

LOVE GAME

Season 2012

m.b. gerard

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LOVE GAME

Season 2012

by M.B. Gerard

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For Dory and Stevo

*Shout-outs
to Eva and Flo
to Monique, Cécile and Yvonne*

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PROLOGUE

Peeking through the foam that covered the bathwater Gabriella Galloway's toe didn't look like a part of her body. It looked like a wizened gnome who had popped out from a blanket of white moss. If she had reached out for it and tried to catch it, it would have disappeared again, mocking her. She wagged it a little bit until it almost annoyed her, then let her foot sink back into the water and stood up. She needed to get going, pack and make a few phone calls.

Wrapped in a bathrobe she began arranging training clothes, match outfits, jeans and shirts in piles on her bed. After half an hour her bed looked like the New York City skyline, however a wobbly one. But there was no other space in her apartment for organizing her clothes. Her bed in the bedroom, and a table and chair in the living room were the only existing furniture. On the ceiling a single bulb diffused a bright, cold light.

In what looked to her parents and her sister Luella like an incomprehensible overreaction she had bought the small apartment in central St. Petersburg and had moved out of the apartment she had shared with her sister. Her parents had begged her to at least get a condominium in a protected neighborhood. But she refused to listen to them anymore. In the last three months she had trained harder than ever before and she had

gotten used to being on her own without her twin sister, who was being treated like a star, as everyone believed she had won her first Grand Slam in Wimbledon. After the season had ended in October, the twins had visited their parents' home, but their old friends and most of the family were only interested in Luella. Lulu received invitations to parties and spent almost every evening out with important people while Gabriella tried to catch up with the few friends who still knew who she was.

However, in the supermarket, in the cinema and on the street she was mistaken for Luella. It had been terribly wearisome to explain every single time that she was *only* the little twin sister, and not the Grand Slam winner. What was even harder to swallow was the fact that Lulu was boasting about the win. It was a provocation, and every time Gabriella witnessed somebody on the street who congratulated Luella and had their picture taken with her smiling sister, she wanted to shout out that it wasn't Luella who had won the final match. That it had been Gabriella who had stood on the Wimbledon Centre Court and held the Venus Rosewater dish up towards the blue sky.

But she hadn't said a word. Nobody was ever to know that the sisters had switched matches. Besides that, Gabriella had refused to keep on playing for her sister after Wimbledon. Now she was being punished for her decision by Luella, who was scooping the praise and applause for Gabriella's effort.

The day she moved out, Luella had stood in the doorway of their shared apartment with her arms crossed. Gabriella knew what her sister had been thinking. That Gabriella was weak and running away from the challenge Lulu's popularity had imposed on the sisters' relationship.

But Lulu was wrong. Gabriella just wanted to be prepared and come back better and stronger, and for that she needed to be on her own. She closed the lid of one of her huge trolley suitcases, stretched and stepped to the window. Admittedly, the high-rise building she now called her home wasn't pretty, but if she stood at the far end of her window and looked outside, she was able to catch a glimpse of Tampa Bay. She rarely spent time indoors anyway. The water of the bay was sparkling in the orange evening light. For a moment she

wondered what Luella was doing right now but then quickly pushed the thought away. She didn't want to ponder over her sister. Not anymore. That was over.

Elise's dad, Robert Renard, had helped to gather a new team around her, with Fredrik Nordström as her new coach and a fitness instructor who traveled with her to most of the tournaments. Now she felt ready. Not only to wipe Luella's smirk off her face when Gabriella would surpass her in the rankings and beat her on the court. She also felt ready to get a Grand Slam of her own. She knew how to do it, so she was able to do it again, Gabriella told herself while looking outside the window at the bay. For the first time in her life she was truly independent.

Yet the thought unsettled her. It was a different independence from the one she had shared with Lulu and which she had cherished for so long. The twins had never listened to their many coaches when they had given them instructions or elaborated a game plan for the upcoming match. They were only pretenses for the sisters' secret pact. Instead they had decided for themselves who was to play the match and how. Especially Gabriella had become extremely adept at working out the opponents' strengths and weaknesses and developing a game plan that suited the sisters' scheme.

Gabriella squared her shoulders and went to the kitchenette. All this could only help her now, she thought. But she couldn't shake off nor really put her finger on the underlying tension that accompanied her. She picked up the phone and dialed the number of Kiara, a physio she had met in November, whom she had dated a couple of times and eventually inaugurated the new bed with. They weren't in love but saying good-bye seemed appropriate nonetheless. They chatted for a while and Kiara wished her good luck for the season.

After hanging up Gabriella began emptying the refrigerator before turning it off in preparation for the next several weeks. Sitting down at the table with a variety of yoghurts and fruits, and a huge bowl of fried rice, she grabbed a pad of paper and a pen and wrote down a list of goals she had come up with while lying in the bathtub.

- 1. Win my own Grand Slam*
- 2. Enter Top 10*
- 3. Find a girl who loves me back*

She didn't need luck, Gabriella thought. She was determined to work for it.

Amanda parked the car next to the blue tiled water basin that surrounded the entrance of the building like a shallow moat. A couple of fish crossed under the little bridge when she entered the high archway, which gave the house a Hispanic touch. The place where Elise and her parents lived was on the outskirts of the city, close to the training courts of Rick Salieri, but not too far away from the beach. During the off-season she had become a frequent visitor, as Elise's parents had made it a habit of inviting her over to dinner after their afternoon practices. With all of her relatives living in Australia Amanda suddenly had a new home with the Renards. She jumped up the staircase, taking two steps at a time, and rang the doorbell on the second floor.

Robert Renard, Elise's dad and coach opened the door with a huge grin.

"Punctual as always," he observed, checking his watch.

"Only Elise is far from ready." He winked at Amanda and pointed his thumb to the room at the end of the hallway. The door was open and Amanda could hear Elise curse. When she approached the room she saw Elise kneeled over a large linen bin with clothes scattered all around her. She didn't notice the Aussie. Amanda raised an eyebrow, overlooking the scene, but was somewhat relieved to see that most of Elise's suitcases seemed already packed. They had to leave for the airport in half an hour.

"I can't find the yellow top," Elise shouted loudly, so her parents could hear her.

"Check the laundry chest," her mother shouted back from somewhere in the apartment. Amanda leaned against the door

frame and suppressed a chuckle. Pink, blue and green training tops and pants came flying over Elise's shoulder at her, but no yellow shirt.

"It's not there," Elise yelled. She had reached the bottom of the bin, turned around and yelped in surprise when she saw Amanda. "Good, you're here," she said after steadying herself. "You must help me find my yellow top. You know, the one with the little red stars on the shoulder."

"I know it well," Amanda grinned. Elise wore the shirt whenever possible. In fact she had two of them, Amanda remembered. "You are missing both of them?"

"Well," Elise hesitated. "Yes, both," she continued quickly. "But I might have forgotten one in the locker room the other day. Too bad. That's why I must find the other one."

"I see," Amanda said. "Let me take a look in your room again, and you check your racquet bags and the dirty laundry."

Elise nodded and stepped to the door when all of a sudden she stopped and turned around. Quickly, she walked back to Amanda, grabbed her hips and pulled her close.

"Hello," Elise whispered. She gave Amanda a smile, then a kiss on the lips.

"Check the dirty laundry," Amanda laughed but didn't let go of Elise either for another few seconds before rushing Elise out of the door.

With a little sigh she reached down and started picking up Elise's clothes, folding them and piling them up in the laundry chest. The yellow top was not amongst them and after closing it she looked around. The room was tidy again. Perhaps it had flown under the bed without Elise noticing it, Amanda thought. She kneeled down, and crawling through the jungle of suitcases, she looked under the bed. There was nothing but two *Tennis Nurse* novels bashfully hidden behind the bedpost. Amanda grabbed them and checked the titles. *Tennis Nurse and The Magician of Miami* was a pretty good thriller, Amanda remembered. She had read it perhaps five years ago when it had first come out. The other one was *Tennis Nurse and The Case of the Lotus Lily*. This one was new. Amanda hesitated for a moment, then opened it to the first page. Apparently, the story

was set in Japan and the main character was running through a bamboo forest chased by villains. Amanda giggled. Most *Tennis Nurse* novels started like a James Bond movie. It was always the same pattern and it always worked. She turned the page. Jane, the nurse, had come to a cliff high above a waterfall and the villains were closing in. What would she do? Would she jump? Would she fight?

Amanda closed the book quickly. No time for *Tennis Nurse* now. But she had enjoyed the short indulgence and there would certainly be an evening when she had time to read more. She opened one of Elise's bags to stuff the novel inside and gasped.

"Oh, come on," Amanda mumbled and rolled her eyes. She looked at a pile of shirts, neatly packed. Under a blue top she saw the edge of a bright yellow shirt. Half a red star was visible. Elise had already packed it. They would have searched for the shirt forever and in the end would have had to rush to the airport. She reached to pull it out and show it to Elise, but stopped. The fabric felt bulky. Something was wrapped inside the shirt. More *Tennis Nurse* novels? Amanda wouldn't have been surprised. It was Elise's guilty pleasure and she traded the books with Gabriella and Morgana Doré.

Amanda pulled out the shirt but what was hidden inside was no book. It was much heavier, and when Amanda carefully unwrapped it she looked at a framed picture of herself and Elise looking at each other on a gorgeous morning in Wimbledon half a year ago.

