis players, who had been making huge progress in the last two years. They were all still young and the team had good chances to make a mark at the Fed Cup competition for years to come. Only Elise's success had been impeded by her injury last year, but it was a good sign, Paola concluded, to see Elise among the group. They all seemed good friends and their friendship seemed unperturbed by Carina's new No. 1 ranking and Elise's long absence away from the tour.

But Paola also had learned in the many years on the tour that looks could be misleading and real friendship was rare among the girls.

Joining Lars under the palm tree Paola waved to Carina, who responded with a regal nod. She had adjusted quickly to her new status as the queen of the WTA.

Elise watched Carina walk over to Paola and the camera guy and sit down on a low wall. After the microphone was fixed to her décolleté Carina tugged her white dress into place again and began smiling into the camera.

“I really wonder what she can be asked about? It can’t be her game,” Stephanie Moeller whispered next to Elise.

Angela chuckled. “The usual stuff probably. Her favorite music?”

Stephanie yawned loudly. “I doubt her music preferences are more interesting than her game.”

Elise turned her head to her two German friends, surprised by the spite in Stephanie’s voice.

“She told me she went to an Enrique Martinez concert in December,” Elise mumbled.

“Oh, dear, yes. She told everybody. As if this was something to brag about,” Stephanie moaned.

Elise recalled that Stephanie only listened to obscure bands and artists whose names she had never heard of and who were never played on the radio.

“Carina changed quite a bit during the last season,” Angela explained to Elise. “Since she occupies the No. 1 spot they treat her like a star and she’s loving it. A little bit too much for our liking.”

Elise nodded. She remembered that Carina had been very distant when Elise had come back to the tour at the U.S. Open in August, too busy with important meetings and photo shoots to spend some time with her old friends. Elise hadn’t given it too

much thought back then. She had lost in the first round of the American Grand Slam and was preoccupied with other worries rather than Carina's detached behavior.

Would she have become like that if her dreams had come true? If she hadn't been injured? She had dreamt of becoming No. 1 herself – like everyone on the tour at one point in their lives.

“When is your match tomorrow?” Angela addressed her, taking her thoughts off her ranking dreams.

“Not before three in the afternoon,” Elise said.

Her heart made a jump when Angela invited her to hit with her in the morning. Suddenly she didn't feel so out of place anymore. Stephanie and Angela shouldered their bags, said good-bye and headed over to the practice courts while Elise threw a last look at Carina. The No. 1 player had a final laugh with Paola, then got up from the wall. They had finished the interview.

Quickly, Elise turned away and walked down a little pathway between two courts, heading to the back of the tournament site. She didn't feel like chatting with Carina or – more likely – being ignored by her. Elise had better things to do.

“Here are the facts. We have never played Stephanie, so we don't know who might do better against her. But she is tall and hits the ball flat and hard. She is basically a ball basher like me. Moreover, she hates coming to the net. So you will play her.”

Luella and Gabriella Galloway were sitting in the shadow of two large trees behind the practice courts. Only the sound of smacked balls and occasional shouts from the players disturbed the silence of the sweltering afternoon. A sheet with the tournament's draw was spread before them.

Since they were ten years old, the American twins had worked their way through tournaments by choosing beforehand which sister would play which opponent, depending on game style and preference. What had started as a dare among the twins, had become a very successful, very elaborate habit. In the last

two years Gaga and Lulu, as they were called, had worked their way up the rankings and both had entered the Top 20 a few months ago.

It was a highly illegal team effort that had forced them to adopt several precautionary measures. The sisters spent whole evenings matching their appearances – cutting their long dark hair the same way or wearing the same nail polish – and even more time on their motions. Their game styles naturally differed and four years ago, before their first professional season, they had molded their game styles at their parents' private tennis court to suit the overall game plan. Gaga had spent a whole summer acquiring Lulu's powerful, dashing serve, while Lulu got some lessons in Gaga's agile, versatile all-court game.

Since they started on the tour, their coaches were routinely ousted every six months before they had a chance to understand the nature of the twins' elusiveness and unteachability. Not even their parents, while assuming that their daughters took turns sometimes, seemed to grasp the extent of their mischief. Their aloof behavior was attributed to their exclusive twin status. All in all they had a reputation for being difficult, elitist and inseparable little brats.

"So you play the German. I play the Italian," Lulu pondered, studying the draw. "Then you will play the next German, Porovski, in my third round, or the qualifier, but it's highly unlikely Porovski will lose."

Gabriella agreed. The arrangement made sense as she would be much more comfortable with Stephanie Moeller.

"Just blast Sapore off the court with your groundies!"

Luella nodded. She would have preferred if Gaga had played Antonia Sapore. But if everything went according their plan her sister already had to play two matches more than her. She had to accept this challenge.

“How come I come here every year and don’t know about this dive bar?” Monica Jordan shook her head in wonder. She followed her doubles partner, Agnes Lion who was checking the street signs for the right direction.

“Paola told me about it,” Agnes laughed.

“Paola? Don’t tell me she’s a late bloomer!”

“No. She discovered it by accident, when she was on a booze cruise with Hugh Andrews, her colleague from Supersport. He loved it obviously, as they stayed there the whole night.”

Walking through the bustling neighborhood of Spring Hill, the sound of laughter and shouts from the bars surrounded them like a warm afternoon breeze. It had only been three weeks since they had seen each other but they had been chatting nonstop since Agnes had met Monica for lunch at a cozy Bar & Grill. Once they had gone through their Christmas-with-the-family stories, they had decided to begin the end of the day with a few shots at the newly discovered gay bar. There was one matter they hadn’t discussed yet – the latest WTA gossip, and there was no better source for the hot topics than Monica Jordan. Stopping at the corner to check the street signs, Agnes turned to her friend.

“Will you tell me about your party, now? What happened? Spill the beans.”

Monica’s beach house parties on New Year’s Eve were notorious and whoever got an invitation felt honored and excited. This year, Agnes wasn’t able to make it so she was desperate to catch up on the infamous incidents which surely had happened.

“Are you ready for a big one?”

Agnes nodded.

“Miss Italy is going down on Eva Peron.”

“No way.” Agnes stopped on the spot. “No, no way!”

“Yes way,” Monica gave her a sly grin. “I set up the two Catholic girls over the punch fountain.”

“There’s something wonderfully rotten in the Land of Oz. Which would be you.”

“Thank you. Thank you.” Monica took a little bow, swaying an imaginary hat, then headed further down to the riverbank. “They make a nice pairing, don’t they?”

“A pretty hot pairing. I pity the priest who has to take their confessions.”

They walked down the street towards the Brisbane River. At the end of it was a corner house with a small, purple-lit doorway. Agnes gestured to the entrance and they crossed the street. When they came closer pulsing music gushed out to lead the way.

“Speaking of Oz? Did you set up the Wiz Kid, too?”

“Oh, don’t get me started. She’s a lost cause. She prefers to stick to chocolate.” Monica pushed the door open and began looking for a table in the crowded room. “But,” she added with a snort, “I might try again. I’m old enough now to do charitable work.”

After she finished the interview with Carina Gnocchi and reported back to the editing room, Paola decided that it was time to watch some tennis. Today several interesting matches were scheduled and the most appealing seemed to be the first meeting of Gabriella Galloway, one half of the American twins, and Italian, Antonia Sapore. It should be a fine match with Gabriella’s aggressive all-court game matching Sapore’s tricky shot-making. Paola was looking forward to some spectacular rallies.

She sprinted up the stairs to the commentator box only to witness her colleagues Hugh Andrews and Samantha Watts coming out of the little room.

Sam had been a successful Top 10 player in the eighties and early nineties, but had retired from the game since 1997. Soon after, she had started working for radio and TV stations, commenting on the game. Her expertise and sharp wit had gained her respect and many fans. At 53, she still looked extremely fit and sometimes Paola witnessed her playing for fun in the early morning.

Hugh had never played the game himself, as one could easily tell by his massive, unathletic body. What he lacked in

physical mobility he compensated for with a quick mind and the talent for never being lost for words. An important talent for a professional babbler.

They both looked exhausted.

“Oh, no,” Paola said. “Did I miss it?”

“You didn’t miss much,” Samantha sighed. “Gabriella failed miserably. Tried to hit through the court, but missed most of the easy shots. No net play, no wit, no delight from her. It was a really disappointing performance.”

“Fifty-eight minutes and she was out,” Hugh added.

Paola was surprised. She had talked to the American earlier this week. Gabriella had a calm, even guarded personality, most people mistook for arrogance, but she used to flourish when she went on the court.

“Well, one can only hope it’s not a ridiculous attempt by that new coach to make her play more like Luella,” Sam mumbled.

“If it is, the coach will be fired faster than Renard’s serves go over the net,” Hugh giggled. A day before Elise Renard had managed quite effortlessly to break the speed gun with her booming serves. Several consecutive times she had served over 120 mph. After the fourth time the display went blank and stayed so for the rest of the set. Hugh and Sam had a good laugh as well as the crowd in the arena.

“It’s great that she got the wild card. It would have been a shame if she couldn’t have played at all because of Franke’s injury,” Sam said.

“Elise is a sweet kid. The knee injury was very unfortunate. It must have been hard for her to watch her peers rising up the rankings while her career just stopped dead,” Paola wondered. “Suddenly all the attention is on The Knocker. I remember that two years ago we wondered if Carina would ever crack the Top 50. Now she’s Numero Uno. Amazing how time flies.”

“Tell me about it,” Sam sighed, checking the monitor in the commentator booth. “We need to get back into the sauna.”

“Angela Porovski will try to give Mint Rickenbacher a new flavor,” Hugh purred. Chuckling, the two commentators walked back into their box while Paola headed back to the media center. There was still work to do and a look at her watch confirmed it – yes, she was late again.

Antonia Sapore let herself drop down onto the bench and exhaled. The Italian had asked for twenty minutes before she had to show up for her press conference. Then she would have a massage followed by a talk with her coach over a quick dinner. It was almost 6 p.m. and she had no plans for the evening and right now she didn't feel like doing anything but lying in her bed and falling asleep.

Breathing in deeply she closed her eyes and tried to calm down until her racket bag fell over onto the floor with a loud bang. The sound echoed through the empty locker room. She didn't like it when the place was deserted like this. The tour was all about constant buzzing, boiling activity which took you into an addicting whirl and as soon as you happened to find yourself alone, the lifelessness of concrete walls and clean hotel rooms wrapped you up abruptly. Her opponent had already left the room, leaving behind the sweet smell of a deodorant. It went to her head and she began to feel dizzy.

When the door to the locker room was opened, Antonia opened her eyes. She turned around but her mood shifted instantly when she saw a well-known face appearing in the long corridor that separated both locker sides.

“Como estás, mi corazón?”

Martina Rodriguez made a few nonchalant steps towards her, hands in the pockets of her tracksuit jacket, and smiled at the Italian.

“Fa male molto male,” Antonia moaned with a grin and – pretending to faint – she lifted her hand to her face and laid down on the bench.

“Oh, no,” Martina exclaimed, rushing for help. “Looks like someone needs a nurse.” She slid down on her knees and after carefully taking off Antonias’s shoes began to examine the Italian’s legs.

“How is your thigh, *cariña*? Do you happen to have pains on your inner thigh?”

The Italian nodded dramatically – because which tennis player didn’t have pains in their thighs after a grueling match? She leaned back and, reconsidering her evening plans, she relaxed under Martina’s skillful treatment. But only for a moment. Then she glanced up at the clock on the wall. Only fifteen minutes left until the press conference. Antonia grabbed the Argentine’s head and planted a big smooch on her lips.

“I have to take a shower,” she sighed while taking off her top. She picked up two bath towels and walked towards the bathroom section. As she reached it, she stopped and looked back only to catch Martina staring at her butt. The Italian rolled her eyes then winked mischievously at her lover.

“*Mamma mia*,” she said with a big grin while disappearing into the shower. With a joyful cheer the Argentine jumped up sprinting after her.

“*¡Una y otra vez, sé cómo resistirte!*”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any news,” Agnes said.

She and Monica had ordered some beer and had settled down at a table, discussing the new relationship between Martina and Antonia. Since they had quit the stressful singles competition the two doubles partners had developed a reputation as understanding and discreet counselors and occasional matchmakers for the younger players.

“What about the little fox?”

“Oh, her, right,” Agnes pondered. “I haven’t thought about her for a while. There’s nothing, to be honest. I left some very deep foot prints in the snow but the fox isn’t following the

spoor. At least I haven't heard from her since we played in Luxembourg.”

“What did you say to her?”

“Nothing, really. Just gave her a hint that we would welcome her with open arms.”

Monica shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong about her.”

“When have you ever been wrong about a girl?” Agnes laughed.

“Once or twice in my life for sure.”

“Well, if you were wrong, you were simply great at getting them drunk.”

“That’s me.” Monica laughed. Looking at her friend, she was suddenly glad they had never tried to get it on. Sometimes it was good to just be friends. Then she laughed some more over this atypical, way out of character notion. She was getting old, she thought, and that was a good thing.

Suddenly Agnes grabbed her arm nodding over to the entrance. Martina Rodriguez and Antonia Sapore had entered and peeked into the room.

“Who needs a priest if Monica Jordan is the Mother Superior,” Agnes snickered. They waved Antonia and Martina over, ordered soft drinks for the kids and began to take their confessions.

“It happens. Wasn't your fault.” Gabriella patted Luella's back, then grabbed her sister's bag and pushed her through the gate.

“She got lucky,” Luella growled.

“She also played really well. I wonder how she prepared in the off-season? She was hitting the ball extra hard. She was on fire.” In fact it had been exciting to watch. At times Gaga had to deter herself from cheering for the Italian.

She glanced over to her sister and upon seeing her face Gabriella felt guilty. Perhaps if she had played Sapore, she could have handled her tricky shots. Also, she might still be in the

tournament. Even though Luella played the match today, it was Gabriella's name on the scoreboard, and it was Gabriella who was out of the tournament now.

They walked in silence heading for the practice court in the back. To their left was the picnic lawn of the Queensland Tennis Centre but at six in the afternoon it was still incredibly hot. There was only one lonely figure underneath the big tree in the back of the picnic area. The girl was lying on a tournament towel and there was a huge racquet bag next to her.

"I think that's Elise!" Gabriella exclaimed. "Let's go over and say hello."

"No, thanks," Lulu snapped. Gabriella sighed, which caused Lulu to turn around with an angry stare. "You go over then. I want to be alone anyway."

Luella dashed off leaving her twin sister dumbfounded. But Gaga knew there wasn't much she could do when Lulu was in a bad mood.

She stepped onto the grass and walked over to the girl under the tree. Gabriella was only half-way over the lawn when Elise looked up. The American waved over and Elise smiled back. Then she quickly stuffed the book she was reading into her bag and got up. It had happened too fast and Gaga wasn't able to see the writing on the cover, but from the distance it looked like a *Tennis Nurse* novel.

Now, that would be a surprise, Gabriella thought. Never in her life had she guessed that Elise Renard would read the infamous trash novel series. But then again nobody thought that about herself.

Gaga had almost read the whole series. It was the one guilty pleasure not even Luella knew about, as Gabriella traded the novels secretly with only one player, Frenchwoman Morgana Doré, and never kept more than one novel at a time which she carried in her toilet bag. But Elise? She had never heard any stories about the nice German. No, Gaga must have been wrong. She shook her head and gave Elise a big smile. They talked for fifteen minutes before Gabriella left again to have a light hit with her grumpy sister.

It was good to see Elise back on the tour. She had played only a couple of the European indoor tournaments last fall after she was beaten in the first round of the U.S. Open. It had been her first tournament back after her injury had taken her out for several months, and by then her ranking had dropped dramatically as she had been unable to defend her points due to her injury. But she never let her bad luck get her down and no matter what Luella thought, Gaga liked the smiley girl. Besides her joyful effusiveness, she could be quite thoughtful and shy. Moreover, Elise was one of the few people who didn't ignore Gabriella because of the reputation she and Luella had. On her way to the practice court Gabriella decided to make an effort to get to know the young German better.

“This match has taken some amazing twists and turns. With both players starting a little bit hesitantly, you could even say, a bit timidly, we didn't dare to hope for such an exciting thriller.”

“Absolutely true. This has turned into a incredible fight and it's just impossible to say who will keep their nerve and wrestle the other down.”

“Never in my life have I seen such a tight, hard-contested tiebreak!”

“It's 9-9 in this late night tiebreaker and we have been witnessing some spectacular shot making so far. Sapore just ripped that forehand to run a game on Rodriguez leveling the score at 8-8, but the Argentine was ready to bend over backwards to get into another winning position. But then she seemed to lose a bit of her concentration.”

“Yes, she really struggled to keep the ball in play. It was more make believe.”

“And she failed to finish off the point in the end.”

“Now, that's just not fair,” Martina Rodriguez blurted out. “I was totally drunk!” To demonstrate her point she slammed her fist on the table shaking Agnes's and Monica's empty beer

bottles. “How *por el amor de dios*, am I supposed to remember how I did? I was probably *súper-fantástico*.” The Argentine stared in disbelief at Monica and Agnes who continued to babble into their beer bottles pretending they were microphones.

“I’m sorry, *amore*, but I successfully challenged your shot. It was poor and you lost the point.” Antonia gave her lover a little pat on the back.

“I do remember she was still in my bed when I woke up,” Martina said, but had to admit that the point went to the Italian.

About an hour ago, prodded by the already tipsy Monica and Agnes, the young couple had started to list the affairs they had engaged in since they started on the tour. Being two years older the Argentine had the advantage in the beginning and took the first set easily with 6-3. But Antonia had fought back in a phenomenal effort. She had been quite busy in the last three years and she wouldn’t let go of the second set.

“And now, we witness a little discussion during the changeover,” Agnes agitatedly continued. “Rodriguez doesn’t seem to be taking the lost point lightly.”

“That’s right, Agnes. There you can see the hot-blooded South American coming through.”

“She is picking up the bottle. I’m afraid we will witness a code violation.”

“Will she take the bottle and throw it at her opponent? She is aiming!”

A splash hit the two commentators instead.

After the ugly incident a point penalty for Martina handed Antonia a set point. She converted it with a cunning, lingering drop shot to force the deciding third set. This night was only just beginning.