Amanda knew that for Elise the mysterious journey, which the picture had taken until it finally landed in Elise's hands, had given it an even bigger meaning. Tom had taken the picture, Ted had stolen it with the help of Amanda and had lost it. Then somebody had found it, made a print and slipped it under Elise's hotel room door in Luxembourg. The intention of the anonymous person was still unclear, especially as nothing else had happened since.

Slowly, Amanda stroked the glass of the frame. Elise loved the picture so much, she had put it on her nightstand. It was reckless to take it along on the tour. Anybody could steal it from

the hotel room, and they had decided along with Elise's parents that they had to make an extra effort to keep the relationship private as long as possible.

"Found it!" Elise yelled from somewhere in the apartment. Amanda could hear her footsteps coming back to the bed room. She took a look at the picture again, then quickly wrapped it in the yellow top and put it back between the other shirts. When Elise came into the room, Amanda was still sitting on the floor. She waved with the *Tennis Nurse* novel.

"Can we take this one?"

Overnight a white cover of snow had wrapped up Prague, and now – in the early morning hours of the first of January – held it siege in a cold grip. The perfectly white surface revealed nothing of the war that had been going on the previous night. It had drowned out the sound of the thousand cannons and firecrackers and nothing about this bleak, icy morning promised a good day, let alone a good year.

Sasha Mrachova took a last look into the bathroom mirror. The glass was old and murky, and she was grateful for it.

The house was silent. Everyone in her family was still sleeping. Everyone but her father, who was down in the kitchen pretending to clear up from last night's festivities. Sasha knew that he just wanted to hug her for a last time before she left. When she came down he had already made her a cup of coffee. They silently drank from their cups, then Sasha got up and put on her jacket.

"Take care," her father said when she stepped to the door. "Don't try too hard."

She nodded, swallowing down the big lump that was creeping up her throat. The wind blew a cloud of snowflakes into the house entrance when she opened the door. Pulling her light jacket tighter, Sasha shivered as she stepped out of the entrance of her parents' house into the knee-deep snow.

“Wait,” her father said, winking at her. Sasha smiled. She knew what was to come. Her father pulled out a little glass bottle and stuffed it into Sasha’s racquet bag. The best bootlegged *Slivovice* you could find in the world. He liked gestures more than words. Then he patted her on the shoulder and went back into the kitchen.

In the street a cab was already waiting, and Sasha waved at the driver to come to the door. She had several huge bags she would take to Australia. Sasha was glad she had ordered the cab half an hour earlier than usual. Soon the traffic would press down the snow and turn the roads of her beautiful hometown into skating rinks. Swearing under his breath the driver hauled her suitcases into the trunk of the car and Sasha pulled her scarf tighter. She had wrapped it all around her head, covering her mouth and nose.

Actually, Sasha was grateful for the cold weather, as it meant that completely wrapping her head like this didn’t look so ridiculous. However, as soon as she was sitting in the back of the cab, her thoughts began to race. Passport control would be tricky, she thought. They wouldn’t let her through with the scarf around her head. Not even if she told them who she was. She just had to be really quick, Sasha resolved. Let them take a look at her face and then she would put the scarf on again. She could cough a little, so nobody would wonder why she was wearing it on the plane. Yes, that was a good idea. Besides, the flight would be alright, Sasha thought. She had booked a whole row in first class, so nobody would be sitting next to her.

While the cab bashed its way through the snow Sasha’s cell phone purred. Jaro had written her a text wishing her good luck. He had turned from obnoxious necessity into a real friend. Her only friend, Sasha sometimes thought. And he wasn’t as featherbrained as his buff body indicated. He came up with good concepts from time to time. The Christmas pictures of herself and Jaro sitting behind a huge pile of presents with only their eyes looking over them had been a clever idea to disguise the fact that her nose still looked swollen from the surgery she had to have after the double fracture. It was still swollen. At least Sasha

thought it was. Everyone else seemed to overlook her big nose or nobody dared to mention it. But the Czech knew it was there.

On Boxing Day she withdrew from the Brisbane tournament. Or rather she just didn't show up for it. She simply stayed in bed until she was sure her plane had taken off from Václav Havel Airport without her, then ordered her management to talk to the Brisbane tournament director and reschedule her flight to New Years Day. Not only did she need another week because her nose wasn't looking fine enough yet, but also because – in the midst of her jolly, loud cousins and nieces – an emptiness had invaded her, spread and was eventually filled with the terrifying thought that in Brisbane she could run into Lulu and that the Galloway twin might hit her again.

Or kiss her. You never knew.

BALLIN' IT UP

Auckland, New Zealand

Standing at the window of the players' restaurant, Mint Rickenbacher was overlooking the wet courts of the Auckland Tennis Centre. Mint and her friend, Chili García López, had completed only half an hour of their joint practice when the sky had darkened and heavy showers had driven them inside. After delaying practice for nearly three hours the rain had finally stopped. Down on the practice courts the bustle of clearing the water had begun.

Mint was observing the other players on the courts but didn't move.

"Shall we go down and try to get another half an hour done?" Chili asked.

Without turning around Mint shook her head.

"Let's wait for later. I'm not up to cleaning for twenty minutes if it's just going to start raining again."

Chili parked her chin on Mint's shoulder and looked outside. The rain had stopped but there was no sunny, blue sky to be seen yet.

“Yes, let’s wait and see what happens,” she sighed. Then she followed Mint’s gaze. On the court nearest to the building, two players had begun hitting balls.

“Oh, your favorite opponent,” Chili teased. “Little Elise.”

The Spaniard grinned while she watched the blonde German down on the court. Elise Renard exchanged forehands with Natsumi Takashima. Mint clenched her teeth until she felt her jaw beginning to cramp. The Japanese player and Mint had spent some time together off-court in the past season, and during the Tokyo tournament Natsumi had taken Mint under her wing, saving the American from her obnoxious stepmother. However, since Mint had arrived two days ago, Natsumi hadn’t called her up.

“I couldn’t care less about Elise,” Mint threw in.

“She spent the off-season with Amanda,” Chili reported.

“They won the Couple of the Year Award,” Chili continued.

Mint threw her friend a quick glance from the corner of her eye then looked down on the court again. The German girl was laughing with Natsumi about something the Japanese player had said.

“Well, we already knew in Cincinnati that they were a couple.”

“I knew that,” Chili corrected her. “*You* wouldn’t believe that Elise was into girls.”

Mint didn’t reply to that. What a smartass Chili could be! There was nothing Mint wanted to say. Instead she shrugged and turned away without a word.

“What’s wrong now?” Chili was yelling after her. Mint stopped.

“I just think you could have told me earlier that you didn’t plan to play doubles with me for a whole year,” Mint hissed.

“But it’s only half a year,” Chili said, shaking her head.

“You better find someone for yourself, so you get a chance at the Olympics.”

“I plan to play singles at the Olympics,” Mint replied.

“Of course, Miss Superstar. Good luck with that.”

Mint looked at Chili. It was ironic that she called Mint ‘Miss Superstar’. The Spaniard had been raving about becoming famous the other night after telling Mint that she had been chosen as one of the young players to be showcased in the new Supersport Channel series. Mint should have been in the show instead of Chili. Not only was she the better player, she was also prettier. But Mint knew the reason she had been left out. The show already featured two Americans – Luella and Gabriella Galloway, one of them being in the Top 10. At least for the moment. Lulu was doing fine, but was by no means able to live up to the expectations of a Grand Slam champion and Top 10 player. Mint snorted thinking about the hype Luella’s Wimbledon win had caused.

No, it wouldn’t be easy to get a spot on the Olympic team with her singles ranking, but now she was even more motivated to try to get a spot on the team.

“There’s nobody I could play doubles with anyway,” she grumbled, throwing herself on a lounge chair.

Chili sat down next to her.

“The Olympics pretty much mess up all the good doubles teams,” Chili said understandingly. Then she had an idea. “Why don’t you ask Monica? She can’t play with Agnes, so she might be up for playing with you.”

“I don’t know,” Mint answered pensively. “I never really had a close relationship with Monica. I don’t think she likes me.” She paused for a moment. “But I will ask her. I also thought Gabriella might be up for some doubles action.”

“Gabriella?” Chili was baffled. “Gabriella will play with Lulu, of course.”

“Yes, probably,” Mint said carefully. “But they stopped playing doubles together quite a while ago. And how do you explain Gabriella playing Auckland, while Lulu is in Brisbane?”

Chili shrugged. “Ranking? Luella is a Top 10 player. Of course, she will play Brisbane. It’s the bigger tournament.” Then she paused. “But you are right. It’s very unusual for them. They never play different tournaments. It’s not possible as they share the same team and coach.”

“Not anymore,” Mint said. “Gabriella has her own team now.”

The sky still looked gloomy, but it didn't start raining again and Elise and Natsumi managed to have a good hit on one of the practice courts. When the next players due on the court arrived Elise walked over to the bench and began packing her racquet bag.

“I see you worked on your slice serve,” Natsumi said appearing next to Elise.

“Amanda practiced with me,” Elise smiled at the Japanese player.

“I thought so.” Natsumi winked. Elise shouldered her bag and they walked together towards the players' entrance. From the main court she could hear the comforting sound of the chair umpire announcing the score. Play had started.

“Do you miss her already?” Natsumi asked holding the door for Elise. Elise chuckled at Natsumi's nosiness.

“It's just for a week, Natsumi. We can survive without each other for a week,” Elise said. She knew that Natsumi would love to hear stories about the off-season she had spent with Amanda in Florida.

“We went to a gay bar before Christmas,” she revealed with her voice lowered, so the people who passed them in the hallway couldn't hear.

“Are you kidding me?” Natsumi said laconically. “Amanda in a gay bar? Did you drag her there?”

“No, it was Monica's idea,” Elise laughed, thinking about her girlfriend. Amanda wasn't known for being a party animal. She usually liked a nice evening in, cooking dinner and watching movies. Elise opened the door to the locker rooms.

“We all went there together. Monica, Agnes and Gabriella, too.”

As soon as she had said it and seen Natsumi's raised eyebrows, Elise wanted to bite her lip.

“Gabriella?” Natsumi had stopped dead in her tracks and let her racquet bag fall on the floor. “Gabriella Galloway?”

Elise sighed. “Please, don’t tell anybody! She’s not out to a lot of people and I’m not supposed to say anything.”

As Natsumi opened her mouth, Elise got ready for an onslaught of questions by the Japanese. She held up her hands, hoping to slow down the impending quick-fire interrogation when Natsumi’s phone rang. The ring tone sounded as if someone had scored in a computer game or pinball. The Japanese player raised a finger, gesturing to Elise that she wasn’t dismissed yet, while searching for her phone in her racquet bag.

Elise opened her locker and grabbed her toilet bag. She needed to escape to the showers before Natsumi finished her phone call. Perhaps the Japanese player would forget to ask about Gabriella after Elise came out of the shower. She peered around the locker door and saw to her relief that Natsumi had found her phone and answered it.

“*Moshi moshi*,” the Japanese girl said with a smile, then listened, then she grew stiff. Her smile had vanished.

“Why haven’t you called?” she whispered into the phone. “Why have you never ever called?” She sank onto the bench and buried her head in her free hand.

Elise held her breath. She had never seen Natsumi cry before. But then the Japanese straightened her back, listening carefully.

“Yes,” she eventually answered the caller with a clear voice. “Yes. I can do that.”

Intrigued Elise watched her friend from the other end of the room. Natsumi was still listening, then she seemed to pause and contemplate.

“*Ich dich auch*,” she finally said before hanging up. Elise couldn’t believe her ears. Natsumi spoke German? How did Elise not know that? She opened her mouth to ask the Japanese but stopped herself. Natsumi was still sitting on the bench, staring at the wall in front of her. She seemed to have become unaware of Elise’s presence. Suddenly embarrassed by listening in on the conversation Elise silently closed the locker door and tip-toed to the shower. From under the water, she heard Natsumi finally

rummage through her bag and step into the shower booth next to Elise.

Ich dich auch. That was a German expression used as an affirmative answer to ‘I love you’ or ‘I miss you’. Who had Natsumi talked to? Who did she love back or miss? And why was she so upset? Was the caller a new lover? Elise had to grin in relief. At least Natsumi wouldn’t pester her with questions about Gabriella. In fact, Natsumi seemed to have completely forgotten about everything else.

“This is my last chance.”

Polly Duke looked up and studied the face of the woman sitting opposite her. Bernadette LeBlanc hadn’t touched her salad yet. She hadn’t even picked up her fork. Sitting on the edge of her seat the dark-haired Canadian player was looking outside the restaurant window into the night.

“*You’re* my last chance,” Bernadette said slowly turning her head to Polly.

Polly smiled quickly, but then looked away. Bernadette’s dramatic approach to playing doubles seemed a bit disproportionate and Polly wasn’t sure if it had been the right move to agree on playing with Bernadette in the first place, even though from a professional point of view it had been a great decision. When they had played together for the first time in Luxembourg in October, they had worked well as a team with Polly’s punchy serve backing up Bernadette’s skills at the net. They hadn’t won the title, but went all the way to the final, only being beaten by the top seeds. Bernadette had been content with the result and she had invited Polly to train with her at her base in Florida before Christmas. For two weeks she had avoided the harsh Canadian winter, but this also meant she couldn’t see her family and Polly was happy to at least spend the holidays with them before leaving for New Zealand after Christmas. Fit and ready for the new season she had arrived in Auckland, the

tournament her ranking allowed her to play without going through the qualifying process.

They had decided to play together as the Canadian team in this year's Olympics and the prospect of competing thrilled Polly. But Bernadette seemed almost grim about the challenge that lay ahead of them.

"We need to figure out a good practice schedule," the older player said resolutely. "Let's see into which tournaments your ranking will get you, and with your team I'll figure out a plan for us."

Polly swallowed hard on her lamb rib.

"Of course, we need to play as many grass tournaments as possible to be best prepared for London," Bernadette continued. Many? Plural? Polly looked up. The tennis competition of the Olympic Games in London was also to be held also at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club of Wimbledon – on grass and only a couple of weeks after the third Grand Slam. Were two weeks on the same courts not enough as a solid preparation for the Olympics?

"We considered playing Birmingham," she said hesitantly.

"Yes, Birmingham." Bernadette raised her index finger. "But we should definitely play one more before Wimbledon," Bernadette pointed out, lifting a second finger. "Then we have Wimbledon," she continued her list, raising a third finger." And after Wimbledon I suggest staying in England so we have another good three weeks of practice." Bernadette wagged her four lifted fingers in front of Polly's nose and gave the young player a broad smile. For a short moment Polly thought if it wasn't for the many fingers, Bernadette looked like a witch luring her into her gingerbread house. Polly nodded, thinking about the tight grass court schedule.

"I can talk about this with my team. There is still enough time," she mumbled.

"I'll talk to them," Bernadette interrupted her. With a swift movement she pulled back her hand that had been lingering in front of Polly's nose and clenched a fist.

“I want a medal,” she said vehemently. She almost hissed the words. “I deserve a medal. This is my last chance and I am going to take it.”

She let her fist sink onto the table, suddenly looking exhausted. Then she finally picked up her fork and pierced it into a cherry tomato.

Obviously, participating in the Olympic Games meant a lot to Bernadette. It would be her fourth attendance and also her last. She was already thirty-six. Polly was nevertheless surprised to see the ambition in the older player’s eyes. Bernadette was a journeywoman on the tour, who had had her peak in the singles competition in her early twenties when she had reached a couple of fourth rounds at Grand Slams and when she had had a career high singles ranking in the Top 20. Polly couldn’t remember any of Bernadette’s big matches. They had happened long before she had started following the game. For the last ten years she had specialized in doubles, which was a good way of making a living but wasn’t prestigious at all. Most Canadians wouldn’t be able to recognize her. Perhaps that was the reason Bernadette liked the Olympics so much, Polly thought. Because it emphasized the attention drawn to fellow countrymen and women.

Polly took another look at Bernadette. All of a sudden, nothing in the woman’s demeanor gave a hint at her burning ambition. Pensively, the Canadian was shoveling salad into her mouth while her long, dark hair fell into her face.

Just as Monica Jordan and Agnes Lion entered the stand reserved for players and officials the scoreboard switched to the names of the players due on court next. Natsumi Takashima’s name, along with the embarrassing scoreline next to it was replaced with the names of Gabriella Galloway and Sophia Thrassa.

“What on earth was wrong with Nats?” Agnes wondered, still looking at the scoreboard.

Monica shrugged. "Haven't heard that much from her during the off-season. Maybe she has a new love interest and is missing her?"

"She would have told us about that," Agnes grinned while making her way down the stairs.

"She can't keep things like that a secret, can she?" Monica laughed. "Probably it was just the pressure of being the top seed." Then she pointed to a row of free seats a little further away. "Let's sit down over there."

The seats were at the far edge of the reserved area and opposite the player's box where coaches and family sat during play.

"You don't want her to see us?" Agnes wondered, following Monica through the rows and apologizing to the spectators who had to get up to let them through.

"I never liked it when friends were watching," Monica mumbled.

"You've forgotten that you were weird when you were young," Agnes teased her.

"I was?" Monica shot back, but not without winking at her old friend. She turned her attention back to the court. The stadium was filling quickly with spectators, who had taken a break after the previous match.

"I only want to see how this new prospect unfolds," Monica said, pointing to the player's box where Gabriella Galloway's new coach, Fredrik Nordström, had taken a seat. "They worked pretty hard in the off-season and he told me he had a good feeling about Gabriella."

Under polite applause the players entered the court and started their warm-up. Agnes leaned over to Monica.

"It's strange not to see her twin in the box," she whispered as the chair umpire announced that play would start. "Did Gabriella say what exactly happened?"

Monica shook her head. "She just said she needed a change. But I assume the reason behind it is that she couldn't bring herself to tell Luella that she likes girls. Gabriella knows for ages, but you know Luella. Always the one who gets her way."

“Oh dear,” Agnes sighed. “That’s pretty tough considering that they are twins. Only a year ago they used to be inseparable.”

“Tough for whom?”

“Gabriella, of course.”

Monica nodded, but didn’t say anything. Twenty minutes later Monica and Agnes were both sitting on the edge of their seats. Gabriella Galloway had easily taken the lead with a combination of powerful groundstrokes and clever shotmaking.

“She is mixing it up beautifully,” Monica whispered. “I must congratulate Freddie on his work.”

It was 5-2 for the curly-haired American and she was serving for the first set. But after ten minutes Monica and Agnes began scratching their heads. The American player had had several set points, but couldn’t make the deciding point in her favor. Once again Gabriella was one point away of wrapping up the set— and squandered it with an easy forehand into the net.

“Deuce,” chair umpire, Camilla Sanchez, said into the microphone.

“Oh, dear,” Monica moaned quietly. “She’s choking.”