EAVESDROPPING ON THE HEART

Melbourne, Australia

Walking down the red carpet of her sponsor's pre-tournament brunch, Sasha Mrachova felt very much aware of herself. A red carpet seemed out of proportion for a simple meet and greet but in the run-up to the first Grand Slam of the year it was another opportunity to present the players in a glamorous light.

As much as Sasha loved to be admired she had begun to cherish the moments away from the limelight, on her own with a good book in hand. These moments had become rare and since she had arrived in Australia she couldn't recall a single evening she had had to herself. This morning, she would have felt more like reading or watching a movie but she was paid too much money by her sponsor to bail out.

A photographer with curly red locks smiled at her and gestured for her to turn her face to the camera. She knew how to move for the photographers to achieve the desired effect and get onto the covers of magazines. Over the years Sasha had little by little turned into a model in great demand, to the point that her fans were questioning her commitment to tennis. She had promised herself to prove them wrong.

By her side, now holding her hand tightly, was Czech soccer star Jaroslav Bradka, a midfielder of Manchester City. Jaro was nice, extremely good-looking and provided her some company during the Australian Open. He had twisted his foot in early January and was on sick leave. He also stopped the inconvenient questions about her private life that had begun to lay siege to her in the last few years. For a long time the absence of boyfriends had been explained by her being occupied with her tennis career, but her management worried that it would eventually interfere with sponsoring deals. The relationship with Jaro was set up quickly. In October they had announced that they were dating, around Christmas they had dealt a few pictures to the yellow press. Jaro had agreed to show up for at least five tournaments per year while she would attend just as many of his football club's matches. Flying around the world to Australia to support her in the first Grand Slam of the season would silence the doubters for good.

As soon as she and Jaro entered the buffet room, he was hi-jacked by Carina Gnocchi, the young German, who had the same clothing sponsor as Sasha.

"Why didn't you sign with Arsenal? My dad says, it's the best team ever!"

Jaroslav smiled politely at the young German.

"Oh please, their defense sucks," he answered. "And the city isn't what it used to be. No, I'll stick to Manchester."

As a German with Italian roots Carina was a soccer expert and engaged in a heated discussion with Jaro. How could anyone be so interested in football, Sasha thought. Or was she actually hitting on her boyfriend? She noticed that Carina put her hand on Jaro's arm but the Czech tennis player couldn't have cared less. If the new No. 1 really flirted with her fiancé her effort would be completely in vain, Sasha mused. Soon her German compatriot Stephanie Moeller joined the football discussion, pushing Carina's arm away. That got the No. 1 player going. Her speech on the formidability of a 2-3-5 formation was increasing the cringe factor with every second and Sasha looked down at her glass, realizing that it was empty. No need to endure this

embarrassing performance any longer, she decided. Leaning on Jaro's arm, Sasha whispered in his ear to excuse herself and noticed to her delight that both girls frowned. How easy it was for Sasha to claim her territory with a simple gesture. Besides, her manager had told her to show more public displays of affection. She was in a happy relationship with Jaro after all.

Making her way through the crowd she picked up another drink from a waiter and stepped outside onto the patio. What was so special about football players anyway? She couldn't understand the fascination at all. With a sigh she sat down onto the rattan couch. Looking around she concluded that this was much more to her liking – low-riding with a nice view, which consisted of high-heeled, tanned, long legs of fellow tennis girls.

His whole life had changed in a couple of days. From sporadic freelance writer and photographer Tom Richardson had made it to a full-time writer, photographer and video producer.

As though by chance he had been at the right place at the right time and after a quick phone call he now worked for the WTA, producing entertaining little tidbits for its website. Last week he had mainly done interviews and two photo shoots with some of the lower ranked girls at the Sydney tournament, as his new boss Candice Crantz was testing the waters before she let him loose on the star players. That was fine with him. Everything was fine at the moment. He had only arrived in Melbourne yesterday and his first assignment for today seemed easy enough.

He had met Elise Renard at the reception desk and soon enough had found a quiet place to do a little fun interview with the young German. The twenty year old had been a quarterfinalist only a year ago but now was fighting her way back into the upper ranks. She had done alright in Brisbane, reaching the second round before falling to a more experienced player. Today however was not a good day for the German. She had lost her qualifying match against American newcomer Mint Rickenbacher

and was out of the Australian Open before it had even started. Accordingly, her mood was a little dampened, even though she seemed quite endearing.

“What do you like most about playing in Australia?” Tom asked her.

“The weather,” Elise answered, adding that the people were also very nice. Hearing her mellow-voiced answers Tom soon settled into autopilot. This would be another half hour of boringness, he suspected, plus another hour of editing the boringness. Why not add a little spice, he wondered. He didn’t have to use it if it didn’t work out. He hesitated for a second but then gave it a go.

“Are you looking forward to dancing with a particular player tonight at the player’s party?” It caught her off-guard. She laughed nervously then grabbed the water bottle. Her reaction set Tom’s antennae buzzing. Apparently he had hit the mark – there was someone she wanted to dance with.

“Some of the players are really in demand,” Tom tried to get her talking, but she was still holding on to the bottle gulping little sips. “Who’s your favorite?”

She grimaced in embarrassment. “I’ll keep it to myself.”

Dear Lord, Tom couldn’t help thinking. So German! How much more fun would that question have been with any of the British girls?

“Yeah, you’re right,” he managed to say. “I would do that, too. Most girls would name Ted Curry as a favorite though. At least that’s what I have heard.” Tom smiled at Elise.

“I guess,” she muttered, shrugging her shoulders. She looked like she had never heard of Ted Curry. This girl was too uptight, Tom figured. Why would anyone at her age become so nervous in response to his harmless questions? Wasn’t she traveling with her father all the time? Yes, that must be it. Well, it was actually something they could talk about – her French father, who was also her coach. In the morning he had checked the WTA website to gather some information about the players he was supposed to interview. He was still learning who was who in the women’s tennis world and he was surprised to learn that Elise

Renard was listed as German, but had soon found out that her name came from her father, a famous French coach with a German wife.

Tom gave the young woman a friendly wink.

“Well, back to tennis then,” he suggested.

“Yes, thank you.” She relaxed again and put the bottle down. They talked for another twenty minutes about tennis, music and her comeback from injury.

After she politely thanked him and said good-bye, Tom watched the young girl leave the lobby. He was a bit puzzled by the German and thinking about editing her generic answers he let out a little moan. But then he got up. Why worry? This was Australia and what a difference two weeks can make, he thought. He put on his sunglasses and pulling his hand through his red curls he took a step out into the morning light. He had a new job, a new life and – he smiled as brightly as the Australian sun – since Perth he wasn't single anymore.

The lobby was bustling but there was no sign of Natsumi Takashima. Amanda Auster and Monica Jordan looked around, then headed to the lounge and settled down on the huge couch to wait for their Japanese friend, with whom they had decided to share a quick lunch before they would spend the afternoon getting ready for tonight's players' party. The couch was surrounded by gigantic tub plants that made the room look like a jungle.

“Where is she? She is only on time when she has to play a match. It's not very Japanese to be late, is it?” Amanda was muttering while looking up at the leaves of an exotic plant.

“Whatever the reason is, I just hope it doesn't involve sushi,” Monica grinned thinking back four months when the girls had a night out in Tokyo.

“Oh god. I don't want to be reminded!” Amanda waved aside the thought. That night she had had too much saké. Far too much.

“So tell me about that new girl of yours,” Monica purred.

“Nothing to tell really,” Amanda said slowly. “Just someone I met.” She gave a bright red flower to her left a close inspection and Monica Jordan had to laugh. Even though Amanda was not particularly shy she wouldn’t talk about her feelings a lot. However, in the last two weeks she had been more outgoing and visibly cheerful.

“Come on, you’ve been sporting a big grin since Perth. You could at least give me a name!”

Now it was Amanda’s time to smile. She couldn’t help it. She thought about the new girl in her life.

“Felicia,” she answered. “She’s a singer.”

Monica nodded gravely. So, the stories she heard were true. Felicia Del Castro was invading the tennis world. ‘Singer’ was perhaps an exaggeration. The young woman had made a name as an announcer in several cheap TV shows and was now trying to gain a reputation as a vocalist. Her new songs were being played constantly on the radio and caused one’s ears to bleed. She glanced at Amanda. Well, she’d known it and she’d better accept it, too, Monica thought. She just couldn’t govern everything in the summer camp. She gave her young friend a big smile.

“A singer? Now, that sounds glamorous.”

“She is a bit. Glamorous, I mean,” Amanda mumbled.

Monica leaned over and gave a slightly surprised Amanda a big hug.

“That’s great, kiddo. I’m very happy for you.”

Amanda was wriggling awkwardly in her grip. “Not planning to get married yet.”

“What? But Agnes and I want to be your bridesmaids!” Monica grinned.

“Yeah, let’s see how it goes,” Amanda replied with a sheepish smile. Amanda wasn’t the type to shout it from the rooftops but her eyes revealed she was head over heels in love with Felicia Del Castro. Monica sighed inaudibly then let go of Amanda.

A horrible squeak overpowered her thoughts. Natsumi Takashima had arrived with squealing tires.

“How the hell do you do that with high heels, woman?” Monica shook her head in disbelief. Takashima’s famous trademark move on the court was her sliding split. She would even do it on hard courts.

“Sorry for being late. But I discovered the most amazing roof-deck sushi restaurant and they offered me a free trial if I bring you guys along. The owner is a big tennis fan,” Natsumi explained.

Unperturbed by Amanda’s shocked face she threw her arms in the air in excitement. “Come on, let’s go, girls! Mint is already waiting outside.”

“Mint Rickenbacher?” Monica raised an eyebrow, surprised that Natsumi spent time with the young American. Mint wasn’t exactly what Monica would call good company.

“Her friend crashed out in the qualies. I had the feeling she needed someone to show her around,” Natsumi said.

Monica nodded. Eventually she helped Natsumi to drag Amanda from the jungle sofa and out into the sunshine.

Elise felt a big lump creeping up her throat. For a moment all she could hear were the leaves rustling by the fan above her as the huge jungle plants wrapped around her like Sleeping Beauty’s impenetrable hedge. Praying that no one came to sit in the lounge she crouched into the big wing chair that had hidden her from the three girls. She needed just two minutes of silence to steady herself. Just two minutes to fight back the tears.

So, Amanda had a girlfriend. A glamorous singer. Of course, she had, Elise thought. Amanda was a Top 10 player, she was lovely and friendly and never made a big fuss about her standing. She was a ‘cool cat’, an expression Elise had learned by reading the *Tennis Nurse* novel Agnes Lion had given her. She had learned a lot of other things as well. Soon she needed to give

it back. Otherwise Agnes would correctly assume that Elise had read it, even though she had denied it when talking on the phone with her friend. But there were pages she could read over and over again. That's what she had been doing in the lounge when Monica and Amanda had sat down on the couch on the other side of the jungle plants. But once she had heard Amanda's voice behind her she had forgotten about *Tennis Nurse and The Girl Who Preferred The Grass*.

Now a strong feeling of self-pity and anger rose in Elise. Self-pity because she had missed the opportunity to get to know Amanda better last year. And anger because she hated self-pity. That wasn't like her. She was fighting her way back to playing WTA tournaments without looking back on the months and months she had missed. She was a self-assured, determined person who looked ahead.

But this was different. She could recall exactly the first meeting between her and Amanda before a match three years ago. It had been one of the smaller events on the tour when Elise had just begun to cross over from playing ITF challenger tournaments to the bigger WTA tournaments and she was easily beaten by Amanda. In all the following matches Amanda was able to beat her with ease, and in hindsight Elise had to admit that it was not only the Australian's talent and game but her own nerviness when Amanda was around that made her lose her matches. Then there was that evening they spent on the porch of the Charleston hotel away from the noisiness of last year's players' party. They had talked for hours sheltered by the stars of the Southern night sky and for the first time Elise had enjoyed the inner flurry the Australian caused. She had begun to really like the redhead.

She even had a dream about Amanda after the party. But back then she hadn't grasped the nature of her affection. In hindsight she must have been completely blind to her own feelings. It could have happened back then. Why else would Amanda have spent a whole evening with her? But she had missed out on the chance and a week later she was on a plane back to Germany with a torn ACL. The unfairness of life brought tears to her eyes.

There it was again, she scolded herself. Self-pity. She wiped away the tears. Someone else would come along, she thought. Maybe. And if anybody ever came along, would Elise dare to make the first step? She couldn't expect someone else to do it as apparently everyone who knew her assumed she was straight. Like that new PR assistant she had to endure for an interview this morning. No wonder, none of the gay girls ever hit on her, Elise brooded. Well, that wasn't exactly true. Some of them did, but in a mocking, titillating way.

Last fall Elise had gathered all her courage and started a feeble attempt to get closer to the group of young gay girls around Mint Rickenbacher and Chili García López. But none of them had seemed to even question why Elise wanted to hang out with them. They only found it hilarious. Discouraged by their lack of empathy Elise had never talked about herself. Also, her German friends on the tour had been happy that she was back on the tour and after the embarrassing intermezzo with Mint and Chili she was glad she could catch up with the German girls again.

But she couldn't help feeling angry that Amanda would be spending an afternoon with Mint. Mint! She scrunched the *Tennis Nurse* novel in frustration but then reminded herself that it wasn't hers. Agnes. She had given Elise the novel. A very trashy novel with a lot of gay characters. The young German's heart made a jump. Agnes must know about Elise! The novel was a hint. Why hadn't she thought about this earlier? Elise hadn't planned to go to the players' party, but now she would. After all, she needed to give back Agnes's novel.

The two lovers had gone to a very expensive restaurant which, at lunch hour, was filled by business men mostly. It was on the other side of the Yarra River and they hoped that no other tennis people would make the extra way to have a meal at the same place. It seemed like they never had enough privacy.

Looking through the menu Tom frowned seeing the over-priced dishes that were probably small enough to gulp in one bite. He craved a big burger with fries. He looked up to his love interest sitting in front of him and was mildly touched by the concentration Ted Curry's face showed while he was studying the menu and choosing his lunch dish. It was the same concentration he used to hit the ball.

"What about Mrs. Curry?" Tom asked, even though he was glad they were alone.

"She found a rerun of *Neighbours* on TV," Ted replied without looking up from the menu. "She couldn't be happier."

Ted's mother was also his manager and her obsession with what was going on at Ramsay Street was well-known in the tennis circuit and made for much laughter in the locker rooms and players' lounges of the tour. Even though Tom had not met her yet, she seemed fine with Ted's love life and a fun person to be with. But now Tom had to laugh at Ted.

"I'm not talking about your mother but your girlfriend," he laughed.

"Oh, she's the best girlfriend I could wish for," Ted winked at Tom. "Have you seen that interview we did together? She's the best beard in the business."

"Well, it seems she has many, many talents," Tom said. Honestly, he thought, she was a tedious attention seeker and her talent to be absent was his favorite. Tom's foot made contact with Ted's ankle. Ted smiled back at the hidden gesture which made Tom blush.

"So where is she tonight?"

"Oh, busy, very busy. Like a queen bee stirring up the hive."

"Her majesty?" Tom laughed

"Indeed. You know me. So very British." Ted raised his water glass and nodded while locking eyes with his hot date. "God save the Queen."

“Elise!”

Standing at the WTA service desk and organizing photo and interview requests, Candice Crantz had observed the young player for a while until she decided that it might be a good idea to approach Elise who looked a little lost. Elise turned around.

“Wonderful to see you at the party, Elise,” Candice smiled. Elise nodded, quickly scanning the room.

“It’s filling up nicely,” she said. Again, she seemed to search the room.

“Are you waiting for your dad?” Candice asked.

“Oh, no,” Elise said, a little embarrassed by the question, and Candice bit her lip. It wasn’t unusual for some players to be coached by their fathers or mothers and Elise’s dad was a very respected coach. But traveling with a parent also meant that it sometimes impeded the process of growing up.

It was part of Candice’s job to know a little bit about the players and it was good to see that Elise was getting more independent. She had probably banned her dad from coming to the party to have a fun evening without him watching over her.

“How was the interview this morning?” she asked, changing the topic.

“It was fine.” Elise shrugged.

Candice had already seen the little video Tom had produced in the afternoon. He really was a quick and avid assistant and so far she had no objections. But while watching the interview Candice couldn’t help but notice Elise’s sudden reluctance to talk. Tom had edited this part so there wasn’t much to see in the end, but Candice wondered if the young man had hit a soft spot without realizing.

“Tom’s new. I hope he didn’t bore you to death?”

“No, he’s nice,” Elise assured her with a smile. “Is Archie not working for you anymore?”

Candice explained the situation and how she had gotten hold of Tom.

“He’s from England and is a travel photographer. He’s been to India and China before he came to Australia.”

Elise's eyes had become big. "India? I've never been there."

"Tom said he got washed out by the monsoon in the summer and then almost froze to death in China, so he decided to come to Australia in November to warm himself up. He was in Perth during the Hopman Cup and had asked for an accreditation. Paola told me about him and I hired him on the spot."

"And now he will never have to worry about cold feet again," a voice behind them said.

Candice and Elise turned around to Agnes Lion. Candice smiled at the doubles player she knew better than most people thought.

"I've found us a table in the back," Agnes addressed Elise without looking at Candice. "Do you want to spend dinner with us? Monica and some other boring, old doubles players will be there, too. Sounds great, doesn't it?"

Elise laughed. "Yes, it does."

"I'll see you around, Elise," Candice said to the young player.

Then she touched Agnes lightly in the small of her back.

"See you later," she whispered before heading back to the WTA service desk.

"He is finer than frog's hair!" Ted heard a familiar British voice behind him exclaim. He squared his shoulders and smiled, ready to turn around to Robyn and whomever she was talking to.

"And he's terribly fit. Since I saw him in Perth his hair has turned even redder in the Australian sun. It's so hot."

He frowned. Robyn was slobbering over the reporter she had seen in Perth during their press conference. *His* reporter. *His* surfer. Ted turned around and glanced at Robyn and Stephanie Moeller who were looking across the lobby at Tom. He was standing by the red carpet of the players' party taking pictures of the arriving players.

“I know his name,” Stephanie chirped.

“What? How do you know that?”

“He called me.”

Discombobulated, Robyn looked at her friend. Ted had raised his eyebrows, too.

Stephanie grinned, making her way to the buffet. “Well, not exactly. He called my room from the reception desk to tell me to come down to the lobby. You remember the interview I had to do this morning, don’t you? I didn’t know it would be the guy you’ve been talking about for the last two weeks.”

Robyn followed her friend impatiently.

“Will you tell me the name now?”

“Tom,” Stephanie said with a grin. Then she paused dramatically, picking a strawberry cupcake from the buffet table. “Tom Richardson.”

Ted decided it was time to take action. He approached the two girls, grinning waggishly.

“Have you found a new victim?” he laughed. “I should give the poor fellow a warning.”

“Don’t you dare interfere, Ted Curry!” Stephanie gave him a punch in the ribs.

“What are your plans?” Ted searched the buffet. “Will you lure him to a dark place and strap him down with a left-over racquet string?”

“We might,” Robyn giggled.

“Well, well, young ladies, I’d love to witness some naughty action. Give me a call if you catch the Crimson Snapper.”

He picked up a cupcake and popped it into his mouth. Munching it in a devastatingly sexy manner he saluted the girls and stepped a little further down the buffet table to get a salad.

“He hasn’t changed one bit.” he heard Stephanie whisper. “Have you met his new girlfriend yet? She must be crazy to give Ted a go.”

“I told you, I didn’t speak to her. Just saw them together, when they were giving an interview,” Robyn whispered back.

“I heard she works in television,” Stephanie said. “Ted loves these media people, doesn’t he?”

Ted went over to the bar to eat. He smiled in relief. Everyone was buying it. An old-fashioned rock and roll tune was playing in the background.

Even on the loo she was pestered by terrible music. From the speakers came something that sounded like elevator music. Why can’t a human being enjoy some silence at times, Sasha wondered. She slammed the door of her toilet booth and sat down on the lid. After picking up some goodies at the buffet she had engaged in a nice conversation with Angela Porovski, a very funny German girl. They had talked about the peril the abundance of food at the players’ parties presented for their tummies when German team mate Carina Gnocchi showed up and snatched Angela away from Sasha to cheer Luella Galloway’s karaoke performance of “I Heard It Through The Grapevine”.

Carina, the Knocker. Sasha swore she would knock the pesky German out of the No. 1 spot. She could be the queen of tennis again. She knew she just had to work harder than ever. Good thing she had abjured long-legged distraction for now. Looking, but not touching was the device that would get her back to the top. It had worked in the past and it would work again. There was nothing to take her mind off the tennis.

The restroom’s door was pushed open. The music from the speakers mingled with the music outside. Obviously Luella Galloway had been dragged off the stage as someone else was performing a horrible impersonation of Enrique Martinez’s new song. Sasha could make out two pairs of high-heels clicking over the bathroom floor. Without making a sound Sasha lifted her own feet off the ground so they wouldn’t show under the toilet door.

“Your sister is very funny,” a young voice said. Sasha knew the melodic sound of it but couldn’t place it.

“Yes,” another girl answered. “If she’s in a good mood, she can be very entertaining.”

That was Gabriella Galloway, Sasha thought. They were talking about Lulu.

“So, you know Agnes,” Gabriella said to the other girl. “Are you trading books with her?”

“What?” The other girl sounded offended.

“I saw that you gave Agnes a *Tennis Nurse* novel. Which episode was it?”

Now, wasn’t that interesting, Sasha thought. Gabriella Galloway knew about the *Tennis Nurse* series?

“I didn’t read it,” the other girl snapped. “Agnes gave it to me over Christmas, but I had other things to do. I didn’t even open it!”

There was a silence on the other side of the door. Sasha could only hear the water running. Then a pair of heels turned and walked to the door. Audibly, Gabriella breathed in over the clicking sound.

“Elise, I’m sorry,” Sasha heard the American say but the door had already closed.

Elise? Sasha sat up straight in surprise. The only person Sasha knew with this name was Elise Renard. Sasha shook her head in amazement. Of course, she could remember the face now. She silently began to chuckle but burst into laughter as soon as Gabriella had left the restroom. The best thing about the whole scene was that Elise Renard denied reading *Tennis Nurse*.

Sasha hadn’t laughed so much for quite a while.

They’d got lost, Amanda was sure of it. She had seen that painting on the hotel corridor only five minutes ago. Obviously Natsumi Takashima and Mint Rickenbacher were running in circles, unable to find their rooms which wasn’t surprising at all given the amount of punch they had swallowed.

“We’ve been here before,” she shouted after the two girls in front of her.

“Hear, hear, who’s talking to us again?” Mint shouted back. “Are you done calling Felicia?”

Amanda frowned. Mint had spent the whole evening with the group. She was loud-mouthed and cocky and it looked like she and Natsumi would share a room tonight – if they found it.

“She’s not answering the phone,” Amanda said with a slur. She wasn’t exactly sober herself. Catching up to the two girls who rested against the wall she looked at the display on her cell phone. Why wasn’t Felicia answering? She must have tried a thousand times now. “There must be something wrong with her phone. She explicitly told me to call her when I get back to the hotel.”

“You have been trying non-stop for thirty minutes now,” Natsumi declared with an unsteady voice. “It’s her turn now to call you. She will see that you called her.” The Japanese pushed herself from the wall, grabbed Mint’s arm and hobbled down the hallway.

Maybe she should go to her room and wait for Felicia’s call, Amanda wondered. She looked around to locate where her room might be when a loud bump followed by a scream made her jump. It had come from around the corner. The girls! She began to run. Turning around the corridor corner she saw Mint lying on the floor with a girl in a short turquoise dress while Natsumi was holding on to the wall laughing at the scene. Amanda recognized the young girl as Elise Renard. Apparently Mint had knocked over the German when she had exited the elevator.

“Oh, Elise. *Quelle surprise!*” Rolling on the floor Mint was moving very closely to Elise’s neck, pretending to sniff her perfume. “I like that. What is that?”

Elise shook her head in embarrassment. She looked confounded by Mint’s bluntness and sat up quickly, ready to flee the drunk girls but stopped dead when she saw Amanda approaching.

“Why don’t you join us, Lizzy?” the American suggested grabbing Elise in a headlock. “Looks like Amanda’s been let

down by her famous girlfriend. You could step in? We don't want her to be lonely tonight, do we? What do you say?"

Amanda looked at Natsumi who had stopped laughing. Mint was going too far. The Australian grabbed the protesting Mint, pulled her away from Elise and handed her over to Natsumi, who dragged her away from the scene. When the two girls had vanished around the next corner, Amanda reached out her hand to Elise who was still sitting on the floor.

"Are you alright?"

Elise nodded slowly, then took the Australian's hand and Amanda pulled her up. It was only one year ago when they had sat on that porch in Charleston in the night air, but she sensed a change in the young woman. Her mellow exuberance that had warmed their conversation was overshadowed by a breeze of acridness.

"Sorry about Mint," Amanda muttered. Elise just shrugged. Amanda hoped she would say something but the young German kept staring at the ground. Then she looked up and gave Amanda a little smile.

"Thank you," Elise said and without another word she walked away.

REVELATIONS

Melbourne, Australia

“Why now? Why not wait till we get back home?” Gabriella followed her sister through the corridor of their Melbourne hotel.

“Because we need one. That’s why. Just look at you!” Luella turned around, pointing at Gaga’s hips.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying I’m not fit? I played two matches today!”

“We need to get fitter!” Lulu grabbed Gaga’s hand and pulled her through the door of Room 324. Inside Mick, their coach was waiting. He had a bored face, knowing that he would have nothing to say in the procedures that were about to take place.

“You are late, girls! They are already waiting.” He pointed to the door that connected the room with the next one.

“Good,” Lulu said sitting down in a chair. “Where are their CVs? And can I get a water, please?” She clapped her hands and Mick got up to look for a glass of water.

Gabriella found herself a lounge chair in the back of the room. She had no intention of taking part in the show except to prevent the worst. She sighed. As if her day had not been

strenuous enough, Luella had set up job interviews for a new fitness trainer feeling that they needed one as soon as possible after the previous trainer had left them without warning, after only a week in Brisbane. It was typical for Luella to rush things. That was her way on the court and off the court. That was also the reason Gabriella was the more consistent player. It was a fact the twins never spoke about as they both knew their careers were a joint effort.

Today Gaga had played both the singles match for Luella and an arduous doubles match together with her sister. After the doubles match she had to convince her sister, that she couldn't possibly play the match against Sasha the next day. She felt exhausted and needed the free day that was granted the players at a Grand Slam. This evening she would have preferred to talk about tactics for Lulu's match but Luella was already involved in the inspection of tanned, buff Latino guys.

Latino guys? Yes, all of them, Gabriella realized when scanning the room.

After another twenty minutes she was convinced that Luella had made the pre-selection of suitable contenders based solely on their resemblance to Enrique Martinez. Was that the name of that Spanish rock singer Lulu would listen to all the time? Gabriella couldn't remember even though she had to endure his music on every drive between the hotel and the tournament site.

She closed her eyes and frowned. Now she had one of his terrible tunes stuck in her head. She tried to think of something neutral like tennis balls flying over a net and soon fell asleep on the big, comfortable couch. She missed the big moment when Lulu proudly announced Rafael as new fitness coach for the Galloway twins.

"Any new names?" Lynn asked Agnes. They were sitting on a couch in a cozy restaurant back room for a special private

function. Several players along with a few umpires and officials had gathered for the regular Grand Slam *Tennis Nurse* Trading Dinner.

“Are you spying on me for the Love Game?” Agnes laughed. Lynn gave her a wink which confirmed Agnes’s suspicion but the French player shook her head.

“Too early to tell, Lynn. There is someone I’m keeping an eye on. I actually gave her a *Tennis Nurse* novel which she gave back to me – at the players’ party of all places. She insisted she never opened it but the battered state the book is in and her clumsy attempt to give it back under the table suggest she knows the story.”

On a table next to Lynn and Agnes a furious bargaining battle was evolving. Natsumi Takashima was one of the few players who had already read the brand-new *Tennis Nurse and The Case of the Handsome Hungarian* that had come out around Christmas.

The Japanese demanded three used novels for her new one.

“I’ll give you *The Girl with the Broken Racquet* and *The Mystery of Court 69*. But three are too much.” Cecilia García López purred into Natsumi’s ear.

“Chill out, Chili. There is no way I’ll give that book away for only two novels. Also, I’ve already read *Court 69* two years ago.”

Mint joined their conversation. She had a huge collection of rare *Tennis Nurse* novels and Chili knew she could outbid her anytime.

“What about a signed copy of *Tennis Nurse and The Secret Tournament*?”

Natsumi gasped. *The Secret Tournament* was a limited edition and the signature in Mint’s copy was of none other than Monica Jordan who was rumored to have had an affair with the unknown author of the series.

“Are you serious?” Natsumi asked but already knew the answer when Mint cracked up laughing.

“No, girl. You know I will never give away that copy,” Mint grinned. “But I could offer three for one. How about *The Girl with the Fire Eyes*, *The Case of the Grumpy Umpire* and *The Girl who Slipped Through The Net*?”

Chili was out of the deal and she knew it. Mint always did that. Whenever Chili was trying to make an impression on someone else Mint would interfere and draw all the attention to herself. Sometimes the Spaniard wondered why she bothered at all. Angrily, she got up and looked for another table. In the far corner she spotted Morgana Doré with a pile of *Tennis Nurse* novels before her. Only two hours ago the French girl had advanced to the semifinal beating Angela Porovski 11-9 in the third set.

“Is that your way of recovering from a tough three-setter?” Chili asked when she approached Morgana.

“I will not stay long,” Morgana smiled. “I just want to trade some of my copies.” She gestured for Chili to sit down and opened one of her novels.

“Look, I made annotations and explanatory notes for a better understanding. It is really important to know all this background information to fully grasp the impact of these novels,” Morgana explained to an astonished Chili.

“You scribbled all over the books!” Chili exclaimed. The book was messed up with Morgana’s handwriting. She shook her head but Morgana seemed very proud of her work.

“*Mais oui*, it makes the reading between the lines easier, you see.”

“Well, I assume, most of us understand the sexual innuendo without foot notes.”

“But there’s so much more to it than that,” Morgana almost screamed. Everyone in the room looked up and glanced over to Chili and Morgana. Now the French player addressed the whole room.

“Can’t you see it? Don’t you understand it? These novels are about us.”

Blimey O'Reilly!

The words tried to burst out of Tom's throat but he swallowed them back immediately. Looking for the men's bathroom he had turned a corner of what he had assumed to be a deserted corridor behind the WTA offices only to witness one of the surprises one usually encountered only during wild players' parties. There were Martina Rodriguez and Antonia Sapore leaning against each other on a wall, happily smooching and canoodling along.

Astonished, Tom crouched behind some big potted, bushy plants that were stored away in the corridor and watched the scene for a few seconds. Then he slowly pulled his camera out of the large bag he carried over his shoulder and aimed it at the couple. Lost in their caressing, Antonia and Martina didn't hear the snapping of the camera and when Tom finally let go of the release button he had taken nearly forty photos.

Once he was back in his hotel room, he sat down at the table and started his computer. He had already looked through the pictures on his camera while he was in the elevator. There were some really good ones from an artistic point of view. He wondered how they would look in black and white. But then again he had to admit these pictures were quite simply a nice scoop.

It had been amusing to find himself suddenly in the position of a paparazzo. Perhaps he should consider another change of job, he thought chuckling, and as much as he wasn't into that shady side of journalism, there was nothing wrong with a harmless play of thoughts and considering the money such a picture could bring.

However, while loading the picture to his computer Tom concluded that it was probably not really that much money as Martina and Antonia were not very well-known players. Only in their home countries could these picture create a stir. He suddenly realized that such a photo of him and Ted would cause an even bigger scandal in Great Britain as everyone assumed Ted was the

biggest lady-killer of the tennis world. His last TV advertisement was clearly feeding on this image.

This photo of Martina and Antonia – as much as it had delighted him taking it while hidden behind the bushes – could definitely harm the two players. Moreover, publishing such a photo was certainly against the rules. Tom was sure about it. Not that he had bothered to actually read the hundreds and hundreds of pages of confidentiality notes he had to sign when he had started his job with the WTA.

Tom bit his lower lip. Should he just delete the pictures? They were too good to be erased. Also, he couldn't deny that he loved a juicy secret and the thrill of hiding in the shadows had exquisitely lifted his mood. Stumbling upon them and feeling the excitement of shooting something forbidden was a welcome distraction from his everyday duties. He was wondering if someone else knew about Monica's and Antonia's affair or if he had exclusive knowledge. He was almost certain that at least he had exclusive picture material.

Of course, he wouldn't sell the photos but it wouldn't do anybody any harm if he did a little research here and there. He smiled while thinking back to his teenage years when he had dreamt of becoming an investigative journalist who was taking on the world of politics and crime. Why not take on the world of affairs in the WTA instead? He laughed happily. It was wonderful. He had so much to catch up on. He had to know every single detail about this secret dating world. For how long had they been going at it? Who knew about them? Were there other couples? So many questions that were now dancing in his dizzy head and making him as happy as a boy on Christmas Day.

It was a glorious evening and Tamara Parova and Yelena Kovalenko felt the need to celebrate their first doubles quarterfinal of the year with a nice dinner at a good restaurant. They had played together only a couple of times before the

Australian Open but they complemented each other really well and had achieved their first success in Tokyo last year by reaching the final, followed by their first trophy in Moscow. Even though they were both regarded as singles players foremost doubles seemed like good fun as they had become good friends and it also served their skills at the net.

They had chosen a seafood Bar & Grill not far from the hotel with a nice terrace but the restaurant terrace was already jam-packed and they agreed to take a table inside. They had just begun to sip soft drinks when a small scene at the restaurant's reception desk caught their eye. A tall blonde woman was arguing with the girl who had just showed Tamara and Yelena to their table. Obviously something had gone wrong with her reservation. There was also a woman with curly red hair who seemed embarrassed by the disturbance her friend caused. She looked constantly to the exit apparently ready to split any second.

Soon several staff members marched out to the terrace and approached an elderly couple. From the gestures of the waiters and the couple Yelena concluded that the waiters explained that there had been a mistake with their reservation and the couple had to move to a different table to make space for the new guests.

"Who do they think they are?" Tamara shook her head in disgust when the blonde and the red-haired woman passed their table. She had only seen their backs but Yelena who was seated in the corner had a better view. With a surprised look on her face she turned to her friend.

"That was the Oister! With Felicia Del Castro!"

"Oyster? I didn't order oyster," Tamara was confused.

"I mean, Amanda," Yelena clarified. "That was Amanda, the Oister."

Tamara shook her head. "Why is Amanda an oyster?"

Yelena stared at her partner in disbelief. "I can't believe you haven't heard that nickname before. Amanda Auster. Auster! Combined with 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi Oi Oi' it's become Oister," she explained, even singing the Australian shout of encouragement for Tamara. But the Russian didn't seem to

understand. With a little sigh, Yelena turned her head around the corner to watch the two women sit down at the free table.

“Felicia is a singer and TV show host. She’s also Australian,” she whispered.

Tamara shrugged, unconcerned by the news. Yelena was three years younger than her and apparently knew all sorts of celebrities. Tamara had never heard of that singer and she didn’t care anyway as their food arrived and they dug in.

“I didn’t know Amanda was friends with celebrities. She seems so low key all the time,” Tamara wondered while skillfully butchering a big lobster. “Maybe this Felicia is an old friend from school?”

“Yes, maybe a friend.”

Yelena stole another glance around the corner. The table Amanda and Felicia were sitting at now was at the far end of the terrace hidden from the other outside tables by a bamboo hedgerow, but from inside Tamara and Yelena had a good view of the pair through the glass window. She almost dropped her spoon into the soup bowl. Felicia was bending forward over the table and kissing Amanda Auster. Then she leaned back again and gave the red-haired tennis player a huge smile.

“Or maybe not,” Yelena gasped. She turned her head to Tamara for confirmation, but the Russian was occupied with cracking a pincer. She never saw the kiss and Yelena decided to keep it to herself.

The bamboo saved them from curious looks, but Amanda couldn’t help feeling nervous. Felicia had kissed her for five seconds. She had counted. It was stupid, Amanda thought, but she couldn’t enjoy the soft lips on hers. Instead she had grown stiff as soon as Felicia had reached over the table.