“Yes,” Agnes said more to herself than to her friend. “That was the third set point. I always lose concentration after the third, because it makes me angry I missed my chance again and again. And then my serve gets broken.”

In fact, down on the court Gabriella looked visibly frustrated. She grabbed new balls, stepped up to the baseline and nervously served the ball over the net. It went wide. The second serve was hit so timidly that Sofia had no problem smacking the ball so hard to Gabriella’s backhand side that there was no way for the young American to reach it.

After three good opportunities to decide the game, Gabriella had suddenly given Sofia a break point. Turning to the back of the court the young player closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Yes, so much for the game,” Monica nodded knowingly.

With an easy error Gabriella’s serve was broken.

“What do you do with all the plants?”

Lynn Welch looked up from her dinner plate in surprise. Alice Chevallier, a rookie on the PR and service team, sat down opposite her and stared into the clear evening sky. Her question had come out of nowhere.

“What plants?” Lynn asked.

“I heard you always win potted plants at the end of the year,” Alice explained to the chair umpire.

Lynn laughed. Last December she had been crowned Queen of the Love Game, a game all the chair umpires played. Every umpire had four guesses at which players would come together as a couple. At the end of the season, during the Year End Championships, the umpire who had guessed right won a prize. It was always a potted plant. Lynn had won it the previous year and the year before. All in all she had won it many times. She simply was the best at spotting prospective love birds.

“I usually give them away for Christmas,” she admitted. Alice nodded. Life on the tour never really allowed for making a home with a garden or pets. Or relationships.

“How do you plan to defend your title?” Alice asked and Lynn smiled at her use of tennis terminology.

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” she said. “We still have until the Australian Open to place our bets.”

The screech of a moving chair made them look up. Anastasia Stea, another chair umpire, made her way through the table rows and waved to them. Lynn checked her watch. Anastasia had umpired the evening match between the top seed, Natsumi Takashima, and the Canadian, Polly Duke. It had started only about an hour ago.

“That was quick,” Lynn stated when Anastasia sat down with them. She would have expected a closer match, but one hour suggested a very fast dispatch of the Canadian. “Natsumi must have been on fire.”

“Nope,” Anastasia sighed. “She got bageled in the first set and lost the second 3-6. It was pretty horrible to watch.”

“Oh dear,” Alice said. “Hope she will do better in Sydney.”

Even though the players trained hard in the off-season to stay fit, it wasn't uncommon for them to have a slow start. Upsets were characteristic of the first tournaments of the year.

"So, where were we?" Alice turned back to Lynn. "Who do you have in mind for the Love Game?"

"Yes," Anastasia threw in. "Give me a hint so I have a fighting chance."

Lynn grinned smugly. "I really don't know yet. But I have an eye on Sasha."

"Sasha?" Alice frowned. "Certainly her engagement disqualifies her." Lynn bit her lip. Of course, Alice was unaware of Sasha's preferences. Only a few people knew about the player's interest in women let alone Anastasia's intermezzo with Sasha half a year ago. Anastasia moved uncomfortably in her chair.

"You're right," Lynn said quickly. "I just tried to fool Anastasia."

Both Alice and Anastasia chuckled and Lynn relaxed, while her thoughts wandered back two months to an evening in Istanbul during the Year End Championships. Sasha had stormed through the full room, throwing herself on Candice's apprentice, Tom Richardson, and had screamed wildly about pictures. Her fiancé, Jaroslav Bradka, a defensive football player for a British premier league team, had run after her, slipped on the spilled fruit punch – and had knocked out his soon-to-be wife with a kick in the nose. After that they had rushed Sasha to the hospital, and the Czech player hadn't been seen for the rest of the off-season.

Lynn wasn't sure what she was looking for. She wasn't sure what was going on. But something was. She just had to keep her eyes open.

Heavily, Gabriella sat down on the locker room bench. The metal of the locker door was cold on her back but she was too disappointed and exhausted to move away from it. This hadn't happened in months, if not years! Ousted from a tournament in

the first round. By an aging player ranked way below her. Moreover, Sofia Thrassa had sustained an ankle injury in the Asian swing three months back and word had it that she hadn't started training until mid-December. Gabriella on the other hand had begun her off-season training as soon as she had moved to Florida, first hitting with Elise and Amanda, then working scrupulously with Fredrik Nordström on a few things to improve her game.

She had felt fantastic upon coming to New Zealand.

But now she sat in the locker room and buried her head in her hands, close to tears. She had lost the first match of the season. It had gone well until she had to serve for the first set. She was up two breaks, leading 5-2. Until then, she had held serve easily and she had felt good about her shots and her movement. She had also felt that Sofia still lacked confidence on the court. The Greek had missed months of proper training and match practice which had shown in her shot selection and her movement.

How could she have lost this set and eventually the match? What had gone wrong with her? She never had problems with these big points before. She was known for holding her nerve when she had to serve out a set or a match, and had done so many times in the past – once even in a Grand Slam final. Why couldn't she do it here in a small tournament?

Gabriella opened her locker, still puzzled about the loss she couldn't comprehend, and took out a fresh towel and her spare clothes. Then she stopped. A horrible notion was creeping up her spine, closing in on her. She had won those big points, those big matches with her twin by her side. She had won them for their twin pact, for their plan to conquer the world together, to climb and fall together. This had been her purpose and motivation. And now Gabriella was alone.

Gabriella slammed the locker door shut, imprisoning the treacherous thought. She didn't need Luella. She didn't need Luella's fault-finding, her pomposity nor her clever ways of letting Gabriella work for Luella's ranking. Everything Gabriella did from now on she would do for her own sake. Every win would be her own.

Gabriella stepped into the shower, closed her eyes and dipped her dark long hair under the stream. The patter of a million drops echoed through the empty locker room. After Luella's Wimbledon success, all eyes were on her sister and nobody had paid attention to Gabriella. Her new-found independence had motivated her in the second half of the previous season. Why did it feel so different now? Nothing had changed, Gabriella wondered. Or had it? Since she had put together a new team, she had been asked about her coaching situation, her goals, her training regime. She was her own entity now, independent of Luella and she had clearly demonstrated that she wanted to step out of her sister's shadow. Now she had to prove that she was able to and in her first attempt she had failed.

If that was what independence felt like she didn't like it.

Turning a corner, Tom Richardson held on to the thick stack of paper under his arm and looked out for the room number he had been given earlier on when he was still at the tournament site. He was on his way to an important appointment for which he was well prepared. Much better, in fact, than he used to be for interviews or video shoots. He chuckled. But then he stopped himself. He needed to be serious. This was serious. Tom sighed. For the last two months he had avoided ruminating about the photos he had clandestinely taken over the course of the last season. They showed a few of the female players in delicate situations and they had been causing headaches as they had first been lost and then apparently found by someone unknown who sent prints of the pictures to said players.

Tom stopped, having found the right room, and knocked on the door which opened immediately. Elise waved him inside.

"Have you got everything?" she asked while heading to the table standing near the window of her hotel room.

"Yes," Tom answered. He followed the German player and dumped his bag on a chair. Over Christmas he had done some special research with the help of Candice, going through

lists and tournament schedules for hours and hours, finally printing out the relevant information from two tournaments, the U.S. Open and Luxembourg. At these tournaments several players had been slipped prints of the pictures under their hotel room doors. It could only mean that the person who had the pictures had been at both tournaments and that it was most likely to have been one of them – a staff member, a player’s team member or even a player herself.

Tom took out a carefully sorted pack of papers, but suddenly his eyes caught a framed photograph standing on the nightstand. He went over and picked it up.

“I’m really sorry for all the trouble.”

Elise smiled shyly. “I’m actually glad you took it. I love the picture so much.”

“You two look very beautiful in it,” he said.

“Did you take other pictures of us?”

Tom shook his head. “No, just on this occasion. It was a coincidence that I was there at all.”

Tom looked at Elise and realized that the girl looked almost disappointed. He put the picture down on the nightstand again and stepped back to the table.

“Look, these are lists of the staff members I got from Candice,” he explained, putting a pile on the table. “And here are the players.”

“I want to do the players,” Elise said, suddenly excited again. She sat down and pulled up the paper heap. It contained entry lists with players’ names, draw sheets for the days the pictures were discovered and hotel lists of the players.

Elise grabbed the hotel’s writing pad and a pen and spread several sheets out in front of her. Tom had to grin. The young woman displayed the same excitement as he felt. They were playing detective, finding out who had gotten hold of the pictures. Even though they were aware of the potential havoc the pictures could cause it was fun. Moreover, so far nothing bad had happened to the players. Nobody had been blackmailed. None of the pictures had been leaked to the press either. Not yet. Tom sat down beside Elise and grabbed the other pile. Hopefully they

would be able to break down the group of suspects to only a couple of people.

For quite a while they worked silently, bent over the sheets of paper and scribbling down names.

“There were not many players left in New York,” Elise finally said. “Ted lost the pictures on the evening before the women’s final, so the only singles players left were Amanda and Sasha, as they played the final.”

The day of the U.S. Open final, Sasha had been secretly slipped a picture of herself looking at one of the Galloway twins the day of the U.S. Open final. Amanda had never received one of the pictures personally, but a photo of Elise and Amanda had been given to Elise in Luxembourg. Tom nodded. It eliminated both Amanda and Sasha from the list of suspects, as well as Antonia and Martina who received a picture in Luxembourg.

“There are only the doubles finalists left,” she said. “Monica and Agnes were one team and they were in Luxembourg, too. But I just can’t see them doing this. The other finalists were Bernadette Le Blanc and Sofia Thrassa. But only Bernadette was in Luxembourg, as Sofia got injured in Osaka. Bernadette played Luxembourg with Polly Duke.”