How daring her new girlfriend was! It was incredible. Sometimes Felicia was even reckless. Especially when driving a car. And ruthless. Amanda would have loved to hold the singer

back but she insisted on getting the table on the terrace. She felt terrible that the older couple had to move inside but now she saw the advantage of sitting far away from the other guests.

What if someone had seen them? Felicia didn't seem to care. While sipping her water Amanda observed her new lover and still couldn't believe how lucky she was. A tennis player didn't seem a very interesting match for a TV and music star. But there she was, sitting in a fancy restaurant with a blonde bombshell.

Amanda wondered whether Felicia ever worried about being seen. She was a TV personality. She was a pop singer. Girls in show business always made out with each other at parties, the more pictures taken the better. It was part of their PR strategy. Besides that, more and more people were coming out in show business. It seemed very en vogue right now.

Amanda hesitated.

"Have you ever thought of coming out?" she whispered over the table.

Felicia looked up from her fish and raised her eyebrows.

"Are you serious? Of course, not. I want to sell a couple of records before I die."

"I was just wondering," Amanda mumbled and turned back to her seafood pizza.

"Have you thought about it?" Felicia asked. Her voice had a piercing tone now.

"No, no!" Amanda assured her. "Absolutely not."

But in reality – . She couldn't deny that for a split second she had seen herself and Felicia together. In public. Holding hands.

They could walk down the street like a couple. Go shopping for groceries. When Amanda won a tournament she could climb into the player's box and kiss Felicia. They wouldn't have to oust old people from their table. They could be like anyone else.

"Good," Felicia said. "I really don't want any trouble."

“Morgana Doré versus Angela Porovski. France versus Germany. Wine versus beer.”

Hugh Andrews was a nice guy and a pretty pleasant colleague, but Samantha Watts couldn't help but shake her head. She was certain that it was only a matter of time until the British commentator would come up with an Eiffel Tower reference.

She also knew the reason why Hugh was so hyped up this morning. Sitting between Sam and Hugh was the retired Belgium Grand Slam champion Michelle van der Boom and who would be a guest commentator for this match. She was always the reason that guys went crazy.

Sam chuckled silently. If Hugh knew about Michelle – or Boom Boom as she was called for good reason – he would have been bitterly disappointed. She checked her microphone which was ready to go, when all of a sudden the countdown appeared in big, bold red letters in front of them and within a minute, they were on the air. Quarterfinals day. That meant excitement and hopefully several high-quality matches.

“Good afternoon everyone. It is Samantha Watts commenting for Supersport.”

“And I'm Hugh Andrews and we will be here for you for all quarterfinals today.”

“Joining us for the first quarterfinal is Michelle van der Boom.”

The Belgium greeted the audience with her smooth voice and Sam could see Hugh giving the mocca-brown beauty an approving side glance.

“And will see Morgana Doré from France taking on Angela Porovski from Germany,” Sam continued. “Any thoughts, Hugh?”

Taken by surprise Hugh Andrews nodded and concentrated back on the tennis.

“The Eiffel Tower versus the autobahn.”

Bang! That was quick, Sam thought, glad that Hugh was continuing with his analysis.

“It's the first time that Porovski makes it to the quarterfinals while Doré is obviously the more experienced

player and one of the favorites of the tournament,” Hugh mused. But the German seems to be really in top form this week so my guess is that both will have their chances.”

The players entered the court. It was the same routine as ever – official picture at the net, the umpire in charge of the toss and finally the warm-up. Tennis was a world made of a thousand rituals and Sam loved it.

“The German’s strong forehand will be challenged by the Frenchwoman’s effective serve and groundstrokes,” Michelle picked up the commenting. “It should be a very tight match even though Morgana is a hot contender as you just said. But let’s not forget that Porovski is a very hard worker. She is extremely fit and could become the surprise of this tournament.”

Besides being tireless and ambitious, Angela Porovski was a fun character – one of the rare gems that showed up from time to time on the tour. The German was well appreciated among the girls and her extroverted personality brought along a lightness that was well needed at times. As both players went to their respective sides of the net, Samantha Watts leaned forward on her desk and took a deep breath.

Down on the court Rumanian umpire Anastasia Stea switched on her microphone.

“Angela Porovski to serve.”

She felt the excitement in her every vein. In every muscle. In her toes. She wanted to burst into a little sprint, punch the walls of the stadium and hand out high fives to the spectators who were cheering for her. But instead she regally walked off the court into the catacombs of the Rod Laver Arena with her little trademark wave.

She was back. Back in the game, back in the ring and she just made her first semifinal since she had been runner-up at the U.S. Open two years ago. Who would say now she was over and done for? Sasha was already looking forward to the press

conference. Entering the locker room her joy gave way to a commiserative feeling. There was Gabriella Galloway whom she had just beaten sitting in the corner of the room. She looked teary. Sasha knew how a loss in a Grand Slam quarterfinal felt. Perhaps a few comforting words would be nice? Sasha hesitated.

She wasn't disliked by the other players. But the fact that she had been so successful at an early age separated her from her peers. They looked up to her and at the same time feared her as she was known for her will to win. And today she had proven again that this will was unbroken. She might have lost the first set to Gabriella but she fought her way back into the match, saved two match points and forced a tiebreak in the second set which she eventually won. The third set had been her show. She won the match 3-6, 7-6, 6-2.

Sasha crossed the room and Gabriella quickly got up and walked over to her locker, avoiding Sasha's eyes. While she passed the Czech player Sasha followed her with a side glance. Gabriella had a fine body and her long dark hair looked even darker when it was wet. And she apparently read *Tennis Nurse* novels. Sasha couldn't help grinning. She loved the fact that she knew a little secret. Yes, she should say something nice, she decided.

"You made me work really hard," Sasha said looking at Gabriella's back.

"Yes." Gabriella didn't look her way but was taking out a towel.

"Perhaps your sister will have the chance to get revenge for you in the final," Sasha said with a smile. There was a chance that Luella Galloway would make it to the final. She had been playing exceptionally well the last couple of days and several experts predicted a final clash between Luella and Sasha. The younger woman turned around to face Sasha. There was cold fury in her eyes.

"If you ever make it to the final," she spit out before she rushed off to the showers. It sounded like a warning. Sasha was surprised. The outburst was uncalled for and – unlike her sister –

Gabriella was known as a mostly friendly though reserved girl. The loss must have hurt her badly. Sasha shook her head.

She took a shower herself and when she got out, Gabriella had already changed, ready to leave the room. Sasha approached the younger player with a smile.

“Listen, I just tried to be nice. I know what it feels like,” she said. Then she winked at Gabriella “Maybe you just need some time-out with a certain tennis nurse to smile again?” It was an attempt to pull Gabriella onto common ground and create the secret unity an allusion to the *Tennis Nurse* trash novels always produced.

“What are you talking about?” Gabriella looked at her with real incomprehension in her eyes before she left the locker room. Sasha was stunned. This girl had never heard of *Tennis Nurse*.

“Who is serving right now?” Stephanie Moeller squinted her eyes and took a good look at the two doubles players on the court.

“It’s Lulu,” Robyn answered.

“No, it’s Gaga.” Yelena Kovalenko said, who sat next to them. “Lulu started serving, right? It’s 4-4 now, so that must be Gaga.”

All three of them stared intently at the twins for a minute then looked at each other shaking their heads. It was ridiculous to even try telling the sisters apart.

“She served it down the T at 115 mph. That must be Lulu,” Stephanie insisted.

“She also got it over the net. So it must be Gaga.” Yelena snickered.

They were watching the doubles quarterfinal between the twins and Monica Jordan and Agnes Lion. The old doubles partners gave the twins a good run-around, chipping and charging with the prowess of their experience. At the net they successfully nullified the high-paced balls of the younger players.

“They could play blindfolded. They click like no other team,” Robyn pondered after the older doubles team had broken Luella and Gabriella and advanced to a 5-4 lead.

“Together they are twenty years older than Lulu and Gaga,” Yelena calculated.

“That’s wicked. I hope I’ll be playing in fifteen, twenty years from now,” Robyn said.

“But you’d rather play mixed with a certain hot player, wouldn’t you?” Stephanie gave her friend a huge grin.

“Oh, please. I’m so over Ted.” Robyn waved the thought away.

“Did I miss something?” Yelena looked up, her eyes wide open.

“No,” Robyn protested. “It was just a temporary lapse of sanity. Nothing serious. Besides, he has this famous girlfriend now.”

“An Aussie singer. Felicia Del Castro,” Stephanie explained to Yelena. “She worked on the telly and now makes bad auto-tune pop music.”

“Yes, I know,” Yelena said slowly. “And she is with Ted Curry?”

“Yes,” Robyn nodded. “Happily ever after if you believe the yellow press.”

For a moment Yelena said nothing, just watched the balls flying over the net until Luella – or perhaps Gaga – smacked one into the net and the applauding spectators brought her back from thinking about the incident she had witnessed last night. She took a deep breath and turned to the two British girls. Then she stopped herself with her mouth open.

Stephanie looked up surprised to see the excitement in Yelena’s eyes. “What?”

“Nothing.” Yelena was still unsure what to do.

“What is it?” Now even Robyn insisted on knowing. Yelena rolled her eyes. Too late now to duck out of it.

“Okay, I’ll tell you. But you have to promise not to tell anyone, alright?”

Robyn and Stephanie looked at each other with huge grins, then looked back at Yelena.

“Sure, we promise.”

Gabriella sat down on the bed and shook her head. It was unbelievable! Luella had to be joking! But looking up to her twin sister she knew she wasn't.

Lulu had just admitted with a sheepish grin that losing the match she had played for Gabriella was mainly due to exhaustion, and that her fatigue was related to a nightly training session with Rafael, their new fitness trainer whom Lulu clearly had chosen because of his stunning resemblance with rock singer Enrique Martinez. What about tennis? What about their professional career?

It was the second tournament in a row where Luella had lost a match while playing for Gabriella. Soon Gaga would have to worry about her ranking, if Luella continued to mess up their game plans like that. But her sister seemed unperturbed by Gabriella's anger.

“Don't be so upset,” Luella moaned. “A quarterfinal isn't too bad. Besides that you lost your match too, playing for me.”

Gabriella gasped. She had lost fair and square against a stronger opponent today. Not because of fatigue caused by nightly activity. For a second, she thought about getting her revenge by deleting all the Enrique Martinez songs from her sister's MP3 player.

“This is the first match this season I lost playing for you – and I gave it all,” she defended herself furiously. “That's why we switch matches, Lu! So we have a better chance of winning against players with different game styles.”

But while saying this out loud she only realized that it wasn't the lost match that bothered her. She could accept a loss. Everyone lost once in a while, having a bad day or facing a strong opponent. She was upset because Luella had taken the loss

without hesitation or regrets. Would she have stayed up all night if she had played for herself? Gabriella doubted it. She waited for Lulu's reply but her twin just shrugged.

Gabriella shook her head. "Next time I will crash the car myself," she said disappointedly.

"Don't be so huffy," Luella snorted. "I know what's wrong with you. You're jealous of me."

That actually made Gabriella laugh. "Jealous?"

"Because I get all the attention, while you stay in your hotel room reading every night like a spinster." That struck home.

Gabriella got up. She needed to get out of the room. Her sister was right. Luella was never lonely. She had a persistent entourage of hot guys lining up for her. What did she know about Gabriella and her feelings?

"Plus," Lulu added smugly. "I'm hotter than you."

Gaga had always been glad to have a twin sister as it was more than useful on the tour. They were never lonely like so many of the other players. They stuck together and could rely on each other at any time. But right now she just wanted to be alone. She never wanted to hear any of Luella's bed stories again, she was fed up with her sister's constant change of direction when they planned the draw and she was sick of being the younger half, who once more had to wait courtside for her big sister to pick up the prize, the compliments and the ranking points. For the first time in Gabriella's life she wished she was an only child.

"We look exactly the same," Gaga said calmly walking to the door. But Luella wouldn't let go of her that easily.

"At least you're not the one who has to deal with Sasha's advances. She hits on me all the time."

Sasha? Advances? All the time? Already outside the door, Gabriella stopped in her tracks. What was Lulu talking about? She turned around only to face the closed door. Luella had slammed it shut. Again.

A CHANGE IS GONNA COME

Indian Wells, United States

“Sasha is on fire,” Paola Scetti remarked, looking over the mountain ridges of Indian Wells.

“She’s cruising through the matches like a rocket,” Samantha Watts agreed. Sasha Mrachova had beaten Elise Renard in the second round of the tournament, getting a bye in the first, and then had taken out fellow German Stephanie Moeller in the third round in straight sets. Today she would play the top seed Carina Gnocchi, another German.

As the week evolved, it had been the talk in the press room that Sasha was slaying the German girls one after another. If she won against Carina today and Angela Porovski won her match as well, there would be another German – Czech encounter in the semifinal. Everyone was looking forward to it, and it wasn’t unlikely to happen, as Carina had had problems with Sasha’s game in the past. The Czech led the head to head by five to two.

“Elise Renard didn’t look bad, however. She is finally finding her shots again.”

They were sitting outside of the commentary box on a bench for a little chat. There was not too much time left until the first quarterfinal of the day.

"I like to see her play doubles. She will be a fine doubles player one day. Getting better at the net with every match." Sam checked her watch. Twenty minutes left. Sometimes she envied Paola's light-hearted handling of time and appointments. Sam had never been late. Not as a player and not since she was working as a commentator.

"It's good to see the young ones stepping up to the task, even though they still struggle at times," Paola mused.

Sam nodded. The older players in the Top 10 were struggling with form and there was a chance for the young guns to do real damage this spring. Yelena Kovalenko, a former No. 3, had just fallen out of the Top 10 after the Australian Open, and even though Tamara Parova was one of the more consistent players out there she had once again failed to take home a Grand Slam title in Melbourne. Marieke Bender had been the winner against Sasha in the final. But Marieke injured herself shortly after the Australian Open in a bike accident. She couldn't play for several weeks and was expected back at the earliest for the European clay season. Only Sasha Mrachova, who belonged neither to the younger generation nor to the players who already pushed the thirty years mark, seemed to draw from a never-ending source of will power.

"It's been a long, long time coming but I sense a change is gonna come." Paola hummed.

"I know," Sam corrected her, but Paola mistook Sam's answer as confirmation of her observation. They kept on staring at the skyline when Paola suddenly jumped up with a loud gasp.

"Hell, I have an interview!" She checked her watch already knowing she was too late. Sam began to chuckle.

"Who is waiting for you?"

"Ted Curry and that Aussie singer. What's her name?"

"Felicia Del Castro," Sam said. "They make a glamorous couple, don't they? Doesn't she start her U.S. tour next week?"

“Yes, in L.A. That’s the reason she is here. A little bit of quality time with Ted, I suppose. But today we will take a look behind the scenes and spotlight the grinding fitness regimes these two go through in order to look like they do. Should be fun. Something for the guys and the ladies, you see,” Paola shouted as she hurried down the stairs, waving good-bye to Samantha Watts, who herself got up and went to the commentator box. It was time.

There wasn’t much to do other than watching the on-going match. Yelena Kovalenko had just gone up a break on Angela Porovski in the second set. If Yelena could take the set they would head into a decider.

Sasha sighed. She was sitting on a couch in the players’ lounge, waiting. How much of her time did she spend waiting for her match? Sasha couldn’t tell. Too much, definitely. She checked her cell phone again. Her fiancé had asked her to join him in London for a sports store opening. It’s been too long since they had been seen together. The press demanded fodder and her management demanded reassurance that she took her job seriously. She decided to call Jaro. He was a nice guy after all and surely was dealt the more difficult hand as a football player. She looked around to check if no one was listening, but the players’ lounge was eerily empty.

She was just skipping through her phone book for his number when the door opened and a familiar face looked in. Gabriella! Why did she have to join the lounge now to wait for her match? The American would play Amanda Auster who had made an inspiring run to the fourth round in Melbourne as well as here in Indian Wells. Everyone was most surprised, especially as Amanda suddenly seemed able to overcome her annual slumping in the Australian season. Gabriella would have a hard time against the redhead.

Sasha looked away quickly. No need to engage in a conversation with Gaga after their last meeting. Gabriella’s brash

reaction in the locker room had caused Sasha to become even more careful. Why on earth did she have to mention *Tennis Nurse*? That had been grossly negligent of Sasha. The incident had also confused her profoundly. It didn't make sense. She had heard Gabriella talking to Elise in the bathroom of the Melbourne players' party. Gabriella did know about the *Tennis Nurse* novels – whereas Elise denied having read it. Well, that was no wonder. Sasha shook her head thinking about the German girl. But why would Gabriella have denied it when Sasha had alluded to the novel series? She had no reason to mistrust Sasha. And she had not only denied it, but had seemed completely ignorant of it. It just didn't make sense.

Unless –. A thought suddenly dawned on Sasha. Of course, that must be it! It wasn't Gaga she had overheard talking to Elise in the rest room, it was Luella! She wrongly assumed it was Gaga, but now that she thought about it, she realized Elise had never mentioned a name. They were twins! They not only looked the same, Sasha scolded herself, they also talked the same. They were just the same. Only Luella was apparently gay and Gabriella bitchy. At least after losing a match. Sasha still couldn't understand why the otherwise friendly player had displayed such a bad demeanor.

She looked up and turned her head to see where Gabriella had sat down, but stopped midway. Gabriella was standing right behind her smiling down at her.

“Hi,” the American said. She seemed to wait for an invitation to sit down.

“Hey.” Sasha tried to remain reserved.

“May I?” Gaga asked politely. Sasha shrugged.

With a side glance she followed a still smiling Gaga who sat down next to her. From the corner of her eye she watched Gaga staring at the TV monitor. Would she apologize for her outburst? Gabriella just smiled and gave her a quick glance once in a while. Sasha couldn't believe Gabriella pretended to have forgotten about the locker room encounter. What was going on here? She was just about to run through all the incidents with the Galloway sisters again when Gaga pointed to the screen.

“You have to get ready.”

Sasha looked up at the TV. Recovering from her low, Angela had won the second set and the match against Yelena. Sasha gave Gabriella a confused nod and got up. It was her turn now against Carina, the Knocker, and she was looking forward to it.

“Hello, losers!” A beaming Angela Porovski entered the cozy restaurant room of the hotel. The other three German girls were already waiting for her and sipping drinks. They moved over and Angela sat down at the table. Unlike Angela all the other girls had lost their matches today. Elise Renard and Stephanie Moeller lost their doubles match and Carina Gnocchi had just come back from the tournament site being defeated by a fierce Sasha Mrachova.

“I was just saying that it’s always so much more fun playing joint tournaments,” Stephanie explained to Angela.

“Oh, yeah!” Angela answered, skipping through the menu. “I hope I can increase my chances with Rufino.” Angela smiled when she thought about the hot Spaniard.

“I don’t understand what you see in him,” Carina said. “He makes funny sounds when he plays.”

“I like him anyway,” Angela said, giving the girls a big grin. “So, what about you? New favorite hotties, anyone?”

Stephanie laughed. “Not for me. Still busy with my old ones!” Angela shook her head but not without admiration. For the last eight months Stephanie had successfully been managing to have affairs with two ATP players without them knowing of each other. Carina just met Stephanie’s remark with a sneer. She disapproved of the love triangle and looked over to a silent Elise, who seemed to share Carina’s sense of decency.

“It’s just not appropriate, right?” Not waiting for Elise’s answer Carina continued talking. “Who do you like, Elise?” Angela and Stephanie turned around to Elise. They also wanted

to know what was going on in their friend's life. Angela gave her shy colleague an encouraging nod, but Elise began to panic.

"I don't like anyone in particular," she began with faltering lips, when Stephanie already interrupted her with an irritated sigh.

"You are such a bore, do you know that? I cannot believe you are half-French. Aren't the French supposed to be completely oversexed all the time?" She turned to Carina missing that Elise blushed heavily. "Let's see what the Italian likes."

"I like Ted Curry. Because he is a gentleman," Carina answered with confidence, glad that the attention was back on her.

"Ted Curry a gentlemen?" Stephanie blurted out. "Not every Brit is a gentleman, Carina!"

"He also has a girlfriend," Angela remarked.

Carina rolled her eyes. "I can wait," she said.

"Well, probably you don't have to wait much longer," Stephanie said mysteriously. She tended to her drink, sipping it slowly through the straw. Angela and Carina leaned forward.

"What do you know, that we don't?"

"You'll never guess it," Stephanie grinned. "It's the best."

"Come on," Angela pressed.

"Alright, I'll tell you." Stephanie leaned forward to the other girls, then she whispered, "That new girlfriend of Ted's – she is having an affair." She paused again for a dramatic moment. "With another player, we all know."

"Who?" Angela and Carina almost screamed in unison. Stephanie grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Ted's girl is slurping the Oyster, my dears!"

Angela was the first to get the pun. She let out a loud wail of excitement. That was fun news, indeed! While Stephanie and Angela giggled, Carina winced and moaned in disgust. Elise also seemed quite taken aback by the news.

"It's not a big deal, ladies," Angela addressed her two friends.

“It’s a sin!” Carina exclaimed. Her piety only made Angela and Stephanie scream with laughter.

“They are not married, Carina. She can do whatever she wants,” Stephanie defended the unfaithful girlfriend.

“It’s bad enough that she sleeps around,” Carina snapped. “But with a girl? That’s just sick!”

A heated argument erupted among Stephanie, Angela and Carina. Elise’s repeated attempts to excuse herself went unnoticed in the loud clamoring. Only Angela noticed when Elise finally got up and left the room.

The good thing about dating a tennis player was the lover’s body shape, Tom mused. Ted had muscles everywhere – muscles that popped up unexpectedly when he moved, small muscles, huge muscles and muscles that came in handy when he held Tom. Alright, alright, Tom told himself while lying on his back with his eyes closed, Ted Curry had other qualities as well. He was dashing, very British, very funny and for once, he was playing the same tournament as all the girls. It had been so long since they had seen each other. Actually, now that Tom thought about it, they hadn’t had a night together since the Australian Open. But now they were back together and they had promised each other they would take advantage of it. The tour had a long and cruel schedule for lovebirds. There must be more couples on the tennis circuit, Tom wondered, yet nobody seemed to see them.

“I wonder who else is dating?” Tom asked Ted. They had been talking about Antonia Sapore and Martina Rodriguez when they were briefly overcome by lust and distracted by a quick physical intermezzo. Tom had omitted to tell his lover about the pictures he had taken. He needed more information first before he would decide what to do with it, if anything at all.

“Well, Felicia is dating Amanda.”

“That’s not a big secret,” Tom mused. “Everyone knows the Oister is gay.”

“Yes.” Ted seemed not too happy about it and Tom wondered if Ted felt his masquerade with Felicia could be exposed someday due to the rumors surrounding Amanda.

“Who else do you know of?” He tried to take Ted’s mind off of his own charade.

“I heard something about Sasha once. But she has this soccer guy now. So apparently these were just rumors. You know how that works. Girl plays tennis and hits the ball hard. No boyfriend seen for miles. She got a gay rumor just like that.” Ted snapped his fingers and shrugged. Then he gave Tom a kiss.

“Sure. But perhaps this soccer guy is a beard,” Tom wondered. He kissed Ted back.

“Why are you so interested in the girls. Do I need to worry about you?” Ted laughed.

“Just a little obsession, darling,” Ted giggled.

“How old are you again?” Ted said with a grin, rolling over and pinning Tom to the mattress.

“I’m almost thirty, love.”

Ted laughed. “30 – Love? Means you are half-way there, Tommy boy.”

They looked at each other, smiling in a moment of silence, and Ted let his fingers travel up his lover’s chest. He leaned forward to Tom’s ear.

“But here comes Ted Curry,” he whispered. “He will never give in. No, looks like he’s going to go down.” Ted slowly moved his lips over Tom’s body.

“30 – 15.” He moved down biting Tom’s left nipple. Tom slapped Ted’s buttock.

“Here we go! Good serve by Richardson into the left service box. But Curry responds with a pin-point winner down the line. 30 all. What’s Tom Richardson going to do about it?”

Tom smiled. He would just lean back. That’s what he would do about it. Ted kissed Tom’s stomach.

“30 – 40. Ted Curry with a well-deserved break point. Now, can he make it?” Ted gave his lover a last big grin, then he moved down a little further vanishing under the sheets, and Tom closed his eyes.

They had done this a thousand times before and there seemed nothing unusual about the twins playing against each other. There wasn't a single previous Galloway clash that had escaped from the decision-making process of who would eventually win the match. It might have been comforting to know that they were able to control every single situation in one way or another. But in fact each time the draw foresaw an encounter between them it was a real dilemma. Most of the singles players didn't understand. They were lone wolves out there and they treated every opponent the same. Only long-time doubles partners and, of course, the couples understood the predicament. Playing your twin meant that either way – whether she lost or Lulu did – she would be saddened by the outcome.

“So, what are we going to do?” Lulu looked at her sister, as always waiting for an answer from Gaga, before she would overturn it and make her own decision.

Gabriella sighed. She looked at the draw sheet again to anticipate the possible next match encounters, but the players' names began to blur before her eyes and an awful Enrique Martinez song was stuck in her mind. As if this wasn't enough, there was this curious thing about Sasha's advances towards Luella that kept her wondering much more than she wanted to admit.

Luella waited for an answer from her sister but Gabriella just shook her head. She couldn't concentrate.

“Alright,” Luella resolutely said. “I think it would be best if I won this match. Mainly because the other semifinal is Sasha versus Angela and they both seem to think they can adapt to my game easily, so they will expect and train for my big groundshots and will be surprised when you pull them in to the net with your dropshots.”

Gabriella breathed in sharply. The scenario made sense, but it also meant that she was out of the tournament, while Lulu

had a chance to pick up many ranking points. Or to be more precise, while Gabriella picked them up for her sister. With a little surprise she noticed that she despised the thought of losing again.

It's not fair, she wanted to say. Why do I always have to lose? But she stayed silent. This was for both of them. They were in this together and would always be. They shared that odd connection of twins that needed no words and that left others baffled at times.

Also, playing against Luella still produced good entertainment, Gabriella tried to cheer herself up. She recalled an evening in the off-season when Lulu and she had watched some of their matches for learning purposes, but had to stop as they were laughing so hard at the commentators' confusion over their resemblance. They simply couldn't tell the twins apart, mixed up the names and corrected each other constantly.

Gabriella smiled, then finally nodded. Luella was right. She had to let her win this time. She would later watch the final and find consolation in Sam's and Hugh's hilarious, helpless commenting.

Slurping.

Elise heard the long sucking sound even though she had retreated into bed, hid under the sheets and pressed the cushion over her ears. There was no getting away from it.

Sick! Elise heard the girls laughing. Sick oyster-slurping lesbians. Muff divers, clit crusaders, carpet munchers.

"Oh god," Elise sobbed. And she was one of them.

The sudden mention of Amanda and the amusement her relationship with Felicia caused among her friends had thrown Elise back onto herself. Her friends' words had cut through the air like knives thrown at her. She had been sitting at the end of the table – stock-still – waiting for a blade to hit, for herself to scream out and give away her secret, and for her friends to turn around in dismay. Elise was one of them. Elise was one of the

sick oyster-slurping lesbians. But she hadn't said a word. While Angela and Stephanie ridiculed a disgusted Carina for her dated beliefs and argued for liberality and gay rights Elise sat there shell-shocked.

Shell. Elise wiped away a tear with the blanket. She had always liked the variations of Amanda's last name. It evoked the image of a small shell you could cup in your hands, hard and impervious on the outside but with a treasure hidden inside. Perhaps if you stroked the shell tenderly enough it would open and let you in. She thought back to the previous summer when she came home every day from rehab and sometimes allowed herself to switch on the TV to watch a tennis tournament. She loved watching Amanda. Every time Amanda won a match and smiled into the camera, Elise smiled back at the screen, and when Amanda lost a match and left the court with a stern face Elise sent over a virtual hug, stroking the hard coating and hoping that it was somehow felt through the TV screen. Auster. She had really liked the name.

But now she could only see Felicia slurping Amanda's oyster. And she could hear it. The siren had enchanted Amanda and the hard shell had opened for her.

"She can't even sing," Elise spat out. But Felicia didn't need to, obviously. She offered Amanda other amenities which Elise didn't have in her bag of tricks. Like slurping. Would Elise be any good at it? Would she like it at all? Judging from the sound of it she wouldn't. Why was she so weird? Why couldn't she take the fact that she was a carpet muncher in stride – like Mint or Chili? They had fun!

Elise flung the sheet off herself and jumped up. She had to take her mind off these things. It wasn't helpful to ponder over them if she didn't *do* anything about them. But now – with the slurping sound occupying her mind – there was only one solution. Elise hopped into a pair of shorts and grabbed a towel before heading to the hotel gym, getting on a treadmill and sweating the frustration out of her body. Just when she was about to open her hotel room door her cell phone rang. Who could that be? Hesitating for a moment, Elise decided to take the call.

It was her friend Agnes.

The cool night air caressed her naked skin and gave her goose-bumps. It was getting cold, but Amanda felt no urge to close the window. She had no intention to get up or even move an inch or talk. She just wanted to be held by Felicia in the stillness of the night.

There would never be enough time for them, Amanda thought, even though she had already decided to stay for a couple of days longer after she had lost her match today. It was the only way to squeeze out a few more hours with Felicia. The singer would also stay for some days. Not because of Amanda though. Unlike the Australian, Ted Curry was winning his matches and was still in the tournament. Felicia would sit in his box and pretend to support him like she had done today. Yes, it bothered Amanda, even though she didn't say it. Since the one day when they had met, Felicia had never sat court-side for Amanda's matches again. That was just fair, Amanda had to admit. With her record racing up the charts, Felicia generally attracted a cloud of photographers and people while Amanda was happy to avoid the spotlight whenever possible. And still – the relationship had become an affair of closed hotel room doors, as Felicia spend most of her free time posing with Ted, supporting him at his matches or even joining his practice. Not once had Felicia joined Amanda and her friends when they went out in the evening. Not during the Australian Open and not here in Indian Wells. Her friends had already stopped asking about Felicia, assuming it was just an affair and nothing serious.

“Have you thought about Charleston?” Amanda had asked Felicia to join her for a week at the Family Circle Cup. Laying on her side and watching the sky outside of the window Amanda could feel Felicia shifting uncomfortably behind her back.

“I’m not sure yet, baby,” Felicia answered. “I don’t think I can cancel my appointments in New York. Maybe I’ll make it for a day or two.”

“Maybe for my birthday?”

Amanda felt cheap mentioning the date. She had suspected that Felicia had forgotten about it. It was pathetic to blackmail your own girlfriend, but what could she do?

“Sure,” Felicia chirped. “I’d love to be there. I’ll see, what I can do.”

Amanda turned around to face her girlfriend.

“I just want to spend more time with you,” she explained.

“I understand that you have to plan your European tour and have to work with the musicians and all. And,” she paused to take a deep breath, “of course, you have to spend some time with Ted to cover for him. That’s very nice of you. But in fact, I want *you* to spend more time with *me*. Not with Ted.”

There, she had said it. She had blurted it out and now waited for a surprised Felicia to respond. She was sure that Felicia understood the loneliness and longing she felt on the tour. Felicia spent so many months herself now on the road. She was suddenly glad she had said it.

Felicia reached out and took Amanda’s hand.

“Well, I know you don’t like Ted,” Felicia said. “But he’s the reason I can be here with you, right?”

Amanda was aghast. Felicia had gotten in all wrong! Besides, Amanda liked Ted, but she didn’t want him to be the reason Felicia was here. She began to shake her head but Felicia had already pushed her back onto the cushion.

“You are cranky because you lost that match and worry about your ranking. That’s okay. I’ll make you forget your stupid match,” Felicia purred while kissing Amanda’s shoulder, then her neck and her ear.

Amanda closed her eyes. It was not what she wanted from Felicia. But for the moment she would take it.

Reluctantly Elise entered the little café. It was 9 a.m. in the morning and she was about to have breakfast with Agnes. However, she was nervous. As nervous as she was before an important appointment. She also felt bad about lying to Agnes about the *Tennis Nurse* novel. She had waited for a good moment at the players' party in Melbourne and she really had been determined to talk to Agnes then, but there had been a constant coming and going of people at the doubles player's table and when Elise had finally given her the novel back she had become so nervous that she was unable to say anything. Agnes had just looked at the crumpled novel and had said nothing – until yesterday, when the older player invited her to this cozy coffeehouse, before Elise took a plane back to Florida.

Agnes was already sitting at a table near the window. The morning sun warmed the scene and Elise all of a sudden felt comfortable again. This was her friend Agnes. They had known each other for about fifteen years now, ever since Elise's father was Agnes's coach and Elise was just picking up a racquet looking up to the Top 10 player, Agnes once was. Elise sat down and they instantly engaged in a cheerful and animated conversation. Their usual conversations were about the tour life, training methods and Elise's dad, as Agnes knew his quirks and was very talented in imitating his pep talks. It always made Elise scream with laughter.

Elise had also known for a while now that Agnes was in a relationship with a woman, even though she had never seen her with someone. Also, they had never talked about their private lives. That was just the way it was – everyone knew about it, no one talked about it. But there had to be a way to talk about private things, Elise thought. But how to address it, she didn't know.

"Do you like pets?" Was that a good way to start? Elise wasn't sure.

"Yes," Agnes laughed, "but you know that it's almost impossible to have a pet when you are on the tour. We feed the stray cats though, when we are at home."

We. Elise knew she had to hold onto that straw, but how? She began playing with the salt shaker.

“You want to see some pics?” Agnes took out her cell phone and looked for the photo album. The pictures showed several cats on a porch. Then there were pictures of a woman. It was Candice Crantz, one of the communications managers. Was she the other half of Agnes’s *we*? Skipping through the album, Elise saw more and more pictures of Candice and Agnes. On one of them they even held hands. Elise took a deep breath. On the court there were moments when you had to take the plunge and jump in at the deep end. Sometimes these moments came in little sun-flooded cafés.

“Are you together with Candice?”

Elise regretted the question instantly. Surely Agnes found it impertinent and wasn’t it a taboo after all?

But Agnes didn’t give Elise much time to worry. “Yes,” she answered very matter-of-factly. “We’ve been together for six years now.”

“Six years. That’s very long,” Elise said sheepishly and surprised by Agnes’s straight-forward answer but also with admiration. How come she didn’t know about them? Six years! Would she ever have a relationship that long, Elise wondered. Well, first she should have a relationship at all. She sighed inaudibly looking at the couple on the display.

“Do *you* have a girlfriend, Elise?” Agnes looked at her young friend with a warm smile. Elise stopped breathing. Had Agnes really just asked that? But what had Elise expected? That’s what she was here for – to talk about herself. And Agnes knew it. That’s why she had come here while being afraid of it at the same time. After giving Elise a big hint last year with the *Tennis Nurse* novel the older player once again had reached out her hand and Elise only had to take it. She just needed a second to gather herself and grasp this moment.

It was the first time Elise was asked this simple question. How many times had she been asked about a boyfriend? How many times had she circumvented the question with an awkward smile and a lame excuse? Being asked about a girl felt so peculiar

and so right at the same time, it made her smile. She looked at her older friend in relief, then shook her head.

“No,” she finally said. Elise laughed even though it was a bit sad and embarrassing. After all, she was already twenty years old. But then it didn’t matter at the moment. The sun was warming her face and she felt grateful and calm for the first time in months.

What is she doing? This was all Gabriella could think for a couple of games now. Luella was about to serve. Holding tight to her racquet, Gabriella took a deep breath and waited for the ball, but Lulu’s first serve pitifully crashed into the net. For a change, Gaga thought ironically. The other three previous attempts had gone wide. Gabriella got ready again, but Lulu’s second ball never hit the court. Instead, the ball flew high into the air before landing somewhere among the crowd. What a shameful, embarrassing effort!

Trying to hide her disbelief, Gaga made it to the other side to now hopefully get a first serve from her sister. Perhaps they could even play a little. Perhaps hit the ball once or twice. They needed to play at least a little bit of tennis so Gabriella could lose the match. What was going on with Lulu? She was supposed to win and yet she seemed to have switched off her brain. The thought conjured a little smirk on Gabriella’s lips. It looked like the Enrique Martinez overdose had finally gotten to Lulu’s head. Even the crowd seemed to wonder what was happening. This match was a complete mess.