“So the only player we have is Bernadette LeBlanc?”

“No, the only U.S. Open finalist who was in both New York and Luxembourg is Bernadette. But a lot of the players could have stayed longer in New York,” Elise said. “We have to take a look at the players who perhaps lost within a couple of days of the final.”

Tom leaned back and sighed. Suddenly, it seemed unlikely that a player would do this to other players. Perhaps they should concentrate more on the staff and team members. Suddenly he realized something and this time he groaned in desperation.

“I forgot the umpires,” he yelled. “They also travel with the tour.”

Tom looked at the sheets. The more they investigated this matter the longer the list became.

After Tom had left, Elise cleared the table and took a look at the list she and Tom had compiled. It was rather long, she had to admit, and she couldn't think of anyone listed doing such a thing. Why would they? After changing into her nightwear, she lay down in bed as she had an early match tomorrow morning. Elise was scheduled first on court, so she would get up at around 7 a.m. and practice. But she didn't want to go to sleep yet. Earlier, Amanda had promised to call her tonight after a sponsor dinner she had to attend. Elise checked her watch and sighed. Amanda must have forgotten about the slight time difference between Australia and New Zealand. She slipped her hand under the blanket and fished out the novel she had hidden when Tom had knocked on the door. She had been reading the whole afternoon and she had almost finished *The Magician of Miami*.

Ten minutes later she turned over the last page of the book, and just then Amanda rang in and with a big smile Elise grabbed her laptop and answered.

"Did you go to an all-you-can-eat restaurant or why did it take so long?" she teased Amanda as soon as the Australian appeared on the screen.

"No," Amanda grinned. "But on the way back to the hotel I started reading the *Tennis Nurse* novel you gave me and I needed to finish the first chapter before I could call you. I forgot how addictive these books are."

"I know," Elise said. "I just finished mine and now I don't have anything to read." Suddenly she regretted leaving the other *Tennis Nurse* novel with Amanda.

Amanda cracked up laughing. "Do you want me to read the next chapter to you?"

That actually sounded like a good deal, Elise thought. Also, she could listen to Amanda's hot Australian accent. Elise nodded.

"The first chapter is only so that the reader understands that Jane is in Japan," Amanda explained. "She's just escaped some bad Yakuza girls and has now returned to the tournament in Osaka as if nothing had happened."

Then Amanda began to read and Elise slipped down into the warm cushions watching her lover's concentrated face.

Jane, the nurse, had finished her duties at the tournament when she received a mysterious message.

"The messages always seem to be random notes on the locker room wall or the scoreboard, and only Jane understands their meaning," Amanda illustrated looking up to the screen at Elise.

"I know," Elise grinned. "I've already read eight books. Keep on reading."

Immediately Jane packed up her first-aid kit and sneaked outside, waiting at a side entrance. It was already dark. Soon a hooded figure stepped through the door and Jane followed her. When the woman passed by a street light Jane was able to recognize her. It was French player, Dorothee Margeaux.

"Oh, wait," Elise interrupted Amanda. "I've never heard of this character before."

"Me neither," Amanda shrugged. "Have you only read old novels so far?"

Elise nodded. "Yes," she said, then pointed to the book Amanda was holding up on the screen. "That's the first novel I ordered myself. It's brand new." Then Elise sat up on her bed.

"Don't you think that could be Morgana?" she wondered. "Dorothee Margeaux. Morgana Doré. Both are French players. Yes, the author must mean Morgana."

Amanda nodded slowly.

"Oh, Morgana will be delighted that she has her own character now. She is obsessed with *Tennis Nurse*," Elise smiled, bouncing on the bed. "Keep on reading."

Amanda picked up the book again and continued. Nurse Jane followed the player through the city and finally into the back of a restaurant. In the kitchen Dorothee took a quick look around, then walked to one of the cooks, while Jane waited a few feet away. Without saying a word Dorothee slipped her hand into her jacket, took out a brown envelope and handed it to the Japanese cook. He just nodded.

Hiding behind some exotic plants Nurse Jane watched the French player sit down in the back of the restaurant while still

keeping an eye on the cook who then began preparing a big fish.
A blowfish.

“Blowfish is very poisonous,” Elise mused aloud. “Did she pay to kill someone?”

Amanda looked up. “How would I know?”

“Why would she do this?”

“I’m pretty sure it will be explained at some point in the story.”

“It doesn’t make sense!”

Amanda shook her head at her obnoxious girlfriend.
“Maybe later it will.”

“Keep on reading!”

Amanda laughed. “No,” she grinned and closed the book with a snap. “That was the end of the chapter and we have to go to bed. I’ll read you the next chapter tomorrow.”

“Oh no,” Elise giggled but accepted it. For a while they kept looking at each other on their screens.

“If you had glasses, that would be funny,” Elise said sleepily. “You need glasses to be an authentic reader.”

“And you need sleep. You talk nonsense,” Amanda whispered, then she blew Elise a kiss, waved and they ended the transmission.

IN THE AIR

Sydney, Australia

With cameraman Lars in her wake, Paola rushed across the tournament site for the tenth time looking for Sasha Mrachova. Where was the Czech? She would be training on the last practice court, Sasha had told her over the phone. But where was the last practice court? Paola had wandered over to Court No. 15, but there was nobody there. She then had gone to the other side of the practice courts – to no avail. Paola moaned. She was running around the site like a headless chicken. It was a relief that no visitors were on site yet, blocking the paths. She would be late anyway. But really, this time it wasn't her fault. What was going on with the Czech? Had she forgotten about their interview appointment? It wouldn't be surprising. Lately Sasha Mrachova had been displaying a new, displeasing behavior as the tour diva. From Candice Crantz, Paola had heard that without explanation Sasha had cancelled the photo shoot she was assigned to as one of the five top players, right after her loss at the Year End Championships in Istanbul. The player's management had then called off the next appointment for shooting a Christmas message video. There were hushed whispers that Sasha had had an accident, that there had been trouble with her football fiancé, but

none of the speculations had been confirmed. A few days ago, Sasha had published a couple of pictures on her homepage that showed her under a Christmas tree holding up presents, looking goofy and happy with Jaro. Her sudden reappearance stirred the thought that Sasha had simply gone on a spontaneous love trip, forgetting all about her duties as a Top 5 player. Paola had been surprised. This was not like Sasha, who had the reputation of being highly professional about her off-court assignments. But this time love seemed to have gotten in the way of reason.

Out of breath, Paola finally settled down on a bench and took out her cell phone. It was best to call Sasha's management. But after dialing the number, all she heard was the phone ringing on the other end.

"Take the morning off, Lars," she told her cameraman, who packed the gear and headed to the media center. Paola got up and began walking around Ken Rosewall Arena. On the other side there was a kiosk that sold cold beer and she really needed to cool off before continuing with her tight schedule. While on her way, Paola went through the list of things to do. She still needed to organize the location and setting for the new show Supersport Channel was about to launch with some of the younger, upcoming players. It would allow tennis fans a look behind the scenes while pushing the popularity of these soon-to-be top players. It was initially intended to be a couple of clips with the Galloway twins that showed their life on the tour and the cities they visited. But the channel had broadened the idea over the off-season and would produce videos with some other players as well, even though Paola was sure that the twins' good looks helped to put them in the spotlight more than the others. One week ago, however, Paola had learned that – unlike in previous years – Gabriella and Luella had planned completely different tour schedules. Initially, Paola was surprised, as the twins were known to stick together. Even a slight distinction in ranking should not have derogated their union. But then she remembered the conversation she had had with Gabriella at the end of last year's season, and in the off-season Gabriella had moved to Florida and had gathered a new team around her.

The new information only confirmed that there had been a dispute between them, and the Austrian journalist was confident she knew why. Luella had already won a Grand Slam and had entered the Top 10 while her sister was still waiting in the wings to prove herself. Paola grinned. This year would see drama, she was sure of it. And she would be there to catch it with her camera and her microphone. Thank god the off-season was over.

At 9:45 in the morning there wasn't much traffic at the watering hole and with a glass of beer in her hand Paola happily sat down on one of the nearby courts to watch Martina and Antonia hit some balls. When they finished practice Paola decided to go, but the sudden sound of squealing tires made her turn around. A black tournament car sped through the entrance at the back of the park and down a little side path next to the courts. It stopped in front of an outside court where a play area for kids was installed. Peeking through the fence, to her surprise Paola could make out the slender figure of Sasha Mrachova coming from the kids zone court. Surrounded by her team and a handful of bodyguards Sasha approached the car. Paola snorted. Sasha had indeed forgotten about her appointment. Or had she given Paola the wrong information on purpose? And what on earth was Sasha wearing on her head? Admittedly, the Australian sun was lethal and Sasha had fair skin, but the visor seemed disproportionately huge. Paola wondered if the Czech could even see the ball when she tossed it up for the serve.

“No, no, no,” Ted muttered. “This is ridiculous.”

He stared at the long list on a sheet of paper which Tom had just handed him. “Over thirty people,” he counted. “How are we supposed to find out if one of them is the person we are looking for?”

Tom nodded and sighed. In defeat he sunk into the broad sofa that occupied most of the hotel room. It seemed to be the only luxury he had right now. “I don't know,” he groaned,

burying his head in a cushion. “But at least we narrowed down the list of suspects.”

Ted continued looking at the paper. Elise and Tom had done a good job figuring out who had been both at the U.S. Open and the Luxembourg tournament.