Against their agreement, Gabriella broke her sister’s serve after Lulu served a second double fault. But what was Gaga supposed to do? How could she play worse than what her sister produced for the last three games? It was impossible. She wasn’t even given the chance to hit the ball wide. She glanced over the net to catch Lulu’s eye. But her sister had turned away.

For a semifinal, this was just a big joke and a big waste of money for the people who had come here. It was also a big waste of tennis, Gaga suddenly thought. The spectators had to be very disappointed after watching a great match before. Earlier in the afternoon, Sasha had won her match against Angela, which hadn't been surprising. Even though the German player had had a very good week so far at the tournament, Sasha was on a roll now and it seemed like nobody could stop her anymore.

Anger arose in Gabriella. Enough with the Galloway strategy! She was a tennis player first and if Lulu didn't want to play then she'd give the crowd her best – serving an ace down the T. And prove to the whole world that she was the one – by smacking the ball back after Lulu finally managed to return one of her serves. She was the one with the impeccable forehand, the reliable serve and a rather dangerous backhand. She hit another relentless shot down the line and after another break the set was over.

“Game and first set, Gabriella Galloway,” Lynn Pebblestone announced.

Numbed by what she had done, Gabriella walked to her seat. She had just won the first set. And in a brilliant way, she should add. No, it wasn't the match of her life since her sister seemed to be completely missing in action but still good enough to feel the excitement she loved so much, playing her game and going for her shots. Unhindered by a Galloway plot she could play like she always dreamed of playing. At the changeover she met Lulu's eyes. What the hell are you doing, they seemed to ask. Gaga knew in what state of incomprehension her twin was stuck. Their little scenario had suddenly vanished. She didn't care anymore who was on the other side of the net.

After the break she got up. She didn't look at her sister. She didn't look back at the first set. She went over to the baseline and gave the ball boy a nod. Then she looked over to her sister giving her a nod as well. For once, they would fight it out on the court. She won the match 6-3 6-0. In fifty-two minutes.

KEEPING UP WITH THE JANUSES

Charleston, United States

The roads were packed at that time of day but Candice maneuvered the car through the heavy traffic without hurry. She had turned on the radio which was blasting a rock tune, however the sound that came out of the speakers was muffled by loads and loads of luggage. Monica and Natsumi were sitting in the back between racquet bags and huge suitcases while Agnes, who was sitting in the passenger seat, held a huge bag on her lap.

Their conversation had turned to discussing the young girls and their love lives. They had already discussed Antonia and Monica and Agnes could barely resist telling Monica and Natsumi about the new member to the club – Elise Renard – but something held her back. It didn't feel right to gossip about Elise. Probably because Agnes had known her since she was a little girl.

I have to take her under my wing, she thought. The young German seemed completely wet behind the ears.

“What about Chili and Mint? Are they together?” Agnes asked to take her mind off Elise.

“I think they are only fuck buddies,” Monica stated.

“These young girls have absolutely no decency,” Candice chuckled and shook her head.

“I get the feeling Chili is somewhat in love with Mint,” Agnes said.

“Well, she used to follow Mint like her shadow,” Monica nodded. “But these days I see her more often with the other Spanish girls. Which is not a surprise though. Mint can be a really nasty one. I like her, but she has a catty side. Must be her family, I guess. Her stepmother is just horrible. No wonder the girl’s wicked.”

“Oh, she is not wicked. Just lonely perhaps. It’s a hard life, especially the first years. We should do something about it,” Natsumi contemplated, but then she grinned. “We should set her up with someone for doubles and hormones will take care of the rest.”

Agnes and Monica turned their heads. It was the first time that day Natsumi had said anything remotely good-humored. She had been grumpy since they had boarded the car in St. Petersburg.

“Nice that you have found your good mood again,” Monica snickered. “You’ve been a bit of a sourpuss all day.”

It was clearly the wrong thing to say, Agnes realized. Natsumi inhaled sharply, ready for a reply. Then she seemed to decide against a confrontation, instead turning towards the window. A minute of silenced followed, then she turned her head towards Monica.

“It’s Dani’s birthday today,” she said in an angry whisper. “You all seem to have forgotten about it.”

Agnes swallowed. Yes, she had forgotten about it. Or had she deliberately not thought about the date? The car’s roar suddenly seemed even louder, as they had fallen silent again. What could they say to Natsumi? The last meeting with Daniela Grieb, Natsumi’s former doubles partner, had turned out to be very unpleasant. Nobody wanted a reminder.

“Monica,” Candice said looking into the rear mirror. “Any news on Amanda and her pop star?”

“No, just the usual,” Monica replied, but with a sigh of relief. The tension was broken. “Amanda is over the moon. I don’t know if that is a good thing though.”

With a side glance Candice winked at Agnes. They were back to easy-going conversation and with the hotel resort almost in sight Agnes relaxed again.

“Are you worried?”

“Oh, I’m done worrying when it comes to Amanda. I don’t expect a white wedding anyway.”

“Thank God,” Agnes threw in. “Can you imagine Felicia singing one of her songs at the wedding? I would dunk my head into the wedding cake to drown out her voice.”

They all laughed at this thought, even Natsumi.

“Yes,” Monica said slowly. “But there’s something dodgy about Felicia.”

“So, you *are* worrying,” Agnes said with a wink.

Monica shrugged, but didn’t answer.

“Here we are, ladies,” Candice shouted to the back of the car, driving the huge car up the drive way of the hotel. They stopped in front of the entrance.

“Great,” Agnes replied. “Then we can finally stop talking about all these Janus-faced people.” The remark earned her a stern look from Candice, but no one seemed to have heard the undertone. Natsumi and Candice stepped out of the car and went to the trunk.

Only Monica raised an eyebrow.

“Janus-faced actually means that the god had two faces, one was looking to the past the other to the future,” she said thoughtfully, not moving on her seat. “It symbolizes change and new beginnings.”

Agnes looked at her pensive friend with whom she had shared so many adventures. The past and the future. Good times and bad times. In sickness and in health. Till death do us part. Monica turned her head and they looked each other in the eyes until Candice’s laughter brought them back to the present. They left the car and began unloading their luggage.

Gabriella was sitting on her bed in their Florida home surrounded by her bags she was supposed to pack. The twins had played the Miami tournament both making the quarterfinals and in an hour would leave for Charleston, Daniel Island for the next tournament. They only had had two nights to relax and do some washing.

Gabriella liked the apartment they had bought together last year. There was just not enough time to spend here. With a sigh she went back to packing her training shorts and shoes into a huge bag. On top of her dresser was her new trophy from Indian Wells. Like every aspiring player on the tour Gabriella Galloway was dreaming of a Grand Slam but this was her very first big title. Indian Wells. She had won it against all expectations.

Game, set and match, Galloway. She still could hear the umpire's voice piercing through the applause and through her own heartbeat to announce the score and these four words that every tennis players wanted to hear. *Game. Set. And. Match.* Followed by your own name. Excited by the sudden will to win that had appeared during her semifinal when she had played her twin sister, Gabriella had crushed Sasha Mrachova in the final. She had beaten a player everyone had expected to win – from the experts to herself. She was still smiling when she thought about the moment of victory.

Only the quarrel she had with Luella a few minutes after defeating her sister in the semifinal was still nagging. By winning the match Gabriella had betrayed their secret pact and Lulu had stormed out of the locker rooms not waiting for Gaga's explanation. Gabriella hadn't seen her after nor for dinner. She was sure Luella had hitched a ride with Rafael to cool off.

The next day Gabriella had won against Sasha and as if nothing had happened between them, Luella had showed up in the locker room to congratulate her. Of course, she had watched the match from the player's box because nobody was supposed to

know that they had gone into a fight over their failed illegal pact. It was a big win for Gaga. And a big win for the Galloway sisters.

“I’m very proud of my little sister,” Lulu had told a reporter after the win. She always referred to Gaga as her little sister, due the simple fact that Gabriella was born fifteen minutes after Luella. They had hugged, tightly, and had turned the page. Whatever had happened during their semifinal would become part of the bigger plan.

Gabriella zipped her last bag and scanned her hotel room to check that she hadn’t forgotten anything. Luella was waiting for her outside on the curb.

“Ready for some family action?”

The Family Circle Cup was an important event but the atmosphere was laid-back and familiar. Gaga gave her big sister a nod and Rafael, who had come to take her bags a friendly smile. She knew that she owed part of her sister’s good mood and sudden amnesia over the Indian Wells semifinal to their so-called trainer Rafael who had – quite literally – licked every single one of Lulu’s wounds.

As Elise reached the corner and turned into the alley that led to the practice courts, the sun blinded her and she stopped to take out a visor from her racquet bag. She had left her father at the players’ service desk to sign some papers and make some reservations.

Putting on her visor, the sound of a ball hitting a racquet made her look up. With curiosity she shouldered her bag again and approached the court it came from. Of course, she knew the crack of a racquet hitting a tennis ball by heart but this sound was different. It was just perfect, a loud, full smack when the ball was hit in the sweet spot of the racquet. Before Elise had realized who was practicing, she had already visualized the firm grip of the hand on the handle, the work of the wrist, the position of the feet.

Amanda Auster. The Australian was focused on the balls her coach was hitting over the net. Elise approached the fence, yet remained at an angle that allowed her to hide from the Australian, and dropped her bag next to her feet. She didn't want to bother the player. Moreover, she didn't want to be seen like that, literally studying Amanda's moves. The way the Australian struck every single one of the balls was tantalizing. Her hits were perfectly clean, almost effortless, Elise thought, realizing that she was chewing on her lower lip.

Elise knew it was not only the Australian's movement and display of talent that fascinated her, and she restrained herself and quietly enough reached for her racquet bag. She had to keep her distance from the Australian. She had to refocus – on tennis, for a change, she scolded herself. She really wanted to do well in this tournament she had won two years ago. Last year she got injured and couldn't defend her title. Carina had won the final – against Amanda.

Amanda. Elise sighed. Amanda seemed to lurk behind every corner of her mind. There was no getting away from her. The young German allowed herself one last look at the lean body in front of her. Amanda was with Felicia and everyone seemed to talk about it now. Apparently, Amanda had been sighted in Australia with Felicia in a restaurant, and the theories varied between speculations that they were only friends from school and them being lovers. The latter, however, wasn't taken seriously at all, as Felicia was with Ted. Apart from Amanda's closest friends only Elise seemed to know for certain that Amanda was in a relationship with Felicia, as she had heard it with her own ears during the Australian Open, when Amanda had spoken to Monica about the pop singer.

How unlucky it had been for Elise to sit behind those palm trees and listen in on the conversation. She wished she didn't know. Not only had it crushed her fatuous dreams she had had about Amanda and herself, but now she knew something but had no one to talk to about it, as she really didn't want to contribute to the rumor mill. She shook her head in desperation. It was really time to stop thinking about Amanda. Most of all, she

needed to stop watching her. *Perving*. A word she had learned from the British girls. Yes, that's what she was doing. She couldn't deny it. Angered by her own weakness Elise was about to turn on her heels to go and find another court when a familiar voice caught her off-guard.

“Fascinating how she strikes the ball, isn't it?”

Elise spun around, and Agnes felt instantly sorry that she had surprised her friend while worshipping Amanda's game.

“Yes, it is,” the German said awkwardly, then blushed and looked like she was about to leave. Agnes smiled at her young friend. She almost laughed out loud seeing the sheepish look on Elise's face. She had clearly caught Elise in the act of spying on Amanda. Well, it wasn't hard to fancy the Australian player, she thought. Amanda was in great shape and her personality was endearing. Other than that Elise would probably find a girl her own age more appealing.

She followed Elise back to the pathway and decided to accompany her friend to the practice court before heading back to the locker rooms. Even though they hadn't talked about Elise again, Agnes felt that Elise was seeking her company more often now, content to be around someone who could understand her experience and seemed settled in a relationship without emotional troubles. Agnes knew how important it was to have positive role models. She liked the idea that she could be one. She took a look at Elise again, who was silently walking next to her. Especially a role model for this girl whom she'd known for so long. When Elise had been a little girl of five, she used to visit her traveling dad whenever possible. Sitting next to the courts, she watched Agnes hit balls for hours without ever getting tired of it. Back then Elise had been a self-assured, sometimes even sassy and loudmouthed kid, who had begged Agnes to show her how to hold a racquet so she could hit the ball herself. She had always gotten her way in the end.

Nowadays she seemed more guarded, and even though Agnes was sure the main reason was Elise's long injury break and the grueling struggle to make it back up the rankings, the older player couldn't help feeling that Elise's coming to terms with herself was a big part of her new humbleness. It was a process that took its time and very often needed isolation to unfold.

Laying her arm over Elise's shoulders she turned her head to the young German.

"By the way, are you still looking for a doubles partner, Elise? Entry deadline is today."

Smiling brightly at the question, Elise shook her head.

"No, I have found one! I will play with Angela."

Agnes raised an eyebrow in surprise but she smiled back at the young player. Angela Porovski was Elise's German Fed Cup colleague and fun to be with. Elise would be in good hands and she should enjoy her time on the court. Agnes might have had other plans in mind for Elise but she would find another way to introduce her to the doubles girls eventually.

Amanda felt great. Her practice had been going great. She was hitting the ball with incredible precision and power, even Dan Metic, her coach, was impressed. In one rally she moved Dan from one corner to the other until she finished him off by hitting one of her infamous inside-out forehands while a huffing and puffing Dan was crying out for mercy. It was great fun and Dan gave her a wink afterwards knowing that Amanda was looking forward to an evening on cloud nine.

Smiling to herself Amanda entered the hotel lobby. She had been smiling all day and it seemed everyone was smiling with her. Her happiness had already provoked a funny incident earlier on the practice courts. All of a sudden Natsumi Takashima had come running towards Amanda, waving her arms like a mad woman.

“It’s your birthday, isn’t it? I missed it again!” Natsumi had flung her arms around a surprised Amanda begging for forgiveness. No, Amanda explained to Natsumi while peeling her Japanese friend off her neck. Her birthday was only tomorrow. There was something else that made her smile.

While she approached the reception desk of the hotel, Amanda wondered if Felicia was already waiting for her in bed. Her plane had landed when Amanda was still cooling down from her practice and they had agreed to meet directly in the hotel room they had decided to share. Using her magic smile, Amanda asked the receptionist for the keys. She was just about to ask if Miss Del Castro had already taken the room, when the young woman handed her the keys and a little envelope.

“Here’s also a note for you,” the receptionist explained with a smile.

Amanda thanked the girl, turned away and ripped open the envelope while walking to the elevator. The note was from Felicia and it made Amanda stop in her tracks. Her racquet bag slipped to the floor but she hardly realized it. Felicia was unable to make it to Charleston today, the note said. There were urgent matters she had to discuss with Ted Curry. Felicia would call her tomorrow.

Amanda went up to her room and sat down on the bed. She took out her cell phone from her bag beginning to dial Felicia’s number. Then she put it down quickly. Ted Curry, she thought angrily. What could be more urgent than celebrating her birthday tonight?

She lay down on the bed. Why didn’t Felicia call her? What was she discussing with Ted? She shook her head. Suddenly, she felt dead tired. Slowly she pulled off her sneakers and slipped under the sheets. Rolling over to the side she wondered if Felicia was finally about to ditch Ted, so she and Amanda could spend more time together. Maybe Felicia wanted to tell her tomorrow as a birthday present. Convincing herself that this must be the reason she fell into a fitful sleep.

The Danny's on Ann Street was one of the few gay bars in Charleston and the small room was packed with a crowd of chatting male and female patrons. Tom had decided to head out tonight as he had finished typing his article early and for once had no desire to hang out with the rest of the communications staff he had become friends with. He sat down at the bar and ordered a beer. Just one or two more, he told himself, then he would go back to the hotel. He had to be fit tomorrow for two pre-match interviews and some fun stuff with Mint Rickenbacher and Cecilia García López.

He looked around at the bar and glancing over at the tables in the back almost spilled his beer upon the cute bartender. There was Candice Crantz, his boss. He felt a sudden hot rush of blood streaming to his head but then steadied himself. What did he care if she saw him in a gay bar? She was probably a lesbian herself, sitting here with two other women. Tom took a closer look at Candice's entourage. They were doubles players – that much he knew. But as he was assigned to work mostly with the younger, upcoming players he couldn't come up with their names.

“Do you know them?” a voice behind him asked. Tom turned around. A young woman with big glasses was standing behind him. She nodded over his shoulder in the direction of Candice and the two doubles players.

“Maybe,” Tom replied, curious about the question that had come out of the blue. The girl smiled.

“I thought so,” she said complacently. “I've never seen you here before, so I guessed you worked at the tournament.”

Tom nodded.

“It's always very busy here during the Family Circle Cup,” the girl continued. “You might even get a chance to pick up a player.”

“Is that what you are here for?” Tom asked with a grin. He liked the self-assured woman. She laughed at the thought,

shaking her head. No, she was on holidays with her family who lived here, she explained. But she would cover some of the matches on her blog site.

“You write a blog?” Tom loved the idea.

“Yeah, it’s called Urban Skies. Just thoughts and tidbits about my life,” she said with a shrug. “Mostly my love life, I should say. But as I live in New York it’s also about the city. Hence the name.” She gave him a wink.

“You write about your love life?” Tom wondered.

“It’s anonymous,” she laughed. Now, that was interesting, Tom thought. He raised his eyebrows as a thought crossed his mind.

“I’m Melanie, by the way. See, now you know more than most of my readers do.”

Tom also introduced himself, explaining what he did in Charleston, and they sat down at a table.

“So, you do interviews and photo shoots with the players?” Melanie inquired.

Tom nodded.

“Have you done interviews with Monica and Agnes?” she asked. Tom was dumbfounded. He knew most of the players by now, but he had not heard of these two yet. He shook his head.

“Who’s that?” he asked. Now it was Melanie’s turn to look flabbergasted.

“Well, them, of course,” she nodded in the direction of the doubles players. Tom shrugged in embarrassment.

“Sorry, I’m only catching up now with doubles players. They are not my focus, you see,” he explained.

“Doubles my ass,” Melanie snorted. “Monica Jordan and Agnes Lion are legends, dude. They won several single slams in their prime. You really should do your homework.” She shook her head in amazement. “Who employed you for heaven’s sake?”