- 1 *2 Supervisors + 4 staff members (players' service)*
- 2 *Candice Crantz + 2 staff members (communications)*
- 3 *2 Chair umpires (Stea, Sanchez)*
- 4 *2 Physios (McManus, Reichelt)*
- 5 *Marieke + 2 team members*
- 6 *Morgana + 2 team members*
- 7 *Carina + 3 team members*
- 8 *Angela + 2 team members*
- 9 *Robyn + 1 team member*
- 10 *Monica/Agnes + 1 team member*
- 11 *Bernadette*
- 12 *(Martina/Antonia)*

“Antonia and Martina are in brackets because they are recipients, right?” Ted asked and Tom nodded. But suddenly Ted raised an eyebrow.

“By the way, you forgot someone,” he remarked. Tom looked up in surprise.

“No, Elise and I were absolutely sure,” he said, shaking his head. “We thought of everyone. We even included those players who lost in the quarter- and semifinals of the U.S. Open, as there was a chance that they were still around on finals day.”

“Right,” Ted smiled. “But you forgot someone who lost in the first week and was still in New York on finals day. Not for shopping or sightseeing. Instead she was sitting in Amanda’s box blowing her kisses.”

Tom sat up straight. “We forgot Elise,” he realized. He looked at Ted and shook his head. “But like Antonia and Martina she got one of the pictures herself. It can’t be her.”

“Well, honestly I don’t think it was her,” Ted assured Tom. “But we should put her on the list for the sake of completeness.”

Tom nodded. It didn't make it any easier that the list had grown again.

"Ok, let's recap this whole thing again," Ted said pensively. "Pictures were given to Sasha in New York and a few weeks later to Elise, Martina and Antonia in Luxembourg. At least these are the players we know of. Sasha's print showed her looking at one of the Galloways. Pretty harmless, in fact, whereas Elise and Amanda are smooching, and Martina and Antonia are going for even more."

"If these are the only prints given to players so far, I don't understand why?" Tom pondered. "I don't understand the motive behind this."

Ted looked up at Tom. "Good keyword, boyfriend," he exclaimed. "We should be looking for a motive. That's how they do it in the movies. That's how you convict the villains."

Tom chuckled and patted the couch cushion for Ted to sit down next to him. Snuggled against each other they took a look at the list again.

"It can't be blackmail," Tom stated. "There haven't been any demands so far. It must be something else."

"We need to find out if there are any connections, rifts or secret histories between our photo models and these suspects," Ted said excitedly.

"Well, Sasha got the picture only a couple of hours before her final. If you remember, she had serious problems concentrating in the match and at one point resorted to insulting the chair umpire."

"Anastasia," Ted threw in. She was also on the list and he made a mental note to take a closer look at her.

"It's fair to say that Sasha probably would have played much better if she hadn't received this picture," Tom concluded. "The one person who benefitted from it was – Amanda."

Ted and Tom looked at each other uncomfortably. They didn't want to believe that Amanda and Elise had lied to them.

"Well, Amanda helped you get the pictures from my room. She knew what you were looking for," Tom said. "And it would have been easy for her to slip it under Sasha's door. They were staying at the same hotel."

“I can’t believe she would do that.”

“Me neither,” Tom sighed. “But a Grand Slam title is a motive, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” Ted looked away for a short moment and Tom squeezed his arm. Ted hadn’t won a Grand Slam yet, even though he had come close. But he had lost all three finals he had been in so far. What wouldn’t he do to win a major?

“So, what about the picture of Elise and Amanda?” Tom asked to take Ted’s minds off the fact he had never won a Grand Slam. “She could have lied and told us she got it anonymously. We cannot prove she told the truth.” Ted shrugged.

“She also loves the picture,” Tom remembered. It was a really great shot, with perfect light and an even more captivating subject. “She framed it,” he said with a little smile, proud that his picture received the attention it deserved.

“It’s a great shot, so she wanted to keep it,” Ted speculated. “That’s why she said somebody slipped it under her door. That makes me think of Antonia and Martina’s picture. They are friends with Amanda. Perhaps Elise gave them the picture because she wanted them to have something to frame, too.”

“They were having sex against the wall in a dark hallway,” Tom blurted out. “I cannot see Elise being the type of person who thinks a picture of this kind should be framed.”

“No, she’s a bit uptight, isn’t she? So, that’s probably a dead end.” Ted sighed.

However, they couldn’t deny that a Grand Slam was a good motive.

So far she had avoided drawing any attention to herself, even though her demand to be taken for the short drive around Sydney’s Olympic Tennis Park from the Kids zone to the main parking lot had caused some chuckles from the bodyguards and the drivers. But Sasha decided not to worry about it. Much worse was the short moment when she had to cross the players’ lounge

and the locker room. She hadn't talked to any other player yet, but felt the sideway glances that followed her. Everybody seemed to look at her nose, until Sasha noticed them. Then they quickly looked away and pretended to keep on going with their conversations.

Sasha peered into the locker room and gratefully noticed that it was empty. All this trouble because of a mild curiosity. Why couldn't she have stayed away from Luella Galloway? Sasha took out her belongings from the locker and smacked the locker door closed, but the impetus only made it swing open again. The Czech player suppressed the urge to kick the locker and instead slowly closed the door once again. It really was her own fault. Sasha just hoped that she could avoid Luella as long as possible. She hadn't seen her since that fateful night in the hospital in Istanbul. But she had thought about the hard-hitting twin every time she looked into the mirror. There was nothing she could do or say about Luella's assault, otherwise the Galloway would tell everyone about Sasha's advances.

What a joke her off-season had been. She had spent one week in the hospital in Istanbul while everyone else had gone on vacation already. When she finally left the city at the Bosphorus and flew back home, hitting balls would have been the only way to get the incident and the thought of the Galloway twins out of her head, but she had to pause from training for another two weeks. The idleness and being stuck at home had resulted in a severe obsession with her nose and her looks. Even though everyone constantly told her that she looked fine, the truth was her nose had been feeling bigger since the fracture, and she could see the tip from the corner of her eye. Once in a while she caught herself leering at it. One day her eyes would get stuck staring at her nose. When she finally was able to go out and train again, she insisted on playing on a separate court with blinds. Nobody should be allowed see her.

Sneaking out of the locker room and through the player area Sasha quickly boarded one of the tournament cars and ordered the driver back to the hotel. She had an appointment with her manager, Kurt, who was already waiting in the hotel restaurant, sipping on a glass of red wine.

“I’d rather not,” she said, sitting down at the table.

Kurt looked up and raised his eyebrows. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t want to do the photo shoot.”

“Why?” he asked slowly. But they both knew the answer. When Sasha didn’t say anything Kurt leaned forward.

“Listen, Sasha, your nose looks fine. I’ve told you a hundred times. Nothing to worry about.”

Sasha clenched her teeth. What did Kurt know about it? It wasn’t his nose. She *knew* that it was bigger now. Even though nobody else seemed to notice the fact, it made her uncomfortable in her own skin, and this was a feeling she had never experienced before. She used to be immaculate. Her legs, hips, boobs, and shoulders were perfectly proportioned, topped off with a face that had already graced the cover of every prestigious magazine.

“Can we postpone it?” she asked.

“No, not again!” Kurt leaned back, waving his hands. “Really, what is going on with you? We’ve cancelled Brisbane, we’ve cancelled the sponsor meeting two days ago, you wear this huge visor which looks absolutely ridiculous – I’m getting asked about it all the time. And all this for no good reason, because there is nothing – I repeat – nothing wrong with your nose.”

He leaned forward again and took Sasha’s hand. “I wouldn’t send you out there if there was a problem. You understand?”

Sasha looked at her manager. In the last six years since they had been working together his hair had gotten thinner and his body had grown stout. Soon he would be a big, bald man.

“Yes. Understood,” she said.

Yes, he would be really bald and really big while she only had an imaginary big nose.

“So?”

“So what?”

Gabriella looked up at her twin sister who was sitting opposite herself and tried to look bored. They had been waiting in the offices of Supersport Channel for almost ten minutes now – without speaking to each other.

“So, will you tell me what’s going on?” Lulu almost yelled. “You move out without explanation. You don’t answer my calls. You get a new team. You play Auckland. Something you want to tell me maybe?”

“No,” Gabriella answered flatly. “I just needed a change.”

“Is it the Wimbledon title?” Lulu spat out. “Are you still jealous?”

“I don’t care about that title. I know that it was me who actually won it. I don’t need that dish in my living room to remind me of how well I played.”

“Gaga, please, you sound like a ridiculous, huffy cow. You didn’t like the dish in *our* living room because it bears *my* name. That’s why you moved out.”

“Firstly, don’t call me Gaga anymore. My name is Gabriella. Secondly, I moved out because I don’t like your attitude. Thirdly, I don’t need you anymore. Unlike you, I have friends now.”

With satisfaction Gabriella noticed that her last comment had struck home.

“Great friends you have,” Lulu remarked, but she had toned down her voice. “Elise Renard. I hear she is a lesbian.”

Gabriella felt her head grow hot. “I don’t care about rumors.”

“And not surprisingly your new best friend Sasha Mrachova is also a rumored lesbian. She didn’t say a word about what really happened in Istanbul.”

Now Gabriella looked up in surprise. She restrained herself from moving uncomfortably in her chair or biting her lip. Why would Lulu think she was friends with Sasha?

“I’m not friends with Sasha.”

“You seemed really concerned about her well-being.”