Tom laughed at the thought that his boss was sitting in the same bar but kept it to himself. He directed the conversation to Melanie’s blog again. An idea had taken hold of him.

The knock on the door made Elise jump up. She opened the door and let Angela in. They had rooms next to each other and had decided to spend the evening watching a movie and talking doubles tactics. Angela was holding up two bottles while grinning mischievously.

“Beer?” Elise was slightly distressed. They had a match tomorrow.

“*Amiplörre,*” Angela corrected her. “It’s basically water.”

Angela sat down on Elise’s hotel bed while Elise began to take out her DVD collection. She was reading the titles out loud but Angela shook her head. None of the movies seemed to interest her.

“Can I ask you something?” Angela suddenly said.

Elise nodded without looking up.

“You don’t really like talking about guys, do you?” She looked at Elise who suddenly felt her hands sweating. That question had come out of nowhere. She didn’t dare look up.

“Sure I do,” Elise answered.

“I was wondering – ,” Angela began with a questioning look, but then stopped.

“What?” Elise could hear her own voice and the panic in it. What was Angela wondering? Hopefully, she only assumed that Elise was simply inexperienced. Elise had the feeling, all the other girls believed she was still a virgin, which was completely embarrassing – and true. But the other thing? They would have never guessed that. No one ever had. Probably Angela wanted to set her up with a male player. That must be it. Elise breathed in deeply and tried to relax. Yes, that must be it. She could handle that. Just say no, she decided.

“What are you wondering,” she asked again, this time more friendly.

Angela shook her head. It looked like she had changed her mind. Elise picked up her DVD box again. She was just about to read out a title again, when Angela opened her mouth.

“Are you into girls?”

Bingo! There was the worst case scenario! Elise was baffled. Staring at the DVD box she was silently reading the title a hundred times over until finally she looked up to meet Angela’s eyes. There was not one reasonable word coming into her mind. She could say ‘yes’, of course. But she couldn’t. On the other hand she didn’t want to lie to her friend. She knew she had to say something soon. But she was paralyzed.

“Wow,” Angela finally said, reading Elise’s silence correctly. “Who would have thought?”

Well, Angela obviously. Had the other girls been talking about her, Elise wondered. They probably had placed bets on her and laughed about her. She hated the thought that Carina knew about it and probably told others with that look of disgust on her face. But what could she do about it now?

Elise looked at Angela and shrugged in defeat. If they all knew, so be it. Angela was still sitting on the bed holding the two beer bottles but upon seeing Elise’s distress she laughed compassionately.

“Oh, Elise. You know I’m cool with it, don’t you?”

She slipped from the bed and sat down next to Elise. She looked at her friend until Elise nodded. Yes, Angela seemed fine with it.

“Do the others know?” Elise feared the answer, but Angela shook her head.

“I don’t think so, and I won’t say a word. Come on. Take this.” Angela handed Elise the beer bottle. “Let’s talk girls for a change, alright?”

Elise wasn’t sure she wanted to. What could she say anyway? But Angela had already placed her arm around Elise’s shoulder and clinked their bottles.

“Now, tell me, Miss Renard, what’s your type?”

There had been a cake with candles and a flower bouquet from the tournament director. The attempt of a dozen fellow players to sing “Happy Birthday” for Amanda went down in cackles as they switched into their respective native tongues one after another. Besides that, the athletes were horribly unmusical. The cacophony brought fits of laughter to everyone who attended Amanda’s impromptu birthday celebration and it took Amanda’s mind off of the worrisome thoughts she had had all night. Felicia hadn’t called yet but for a short moment the redhead had forgotten about it. Now she sat down on the couch to gather her breath and all her concerns came flooding back to her.

“This cake is a dream,” Monica sighed. She approached Amanda, chewing on a mouthful of the strawberry cake. “I just cannot stop.”

“I just hope there will be some left after my match. I only had half a piece,” Amanda said checking her watch. She was scheduled first on center court to play Robyn Lawrence in less than an hour.

“Well, the match should be a piece of cake itself.”

Monica sat down next to Amanda. Robyn was a good player but still no match for Amanda. However, Amanda only shrugged. Monica looked her young friend over, realizing that something had to be wrong. Wasn’t Felicia supposed to be here?

“How’s my little Wiz Kid doing?”

The nickname made Amanda smile. Ever since she was 12 years old she had been called that name. Yet, her Australian fans seemed to fancy calling her “Oister” for obvious reasons. She didn’t like it. She still preferred “Wiz Kid”. Before she could give Monica an answer her phone rang. She looked at the display and – as if a light bulb had been switched on – she had to smile. Giving Monica a little sign that she would be back in a second she got up and hurried outside to take the call.

“Happy, happy Birthday, baby,” Felicia was singing as soon as Amanda had answered the call. It was actually the first time Amanda heard her sing, apart from the records she had bought eventually, even though the music was not her taste. She had a lovely voice, Amanda thought. Suddenly she felt all better.

“When will you arrive?” Amanda asked after the serenade. She checked her watch again. Only forty minutes left. She needed to get ready but first she wanted to know if Felicia finally had ended the charade with Ted Curry.

“Darling, I hate to tell you, especially since it’s your Birthday today, but I won’t be able to come.”

Amanda felt her heart slump.

“Why?” she asked weakly.

“You know I talked to Ted yesterday. Apparently, there are rumors about you and me, Amanda. We cannot have that.”

Amanda was confused. We? Of course, she didn’t like rumors, but most rumors would die on their own. She knew that from experience.

“Where did these rumors originate?” she demanded to know.

“Well, all the players seem to know,” Felicia explained.

“But that’s alright.” Amanda laughed in relief. “Nobody will say a word. That’s just a rule, you see. You don’t have to worry.”

“But I do,” Felicia said impatiently. “And Ted is also concerned. So, we have decided that I won’t see you for a while.”

The sudden realization that ‘we’ included Felicia and Ted instead of Amanda was like a punch in Amanda’s stomach.

“That’s not how I envision a relationship,” she said with a tight voice. She could hear Felicia exhale in surprise, followed by a long silence.

“Amanda, I’m sorry,” Felicia finally said. “You see, I’m flying around the world, you’re flying around the world. I’m afraid there was a misunderstanding. I’m really sorry. Take care.”

Before Amanda could say something she had hung up. Not bothering to go back into the players’ lounge Amanda sluggishly headed to the locker rooms.

Lynn Pepplestone had looked forward to this second round match. She liked Amanda's game and enjoyed umpiring at her matches, even though she remained neutral in behavior and tone.

"Love – 40," she said into the microphone.

She wished she could have said something different, but there were the facts right in front of her. Robyn Lawrence had three break points on Amanda Auster's serve.

Amanda went over to the other side of the baseline and accepted two balls from the ball girl behind her. One she tucked underneath her skirt, the other she let bounce a couple of times. Then she tensed her muscles and tossed the ball high in the air. Too high. She wouldn't be able to hit it in her usual rhythm so she let it fall back to the ground and started anew.

Lynn Pebblestone kept a straight face but she was amazed. One thing that was reliable in Amanda's game was her serve. She could serve like a machine. Her ball toss was never too high. At least Lynn couldn't recall any match where her serve was unreliable and this was already the third time in this match she had to start her serve again. Lynn followed the ball over the net. It kicked up high and Robyn Lawrence struggled to get it back, but she did. Her return landed directly in Amanda's strike zone. The red-haired player stepped back with her right foot ready to smack the ball with her impeccable forehand. The loud crack when the ball hit the racquet frame produced a murmur of disappointment in the audience as they saw the ball flying high into the air and wide into the stands. Robyn had broken Amanda to love and was now leading 5-1.

That was incredible, Lynn thought. Amanda was an excellent clay court player while Robyn had grown up playing on hard courts and grass mostly. There was no doubt that Amanda should win this match easily. Besides that, she was the defending champion. But it was not so much the British youngster's effort but Amanda's lack of performance that had put her in this position. Robyn's service game went to Deuce. Lynn could tell that Amanda tried to get into the match but also Robyn had made up her mind. She sensed there was a chance to advance to the next round and claim a victory over a Top 10 player. She pulled

herself together, managed to get an AD point and served out the game and the set.

During the break Lynn glanced into the stands. The crowd was taking their seats and Lynn liked the look of excitement on their faces. Sometimes she spotted celebrities or actors at the matches, but that happened usually at the Grand Slams. There were players though. She had already made out Monica Jordan in the block reserved for officials and players, as well as Amanda's friend Natsumi Takashima, who was sitting next to Monica. Checking her watch she advised the crowd to take their seats quickly.

"Time," Lynn said. Both players got up and walked to the service line.

Lynn checked back on the crowd. There was still someone squeezing through the rows to an unoccupied seat in the upper half of the stands. It was Elise Renard. Lynn looked at Amanda to see if she had noticed Elise's arrival, but the Australian player remained stone-faced and began serving. Once in a while Lynn glanced up to Elise but with every time Amanda got broken Elise looked more sad and confused. Before Robyn Lawrence converted her match point, Elise had left the stadium.

There were the facts. Right before her eyes. She had written them down and now looked them over and over again. Sasha knew she was right, but she couldn't believe it. This was just too incredible, too daring to be true. She looked up from the little black note book she had filled with her scribbling over the last five days and glanced through the bushes onto the court in front of her. Luella and Gabriella had been hitting balls for the last thirty minutes. Their coach was giving them instructions once in a while. Everything looked normal, but Sasha knew it wasn't.

It wasn't just the incident with Gabriella in the locker room that had confused her. Sure, the behavior had been surprising, but sometimes a loss made you cranky and afterwards

you pretended to have forgotten about your outbursts. Sasha could understand that. But what was more striking was Gabriella's playing style. They had faced each other in the quarterfinal of the Australian Open and Sasha had won the encounter in three sets after Gabriella had two match points. But she got tight and in the end lost track of first her game and then the match. In the end it had been easy to win against the more inexperienced player.

Only a few weeks later they played again in the final of Indian Wells. Knowing Gabriella's game style Sasha went into the match with a clear plan. She would basically play like she had in the Australian Open quarterfinal. But in Indian Wells Gabriella was returning well. She hit winners with her backhand and her forehand and her service percentage looked great. Before Sasha could adjust to her opponents new-found wit and energy she had lost the first set.

The second set wasn't better from her point of view. Gaga held her service games and had forced Sasha to come to the net where she had never felt comfortable. Even the baseline rallies went Gabriella's way. In the end Sasha was able to fight her way back into the match and gave it all she could but was still outplayed by the younger player. Her opponent's drastic change in game style and spirit however had taken her by surprise. And now, Sasha was sure she knew why.

During the whole last week in Miami she had observed the Galloway twins. Not only their practice sessions but also their matches whenever possible. It was hard to tell them apart. Even the commentators had problems during their doubles matches. But with time Sasha had spotted the little differences that made out their characters. Little tics and gestures they couldn't unlearn.

During one of the matches a lightbulb went on. She understood that while she had indeed played Gabriella in the Indian Wells final it had in fact been Luella in the Australian Open quarterfinal, even though the score board showed Gabriella Galloway's name. The twins were switching matches.

So it had been Luella who had been unfriendly in the locker room and had been clueless about the *Tennis Nurse*

novels? While it was Gaga in the bathroom talking to Elise? This seemed to make much more sense now. Sometimes it was Luella playing for Gabriella, sometimes the other way round. Sasha was intrigued. That was just as risky as what she was doing with Jaro. She liked it. She also loved the fact that she knew about it.

AD VENTURES AND BREAK POINTS

Stuttgart, Germany

Lying in her hotel room bed, Elise stared at the ceiling. The alarm bell had woken her fifteen minutes ago and she had gotten up immediately to open the window and let in the cool morning air before retreating again to the warm cavity of the blanket.

It was a new day, and Elise knew that it could only be a good day. Stuttgart had been a great tournament so far. Due to her injury last year she had missed the tournament and had no points to defend. Without the pressure she had made the third round in singles where she was defeated by Tamara Parova, a feisty and dangerous player. Even though the loss had hurt for a moment she knew that it was a good result and she could build on it. Still struggling in the Australian tournaments she had become better and more confident step by step and now she was sure that one day she could get her old ranking back, perhaps even finish the year in the Top 50 again.

Even though she had lost the quarterfinal she was still in the tournament. Like in Charleston she was playing doubles again and today was semifinals day. Cheered by the German fans her

doubles team had been unexpectedly successful. Today they could even make it to the final.

Feeling the warmth of her own body underneath the sheets Elise thought back a week, when Agnes had taken her out to dinner with Candice and Monica. Even though she felt it looked a bit weird to hang out with people who were that much older than her she felt comfortable with them. So much had happened in only a few weeks after she had talked to Agnes in the little café in Indian Wells. The fact that her friend Angela knew about her now and couldn't care less about Elise's preferences gave her a new confidence. How relaxing it was that she didn't have to pretend anymore when she was around Angela. She could even handle Stephanie's teasing much better, countering with a joke once, which she felt had gained her Stephanie's respect.

Elise closed her eyes one last time before she had to get up. Her team would play against favorites Martina Rodriguez and Antonia Sapore and could face Stephanie and Angela tomorrow in the final if they won today. Her team. Elise bit her lip thinking about it.

The team was her and Amanda Auster.

Just when they had finished their dinner, Monica had received a phone call and after a few minutes suggested that the caller should come to the restaurant. Soon, a doggish Amanda had joined them and had reluctantly sat down next to Elise. After her initial surprise and heart flutter, Elise had managed to converse with Amanda and the others in a friendly and cheerful tone, successfully hiding her confusion and excitement. If there was one thing she wanted and feared just the same it was sitting close to Amanda, feeling her moves and listening to her Australian accent.

With three very successful doubles players on one table the conversation soon turned to doubles tactics and doubles partnerships and eventually the inevitable happened.

"Why don't you two play together?" Monica had asked Elise and Amanda while munching an *Apfelstrudel* with vanilla sauce. In unison, both players shook their head vehemently and dismissed the suggestion. Amanda mumbled something about

focusing on singles while Elise just looked for an easy way out unable to find one. It would only hurt to spend time with Amanda since she was not available.

But the more they had protested the more the older girls had leaned on them and ultimately they had said yes. Elise had told herself to behave calmly and professionally and she had executed her plan very well, but recapitulating the week she also had to admit that she was happy. Happy to take the court with Amanda, to sit next to her, to hit balls with her, to talk and laugh with her. It was all she wanted. It was what she had feared. Being so close, but never getting there.

Elise knew that this would hurt in the end as Amanda seemed not interested at all in Elise beyond playing tennis. Lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, Elise also knew that it would be a good day.

Monica had taken a seat in the block reserved for press and tournament officials. While watching the match she checked her mobile once in a while, updated her social media profiles and tweeted news to the world. A quick glance down onto the court confirmed what she had suspected since she had seen Amanda and Elise playing together two days ago in their first round match.

These two clicked in an amazing way. The German-Australian team were blasting the experienced doubles team of Antonia Sapore and Martina Rodriguez off the court with powerful and precise serving and a witty combination of well-paced ground strokes and skillful volleying. They had taken the first set in only thirty-two minutes and there was no reason to believe they could lose the second. They were already up a break and when they won the next game the German spectators supported them with loud clapping.

Quietly applauding herself a little bit for setting Amanda and Elise up to play doubles, Monica Jordan leaned back during

the change of ends, when all of a sudden a loud voice called out for her.

“Monica, I need to talk to you,” Morgana Doré exclaimed over the crowd noise while squeezing through the seats. With a heavy sigh and an even heavier looking bag Morgana Doré sat down next to Monica.

“Sure,” Monica said in surprise. “What is it?”

Morgana looked around suspiciously. The older player wondered what was going on and took a look around as well. Nobody seemed to have noticed Morgana but instead the crowd looked at the court, as the players went to the baseline again. Morgana put down the bag and pulled out an old copy of *Tennis Nurse and The Second Service*.

“Look,” she whispered opening the book and pointing to an underlined passage. “This is you, right?”

Monica took her time looking at the passage. But there was no need to read it. The paragraph described a young girl, who never traveled with a coach or entourage. Her trademark shot was a beautiful one-handed backhand down the line. Monica had to laugh. How often had she been asked this question?

“No, that is not me.” She smiled broadly at the French player. Morgana did not look convinced. She pulled out another two novels from her bag, shaking her head.

“No, no. See here,” she said skimming through the pages to find the right passage. “This description is a reference to your ’99 U.S. Open win. It’s an exact point-by-point report of your shot-making in the last game.” Her voice almost cracked with excitement.

“This could refer to any match, Morgana.” Monica was beginning to get annoyed by the overeager Frenchwoman.

Morgana leaned back and gave Monica a long look, ready to say something. But then she changed her mind. Not bothering to open the second book she had taken out, she stuffed the novels back into her bag. She turned to Monica.

“I know that these books are about real players. About you, about Agnes, about Sasha and even me. I think you know who writes these books.”

Taken aback by the fierce determination she heard in Morgana's voice, Monica watched the French player as she left the stands with her bag full of *Tennis Nurse* novels and sighed. In every generation of players there was one who asked too many questions. One player who would dig and dig and in the end get nowhere.

The crowd's loud explosion of triumph brought her back to the tennis match that was taking place down on the clay court. Amanda and Elise had won and would advance to the final tomorrow. With broad smiles on their faces they embraced to celebrate the victory.

Natsumi Takashima put down her menu on the table. She would go for a big cheeseburger today.

Martina, Antonia and Mint had accepted her invitation to dine out together even though they had nothing to celebrate. Stuttgart had promised to become a rather easy tournament considering the doubles draw but unexpectedly, Martina and Antonia had lost to a nonetheless refreshing and effective new team, Elise and Amanda, while Mint and Natsumi had lost to Angela and Stephanie. If it weren't for Amanda, it could have been a German conspiracy. All the German players were suddenly thriving in their hometown tournament, even against the best doubles players of the moment.

"If these two keep on playing together they will go far," Martina mumbled while studying the menu.

"They are mainly singles players. I don't see Amanda concentrating on doubles more," Natsumi considered. "And Elise is trying to get her singles ranking back."

"She is a cutie," Antonia chuckled. "I was surprised Amanda was able to serve." Natsumi and Martina cracked a smile over that comment. It was true. Elise's assets were able to take your concentration off the tennis easily.

“Amanda is a true professional,” Natsumi joked. “Unlike us, apparently, who would go down in flames of lust being on the same court as Miss Renard.”

“Oh, speak for yourself only, please. I can’t stand Elise.” Mint rolled her eyes as if to highlight her words. Natsumi was surprised. Had something happened in the past between Elise and Mint? But she couldn’t recall these two even talking to each other. Perhaps Mint was jealous of Elise, who was well-liked by everyone and seemed to have great support by her parents. Mint was a loner sometimes, who never talked about her parents and only in the last two tournaments she had opened up to Natsumi a bit while playing doubles. Natsumi sighed. The usual girl fight in the summer camp, she assumed. She liked Elise. In fact, she had hoped that the unexpected partnership was able to take Amanda’s mind off things. She seemed to have hit rock bottom since her breakup with Felicia but refused to talk about it.

“Well, looks like Elise still has a positive impact on Amanda. The girl was all smiles today. Hasn’t happened in a while.”

“Because they were winning.” It seemed that Mint couldn’t be convinced today. Looking for support, Natsumi turned towards Martina and Antonia who hadn’t said a word yet. They were suspiciously eyeing the German food the waitress had just brought.

“Amanda should take advantage,” Antonia said with a grin. “French girls are always up for good fun.”

“Aussie kisses versus French kisses,” Martina grinned. “I would love to see that kind of cultural encounter.”

“She’s German,” Mint sneered. “And she is boring.”

Natsumi rolled her eyes. “Well, I would put it a bit differently, but Mint is right. Elise is only half French and she’s not the type to fool around with.” Perhaps she shouldn’t have alluded to Elise and Amanda in the first place because now she had to deal with a grumpy Mint and a couple going wild.

“I just like to see Amanda play doubles again,” she explained. “Playing doubles puts her at ease. Plus, she is volleying like a goddess.”

“Now, that is right,” Antonia agreed. “Why can’t she do it when she is alone on the court?”

“Because it’s a different game,” Mint piped up.

Natsumi relaxed. They were back to discussing tennis and seeing Antonia, Monica and Mint engaging in an in-depth conversation of how playing doubles made you a better singles player she allowed herself to wonder about Amanda and Elise again. It wasn’t quite right that playing doubles relaxed Amanda. The truth was, it was Elise who put Amanda at ease. Easily.

Amanda couldn’t help but smile about the peculiar situation she was in. There she was in another final. Doubles final, she should add. Although she hadn’t planned to play doubles at all. As reluctant as she had been at the beginning, when Monica, Agnes and Candice tried to convince the two girls to give it a go, now she was even more satisfied that she had given in to their pleas.

The week with Elise had been fun and they were a good team. Even though Elise lacked Amanda’s doubles experience and consistency at the net she made up for it with peppered serves and her excellent forehand. She was also a fast learner who listened to Amanda’s tactical advice eager to implement her tips immediately, however not lacking the confidence to make quick decisions of her own.

When Amanda had entered the restaurant, she was initially surprised to see Elise in the company of Monica Jordan and the couple. But then she had remembered that Elise’s dad used to coach Agnes Lion and that Agnes and Elise had to have known each other for at least a decade. She would have preferred to talk to Monica alone as she had felt horrible that night and needed to talk to someone about the whole mess with Felicia, but with a straight girl around she didn’t want to talk about her relationship.

However, the evening had turned out surprisingly joyful. At the beginning, Elise had been quiet, too, and Amanda had

wondered if Elise was still angry about that evening at the Australian Open and the unpleasant encounter with Mint Rickenbacher. But soon the young German had engaged in a calm and thoughtful conversation with Amanda and the Australian had finally relaxed and begun to enjoy herself. And suddenly they had been set up to play doubles together. Amanda still couldn't believe it.

Now, she was standing in the left service box and bent forward. Looking straight ahead over the net she waited for Elise's bullet to come crashing down in their opponents' side of the court. She had gotten used to the German's presence next to her and behind her. And in front of her. Watching Elise's long legs and her backside was not an unpleasant sight either. After her breakup with Felicia, Amanda counted it as a good sign that she noticed these little details again. There was also the attentive look on Elise's face whenever Amanda said something, her shy smile when they met in the locker room, and her broad, proud smile when Amanda had fired an ace.

It soothed Amanda and she was aware of it. Over the week she had been trying to weigh the good and the bad of this situation but then had settled on going with the flow. It was just doubles, played for fun, and right now they were winning in formidable fashion, just going up a second break against the all-German team on the other side of the net.

Giving each other a handclap, Elise and Amanda walked over to the bench and sat down. Amanda took her bottle and thoughtfully gulped the water. She wondered if she should ask Elise out for dinner tonight. That was perfectly normal for doubles partners. Elise wouldn't misunderstand it. Amanda was sure, she wouldn't. Glancing over to the German who was sipping her drink, she was still insecure about whether to ask or not when Elise turned her head to Amanda.

"Would you like to go out for dinner tonight," Elise asked. Startled by the coincidence, Amanda laughed and nodded.

"Yes, I'd love to."

Seeing the German flashing her a big smile, she felt that her head went hot. Elise's unashamed attention made her blush.

She took another look at the smiling girl next to her. A thought crossed her mind. Could she have been wrong about Elise? Was there perhaps a chance this girl wasn't straight? Amanda shook her head and brushed the thought away. She had no intention of engaging in a new relationship anyway. Moreover, Elise was clearly straight but didn't seem to mind that Amanda wasn't. She was just one of these open-minded youngsters.

"Time," Lynn said and Amanda gave Elise a friendly nod. There was business to finish and a fine trophy was waiting only one game away.

"Will you please let me in on what we are doing?"

With a sigh Sasha turned around. Jaro had stopped following her. Her fiancé had showed up this afternoon for a two day PR trip as he would play a soccer match against a German club nearby at the weekend. Their managements had figured they could use the opportunity to show them together. For her semifinal Jaro would sit in Sasha's box and cheer her on.

But right now he was a millstone around Sasha's neck. How to explain to this soccer guy that she was on a secret mission to find out more details about the Galloways? She just had to find out! She had been following them for at least three hours strolling through the city of Stuttgart studying their behavior and writing every detail down in her book. Lulu liked chicken salad while Gaga had fish with rice. It didn't look significant for her mission but Sasha knew that every detail could help her. If she was able to determine who was standing on the other side of the court, she would have no problem in beating either of the sisters in the future.

She readjusted her sunglasses and made sure her large hat was placed accurately before answering him.

"We are following these twins to find out who is who," she explained impatiently, patting her thigh to gesture Jaro to keep moving. Looking over her shoulder, Sasha saw Lulu and

Gaga disappear behind a corner. The soccer player shook his head but nevertheless followed her again. Sasha was speeding down the street and turned around the corner when she heard Jaro's voice again.

"Alright, alright. But that's pure speculation and honestly, it's simply ridiculous. Who would think about switching matches like that? Besides, aren't there controls during tournaments. It's not like it's that easy to fool everyone! I'm sorry to say it but this isn't a good theory at all."

"Don't even dare to question me, Jaro," she hissed. She really began to feel sorry for herself. How could anyone believe she was in love with this guy? He was absolutely simple-minded. Instead of a brain he had a football on his head. Sasha was sure, the next time he would open his mouth she would kick his football head to the moon. Why had she agreed to take him along? She was just too nice. She shouldn't have let him in on her secret mission either. With his football brain he would let it slip one day. Or not. He would probably have forgotten all about it tomorrow. But in future, she told herself, she would keep it to herself. Yes, and she would have a huge advantage over all the other players.

"But the hat and the sunglasses?"

Sasha rolled her eyes. Jaro again. He really didn't get anything.

"Well, I need to go incognito!"

Jogging along Jaro nodded for the hundredth time, not understanding anything.

"Except you are doing the exact opposite! You are the only one wearing a hat and big, dark, turtle-like sunglasses."

Sasha had to admit that this was true. No one in this little German town was as well-dressed and elegant as she was. She was just about to say something to Jaro, when she realized that the twins had vanished once more. With her perfectly manicured hand, Sasha stopped Jaro in his tracks.

"They just entered this German tavern. At 5 p.m.! Isn't that suspicious? I think it is!"

Jaro stared at her for a couple of seconds before shaking his head in obvious disbelief.

“I give up. This is going too far. What are you planning to do now? Don’t tell me you want to go in and pretend to have dinner.” Perplexed he raised his hands, then shrugged. “I’ll wait for you at the hotel, Sasha.”

He turned around and quickly walked away. Traitor, Sasha thought. Her fiancé was gone and she was standing alone in front of the *Ochs’n Willi* restaurant. Fine. She could do that alone. Keeping her hat and her sunglasses on, Sasha stepped into the restaurant. Luckily enough for her, the place was crowded and people didn’t pay attention to her. Now where had the twins gone? Perhaps to some backroom, to have more privacy to develop their next plan?

Carefully she peeped through the door into the large room in the back only to look straight at the two doubles finalists – Elise Renard and Amanda Auster. What the hell were those two doing there? Were other players here as well? Was this some special address the players hadn’t told her about? Sasha knew they all kept these things from her as they didn’t want her to join in. Not that she cared. She didn’t. Not at all. And why would she care about Elise hanging out with Amanda? She didn’t. Right now, it was about Lulu and Gabriella. Sasha noticed the eldest twin’s red jacket at the very far end of the room. Full of purpose, she navigated between the tables towards a free chair at the bar to pursue her espionage agenda.

She had to stop thinking about it. She had to fall asleep and not think about the burning sensation that still sizzled on her cheek. She needed to concentrate on something else. Waiting for sleep to relieve her, Amanda searched the room for something she could count. Anything. Sheep didn’t do it for her anymore. But she couldn’t get her mind off the feeling that pierced her face.

In the end it meant nothing. It had no meaning for the future – so she told herself. She could have touched her cheek and rubbed the burn away but she didn't. She wanted to feel it. It reminded her of her own stupidity and apparently she needed a reminder. And wasn't it a good step towards self improvement to admit your own shortcomings?

The moonlight was sliding along the bare furniture and sighing loudly, Amanda rolled onto her stomach and buried her head in her arms. But then quickly turned back again. She didn't want to close her eyes. If she did so, then the whole scene in the hotel corridor would replay again and she'd only feel embarrassed. Should she have acted differently? Maybe. Life could be so terribly confusing. Or maybe *she* was confusing everything. The whole scheme that had been unfolding in her mind in the last days and hours had been illusory and Amanda knew it. Just one of these enticing ideas that cropped up after another disappointing relationship had ended.

It wasn't easy to get involved in a relationship on tour. Too much travelling and only a blurry concept of home made it almost impossible to find someone for a long-term partnership. But sometimes two players found each other and it made life and love a lot easier.

It had only been a sweet idea – good enough to take her mind off Felicia and perfectly harmless. But she had felt it coming the whole week and the piercing hotness on her cheek only confirmed it – she should have never said yes to going out for dinner, she should have never said yes to playing doubles with Elise. She should have stayed far away from the girl. She moaned quietly. What had she been thinking? She should have stopped herself. Rolling onto her stomach again, Amanda ruffled her hair. There really was no use for a broken heart. Not a second time in a month. But this German kid had captured her mind, there was no denying it. They had met by the showers and in the locker room, talked casually, hugged on court, touched each other and shared good moments. They had laughed a lot.

Amanda relaxed thinking about the time they had spent together. Elise made her smile. She made Amanda crack jokes

and tell stories. She made her forget Felicia completely. Yes, she couldn't help it and as much as she tried to focus on something else, her thoughts always ended up leading her to Elise. She was probably asleep now, lost in quiet dreams with a smile playing on her lips and lighting up her graceful features.

Biting her lower lip in frustration, Amanda frowned and cleared her voice. What on earth was wrong with her, Amanda wondered. Should she have seen it coming? The Germans swift forward movement wasn't exactly what she had expected and Amanda wasn't fast enough to dodge. If Amanda was lucky Elise wouldn't bother her again with playing doubles. Perhaps after a while they could have a nice friendship. But nothing else.

She closed her eyes.

There they were in the corridor still smiling about the previous witty exchange in the elevator when Amanda told Elise about the first time she had played on clay, not being able to handle the new surface, and Elise told her about her first time playing on grass. Amanda had thought of a ballsy, suggestive comment about first times in general and for a second she considered throwing it at Elise to test her reaction, but in the end she didn't. Amanda had been constantly aware of that lingering feeling below the surface but restrained herself from getting too engaged with the young woman. The evening had been pleasantly joyful and relaxed and Amanda had kept her cool with the young German who seemed thoroughly happy to spend the evening with her. Everything had gone according to plan and Amanda couldn't remember when she had felt so much at ease with someone.

Then they said good night and just when Amanda wanted to turn around to walk down to her room, Elise put her hands lightly on Amanda's arms and kissed her on the left cheek.

"Thank you for a wonderful week," Elise said.

The sudden gesture shocked Amanda. She stood still for a moment feeling the fire the touch had ignited running from her cheek through the rest of her body. Then she flashed Elise a last smile, nodded and turned around. Pretending that nothing had happened she walked to her bedroom door a few steps away. Fiddling with the key, she finally allowed herself to look over her

shoulders. Elise had left and only the gloomy corridor stared back at her.

30 Love. Tom would have to thank Teddy for that.

His unexpected encounter with Melanie a few weeks earlier had sparked the idea in him to set up a blog of his own. Thanks to his wonderful lover he also had a name for his blog. After he had done interviews with the finalists he had retreated to his hotel room, motivated and determined to write history. With the only exception that he had assumed it would be a lot easier. Tom had been working on his secret blog project for over an hour now but technology didn't seem to be his best friend that day.

"Damn it!"

Nothing worked. Nothing at all. The whole blog setup seemed to get the better of him. He didn't like the formatting, the themes and he had no idea how to change it. It was just like talking Chinese to him. He didn't understand the slightest thing. When he cast a glance at Mel's blog – and Lord knew he had these past few days – everything looked terribly easy. From inserting a song to adjusting a picture next to the text, it seemed like a kid of five was able to do it. Except now that he faced the challenge, it appeared to be a lot more complex.

Access denied – incorrect password.

With a loud warning bang the website shut down.

"Oh, for hell's nipples!" The internet was mocking him. He restrained from hitting the brand new laptop, took a deep breath instead and closed his eyes. He counted until five then looked back at the screen. Nothing had changed, of course. His inability to set up his glorious blog had become an embarrassment.

Exasperated, Tom stood up and went to lean against the window of his hotel room. If he should ever succeed in setting up his blog, he had to write his first entry yet. For some reason it made him slightly anxious. The first words were the most

difficult ones. Once you had them, the rest came along rather easily. But in the meantime, you had to find those few sentences that would launch the whole thing and what Tom hoped would become the juiciest blog ever written. Even though for the moment, he was pretty far from it.

He looked out over the tree-lined entrance area. The hotel they stayed at was rather cozy if not luxurious. There was nobody outside and Tom was just bracing himself to face his *30 Love* venture again, when his eyes caught two figures he knew well. The Galloway twins were marching across the path to the hotel entrance. Tom had to laugh. Lulu and Gabriella definitely confirmed the cliché that it was just impossible to separate twins. These two spent literally all their time together. One could almost suspect that they were plotting world dominance. They disappeared through the entrance but Tom still looked outside into the night. He could make out another figure in the background. He squinted his eyes to get accustomed to the darkness. Someone was hiding behind a tree, watching the twins entering the lobby.

In an instinctive gesture, Tom crouched down to the floor. Only his eyes were looking over the window sill into the dark outside. Thank god he had forgotten to turn on the light when he was busy setting up *30 Love*, he thought. Peeping out into the night he let out a surprised yelp when he finally saw the dark figure's face.

It was Sasha Mrachova, sporting a hat and pair of huge sunglasses.

Elise rolled onto her side and opened her eyes again. She wouldn't get any sleep tonight. A multitude of images were dancing around in her head, hitting against each other with such frenzy that she almost felt dizzy. She stared into the sky outside

the window of her hotel room. It was a starry night, serene and still, and it almost angered Elise that the world seemed unperturbed by the confusion that was agitating her heart.

Two hours ago in the corridor outside her room she had bent over casually and with the routine of the thousand automatisms that ran her life she had touched Amanda's cheek with her lips. Just a mere contact of her skin against someone else's. A European automatism. It was nothing.

And yet it was everything. Everything she had at the moment – because she would have never dared to go further. And, of course, she knew there was no chance that Amanda would have paused for a moment in surprise before locking eyes with her, taking Elise's hands and kissing her back. No chance that Amanda would have held her tight and pushed her back against the wall or pulled her away to her room at the end of the corridor where they would lie in the dark kissing and whispering for hours and hours.

She wasn't different from the other girls. Like everyone else she waited for the one kiss in the dark, the one moment when everything spilled over, like in the romantic movies she secretly loved watching from the depths of her bed. After the wonderful dinner she had with Amanda she had forgotten about Felicia and about her own good intentions. Elise wanted it to happen, but her lips had lasted too long on Amanda's skin and when they had broken apart, panic had invaded her. From Amanda's quick exit she could tell that she had gone too far, and now it was too late to make up for the move. Or too soon? Or not the right time at all?

Turning around one more time, Elise moaned in embarrassment. It definitely had been the wrong decision. Lingering very closely to Amanda's cheek, she had waited for Amanda to kiss her back. But the Australian had only backed up and nodded with an awkward smile. Without a word Amanda had turned away. Of course, she had. She was in a relationship with a famous pop singer and Elise's advances must have caught her off-guard as they were clearly inappropriate. Elise could only hope that Amanda would misinterpret the touch as a mere good-

night kiss. If not, there would forever be awkwardness between them.

Staring into the darkness, Elise tried to forget the whole scene but the truth was that she wanted nothing but to experience it one more time. Just one more kiss. The thought of it made her chest heave. It felt as if she could sing out loud and at the same time it felt she couldn't breathe. As if her thorax was expanding without limits and yet being crunched to a little ball. Amanda's skin had been soft, but what had actually astonished her most was the warmth of it. There was Amanda's life, spreading underneath the surface and rushing through her veins to her heart and back to her cheek. Elise closed her eyes and, lost in the reminiscence of the sensations that the kiss had stirred up, she put a hand onto her heart and listened to the beats of the precious organ.

For a while she counted the beats but its regularity disappointed her. Nothing had changed, she realized. Nothing. Her heart was beating just the same. Another automatism that ruled her life.

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