“You knocked her out, Lulu!” Gabriella was getting annoyed. She didn’t want to talk about Sasha. For most of the off-

season she had successfully managed to avoid thinking about her. Moving to St. Petersburg, hanging out with Elise and Amanda and the little love affair with Kiara over the Advent season had pushed the Czech to the back of her mind. Of course, the first thing Lulu did was bring all the memories back. Her sister had a knack of being one huge pain in the ass.

“It was self-defense, you know that,” Luella snapped. “She tried to make a move on me.”

Gabriella sighed. Lulu really believed everybody was after her. If she’d known about Gabriella’s little history with Sasha, she’d probably even be jealous. The best thing to do would be to redirect the conversation away from the Czech.

“What do I care about your problem with Sasha?” Gabriella shrugged. “I care about my ranking and I won’t let you get in my way.”

“Get in your way?” Lulu snorted, taking the bait. “I’m twelve ranking spots above you. There are eleven other players in your way and if you get past them we can talk again.”

“I’ll surpass your ranking after Wimbledon,” Gabriella said, surprised that the words came out of her mouth sounding like a fact. But it had the desired impact. Lulu seemed baffled. She had to defend two thousand ranking points along with the title on grass. Not an easy task, and she knew it.

While Lulu was still pondering over her ranking, a young woman entered the room.

“Hey, girls,” she said with a broad smile and waving two sheets of paper. “I’ve got the first assignment for you.” She winked and handed them the paper before leaving the room again.

Gabriella read through the first page, then let the sheets fall down.

“Trampoline?”

Gabriella looked up. Her sister was also baffled and they both stared at each other in surprise. The first task they had to film for their planned show on Supersport Channel would be a game of tennis. The net would be stretched between two poles in the air and the twins were supposed to jump high on a trampoline while making and returning their shots.

“That’s totally screwball,” Gabriella and Lulu blurted out in unison. The unexpected accordance in words made them laugh. Sometimes it was amazing how similar they were. And suddenly Gabriella missed the connection she shared with Luella. Why had such a deep rift formed between them?

“Our first match against each other this season,” Gabriella smiled at her sister in reconciliation.

“I’m the favorite for this one,” Lulu grinned.

“Oh, and why is that?” Gabriella demanded to know.

“I’m half an inch taller than you,” Lulu said smugly. They both laughed, then fell silent again. Too many things were left unspoken and they knew it.

When Polly Duke stepped into the elevator she felt a sudden hesitation rising in her chest. As if it wasn’t right what she was doing. As if she shouldn’t accept all the good things that were happening to her lately. The fact was that Polly could have never afforded the hotel and she knew that Bernadette would pay for the dinner tonight, like she had done every night the previous week in Brisbane. Ever since they had started playing together in Luxembourg last year, Bernadette had been very generous paying for all sorts of expenses. In Brisbane she had booked Polly the same hotel she stayed in, and even though Polly had protested Bernadette had insisted on it.

“How can we prepare for our next match if you stay in a different hotel?” she had asked, smiling at Polly. “No, no. I won’t have it. You can pay me back if we win the tournament.”

As it turned out they only made the second round in Brisbane, and so Polly wasn’t able to pay for all her expenses, but Bernadette assured Polly that they were on their way to becoming a dangerous team in the doubles competition. They had lost a very tight match against one of the top seeded teams, which was a good sign that they could have more success in the future.

The elevator reached the top floor and the door opened to the reception area of a fancy top floor restaurant. In the midst of

the modern cleanness the tracksuit Polly was wearing seemed very much out of place. She hadn't dressed up appropriately. Polly made a few steps back to the elevator. She couldn't possibly go into the restaurant dressed like this. Bernadette could have told her that this was a very posh place, Polly thought.

The young woman at the reception desk eyed her suspiciously and Polly felt her head grow hot. She turned back to the elevator to rush back to her room and change clothes but the doors had already closed.

"Just go inside," she whispered to herself. "There are probably a lot of other players in sportswear inside."

She squared her shoulders and made a step towards the desk.

"I'm here with Bernadette LeBlanc. She reserved a table, I think," Polly said to the woman.

The receptionist scanned Polly's tracksuit and her short hair again and Polly bravely smiled back at her to conceal the fact that she knew exactly what the woman was thinking.

Checking a list the woman finally nodded.

"It's the third table to the left." She made no move to accompany Polly to the table. Even better, the young Canadian thought. Perhaps she could sneak past the other guests unnoticed. Polly peeked into the dining room and frowned. She couldn't see any other players in sports clothes. Near the window was Bernadette in elegant clothes, sitting upright and with a glass of water in front of her.

"Oh, dear."

Just when Polly was about to make a step into the room her cell phone rang. She stopped and took a look at the display. It was her brother Jonathan calling from Canada which was never a good sign. If he called for a chat he usually used video calls, not calls to her cell phone. This had to be urgent. Polly turned around and quickly walked over to a pair of lounge chairs standing next to the staircase.

"Hey," she answered the phone. "What's up?"

"Hey, sis'." Her brother's voice sounded stressed. Polly felt dizzy. The air suddenly seemed very thin.

"What's up?" Polly asked again.

“Mom is in the hospital,” her brother revealed. He didn’t need to say anything else. Their mother’s heart disease had accompanied them now for three years. Polly sank down onto one of the cushioned chairs.

“Okay.” Polly didn’t move. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“I’ll keep you updated,” Jonathan said. There was nothing Polly could do but wait.

Her hair was disheveled and her arms spread to both sides. The straps of the harness around her hips didn’t bother her anymore and the rhythmic up-and-down movement made her body feel lighter and lighter. Elise was flying.

She grabbed Gabriella’s hand tighter and cried out in joy.

“I haven’t jumped on a trampoline in years,” she yelled to her friend with whom she was assigned to play. They were on one side of the large trampoline while Gabriella’s sister Lulu and Robyn Lawrence, a young and upcoming British player were on the other side. All were strapped with long bungee cords for safety.

Gabriella didn’t react and with a side glance Elise determined that her friend was concentrating hard on jumping to the right rhythm. She still looked grumpy after having lost her match against Luella. Admittedly, Gabriella had looked very clumsy the moment she set foot on the trampoline. More than once she missed the ball as she was jumping either too high or too low. She couldn’t get the hang of it while Lulu on the other side of the net seemed a natural at the trampoline task. She entertained the whole Supersport crew with trick shots between her legs and changing the racquet from one hand to the other to get even the most difficult balls back over the net. In the end Lulu topped it off with a somersault. Everything worked for her and Robyn and Elise stood on the ground in awe of Luella’s acrobatic stunts.

“It’s not important,” Elise had tried to cheer her up when Gabriella dismounted the trampoline for a short break after the singles match, even though she felt that it was not so much losing the fun match that bothered Gabriella, but her inability to keep up with Luella’s show skills. The doubles match was just as lopsided. Lulu and Robyn were giggling and making points at will while every ball Gabriella was able to reach she hit outside the trampoline railings. Elise at least tried to have fun.

“Cheer up!” she ordered Gabriella, but in the end they lost the doubles match.

“That’s a wrap, ladies,” Paola said, clapping her hands and nodding at the film crew to pack up. “You all looked great.”

Gabriella snorted while she packed her racquet bag. “Sure.”

“What’s up with you?” Elise asked her when they were walking back to the tournament building. “You didn’t have any fun.”

“Is it not allowed to deliberately *not* have fun?” Gabriella retorted. “I’m trying to win matches. I’m a competitive person.”

“I guess it wasn’t your day,” Elise said sheepishly.

“It never is these days,” Gabriella said cryptically, running to catch a tournament cab and leaving Elise dumbfounded. It was the first time they had argued since they had become friends during the last season.

Mint was hurrying up the stairs. She had less than one hour before she needed to be back in the spa area of the hotel where her stepmother was enjoying a back rub right now, believing that Mint was in the room next door. Once she opened the heavy metal door and the cool breeze tousled her hair all the stress fell off her. She squared her shoulders, breathed in deeply and walked to the edge of the roof. Surrounded by the fiery red evening sky and the skyscrapers around Sydney’s Circular Quay Mint sat down and placed her laptop on the balustrade. Last night she had come here, just to get away from her stepmother a bit and had

discovered that there was great wi-fi reception on the roof along with a fantastic view and much-needed privacy. After answering her e-mails, she checked if any of her friends were available for a video call. She would have loved to show them the Harbour Bridge and the silhouette of the Opera House in the evening sun. But none of them were online for a chat, not even Chili who was in Tasmania at the moment playing a tournament in Hobart. Mint had initially considered signing up for the tournament too, as it was smaller and she would have been seeded in the main draw, but her stepmother had decided that it was better to play Sydney.

Mint sighed. She had realized right away that Evelina Rickenbacher had made the decision solely based on the shopping and entertainment values of the city, not whether it was best for her stepdaughter's chances to rack up some ranking points and perhaps even a title. Mint had no chance of reaching one of the later rounds here in Sydney, with all the top players warming up for the Australian Open. First she had to get through the qualifying process and she had to win one more match tomorrow morning before she would be in the main draw. Then she needed luck to get further in the tournament. As a qualifier it was possible to get drawn against a high seed, so the tournament could be over for you before it really started.

Besides getting away from her obnoxious stepmother, Mint had another reason for wanting some privacy. She was working on something she needed to keep away from Evelina at all costs. Mint clicked on a folder on her computer and a window appeared asking for a password. After a few seconds a table of thumbnails opened on the screen. In the last few days, whenever Evelina wasn't around, Mint had begun to go through the pictures again. She had lost interest in them after Luxembourg, and the off-season had provided her with a well-needed break from the tennis bubble, which she had savored to the fullest during a debauchorous two-week vacation in the Bahamas before going to Florida for training. But because the tour had started again her watch dog was back, and there was nothing to do but play mind games over what to do next with these pictures. There were actually really good ones among them and Mint had decided to play a little trick on her compatriots, Gabriella and Lulu. She had

long pondered whether to give them prints of the picture that showed one of the twins with Sasha. The photo was more about Sasha than about the twin though. Sasha was staring at the Galloway, making it easy to read her feelings from the expression on her face. The twin in the picture wasn't doing anything herself. She was only the object of Sasha's admiration. Other than the other pictures showing Amanda and Elise and Martina and Antonia which Mint had found on the memory stick, there was no interaction here.

But at least it would give the twins something to rack their brains about. Where did the picture come from? Why was Sasha staring at the twin? Mint chuckled. They could handle a little brain-racking. It would be a nice change from shooting glamorous videos for Supersport. Mint picked a picture. She wanted to make prints of it and hand them to the Galloways in Melbourne.

Suddenly a loud bang startled her. The door to the staircase was pushed open and somebody walked through. Mint squinted her eyes against the setting sun. The person had turned away from the door, so Mint could only see the back and the short hair. It was Polly Duke, the Canadian player. What was she doing here, Mint wondered. She was absolutely certain that Polly couldn't afford this hotel. She would usually stay with others in a cheap guesthouse.

Walking towards the edge without slowing down, she looked like a robot out of control. For a second a horrible image flashed through Mint's mind of Polly touching the balustrade with her feet and tumbling over it without even turning her head. Mint frowned, following Polly with a her eyes. The Canadian was approaching the edge and to Mint's relief stopped before the knee high wall. Peering over the edge into the abyss of the street she seemed to wait. Then suddenly she stepped onto the balustrade. What the hell was Polly doing? Mint jumped up, but hesitated to run over to the Canadian. Should she shout out? But what if it frightened Polly and she fell over the edge because of Mint's yelling. From the other end of the roof she saw that Polly was at last sitting down on the little wall, hanging her feet over it. No, Mint decided, she shouldn't shout out. Perhaps it was best not to

let Polly know she was there. Careful not to make a sound she made her way across the roof and sneaked over to an air condition unit near Polly. She would wait behind it and observe Polly. Should she slip any further towards the edge she would need to grab her and pull her back. But until then, it was perhaps for the best to keep quiet.

Polly was wearing a blue track suit that looked flattering on her. She had long legs, broad shoulders and one of those hipster haircuts that was short on one side and in the back while the front was a little longer. Mint liked the feeling of running her fingers across stubble on the neck. However, she never really had the opportunity to do so, nor would she admit to this fancy. Whenever she went out with friends, she picked up feminine girls. She never hit on the butchy ones. Now that she thought about it, it was simply more prestigious to score the long-haired beauties. Also, Mint always succeeded in picking them up. It was easy and it guaranteed her the admiration of her friends, establishing her reputation as a very successful womanizer. None of her friends at home knew that she almost lived like a nun while on tour, even more so now that her stepmother had decided to accompany her all year round and Chili was hanging out more and more with the other Spanish girls.

When the orange sun began slipping into the sea Polly stood up slowly and walked back to the door. After the Canadian disappeared downstairs, Mint went back to her laptop. It had become cold outside and she needed to rush back to the spa. She closed all the folders with a shrug, shut the computer and hurried down the stairs, arriving at the spa reception just as Evelina Rickenbacher came out of the massage room.

STORMY WEATHER

Melbourne, Australia

“Where is she?” Monica tapped her foot and looked at the big orange clock that was hanging a little lopsidedly above the kitchen door. Candice and Agnes sighed, but were still munching on the very delicious curry Monica had cooked. They were waiting for their Japanese friend, Natsumi Takashima.

Natsumi had a habit of arriving at an appointment at the last minute, but she usually wasn’t late – at least not by one and a half hours.

“You want to call her again?” Candice asked.

Monica shook her head. “We should finish up and move on.”

They had another appointment later on – in a beach bar which was run by one of Amanda’s old school friends. Elise and Gabriella had talked them into joining them after dinner.

Just when they stood up to leave, the doorbell rang. Monica ripped open the front door to a grinning Natsumi who stepped into the kitchen, wearing a short elegant dress and high heels.

“Where the hell have you been?” Agnes exclaimed.

“Sorry,” Natsumi shrugged. “My plane was late.”

“Your plane?” Candice raised her eyebrows. “But you left Auckland five days ago.” Everyone looked at Natsumi, baffled by the revelation.

“Are you saying you haven’t been in Sydney all this time?” Agnes asked. “But your first match is tomorrow. Haven’t you practiced?”

Natsumi shrugged. “No, after that first round loss, I thought I’d throw in a mini vacation. Just to unwind, you see?”

Monica, Candice and Agnes looked at each other. No, they didn’t see the reason for that. If you lost a match the only reasonable thing to do was get to back on the practice court and work on your shots. Shaking their heads over Natsumi’s new approach to improving her performance they decided to head out to the bar straight away.

“So, where did you spend your mini vacation?” Monica asked suspiciously, as they headed outside into the warm evening air. Perhaps Natsumi had a new girlfriend? Or an affair? How outrageous that Monica had no idea.

“A secret place,” Natsumi answered.

“Alone?” Monica asked. They followed the Japanese player down the street towards Coogee Beach. Natsumi seemed to hesitate which was surprising. Usually, Natsumi wasn’t shy about entertaining her friends with stories about her raunchy off-season affairs.

“No,” Natsumi finally said, more to herself than to her three friends. She didn’t seem to be willing to say much more. Monica turned to Candice and Agnes who collectively shrugged. It was rare to see Natsumi as peeved as this.

After Natsumi’s loss, she had left Auckland on the same evening. She had seemed to be brooding over the first round defeat when Monica saw her in the hallway, but that was normal after suffering an upset very early in a tournament. They hadn’t talked much in that moment, and even before that day Monica hadn’t taken the time for an in-depth conversation.

“I asked Gabriella to play doubles with me,” Monica announced to begin a new topic.

“To actually play tennis?” Candice winked at her. Monica jabbed her in the ribs.

“Yes, play. At the Olympics. For the United States of America,” Monica laughed.

“What about Lulu?” Agnes had turned around to Monica and Candice. “I can’t believe they won’t play.”

Monica shrugged. “It didn’t look like Gabriella wanted to go back to playing with her sister. So, basically I’m just helping out.”

“I heard Gabriella is playing for our team,” Natsumi remarked pensively. “Elise was saying something about her in Auckland, but didn’t want to elaborate.”

Then the Japanese player began to silently move her lips while lifting one finger after another.

“What are you counting?” Agnes asked.

Natsumi shook her head. She had stopped at eight fingers pointed out.

“Never mind,” she said.

“Why are we having breakfast at this unearthly hour?” Agnes asked biting into a strip of bacon.

“Some of the younger players complained that the dinner would have gone too late,” Candice explained. “They go to bed early.”

Agnes shook her head in amazement. “Only five years ago the *Tennis Nurse* trading dinner was actually quite the party. Now we are having breakfast at 6:30 in the morning.”

“The kids like it,” Natsumi murmured. She was only having a black coffee, as she couldn’t eat that early in the morning, she had explained to Agnes and Candice. With squinted eyes she watched a group of younger players trading books.

“I’ll give you *Court 69* for *Tennis Nurse* and *The Bad Bounce*,” Chili García López negotiated with Martina Rodriguez. Stacks of novels were piling up in front of them.

“¡No jodas!” Martina exclaimed. “My grandmother read *Court 69* to me when I still fit into a racquet bag. A kid’s racquet bag.”

“I also have *The Mystery of The Popular Pusher*, but I’m still reading it. I can give it to you in a week,” Chili begged, but Martina waved her hand dismissively.

“I just finished *The Case of The Lotus Lily*,” Mint mentioned to Martina from across the table. “You can have it now for the *The Bad Bounce*.”

Martina nodded, considering the deal. Chili looked at Mint angrily. Of course, Mint would snatch the novel away from her.

“But I want a second book for *The Lotus Lily*. It’s brand new,” Mint added. “How about *Tennis Nurse and The Bagel Factory*?”

Martina laughed. “Oh, that was a good one. But I don’t have it. Morgana might though. How about *Tennis Nurse and The Australian Formation*?”

Mint hesitated. Where was Morgana? Was it too early for the Frenchwoman? It was highly unusual for her to miss the *Tennis Nurse* swap meet. It was also very inconvenient, as Morgana had all the novels, most of them in duplicate, and she was the best source for new or rare books.

“I have *The Bagel Factory*,” a voice suddenly piped up. Quietly, Polly Duke had come in and stood behind the players. She held a single book in her hand.

“Mint wants two books for *The Lotus Lily*,” Chili remarked spitefully.

Polly let her hand sink down. She shook her head. “I only have this one.”

“I’ll swap with you,” Mint said quickly. “I’ve wanted to read *The Bagel Factory* for ages. I heard it’s very funny.”

“Yes, it is,” Polly answered in surprise. She handed Mint the book. Chili and Martina had fallen silent.

“This one is in very good condition,” Mint remarked while turning the book, even weighing it. “I also give you *The Queen of Copenhagen* for it.”

Chili’s jaw dropped open, but she didn’t say a word. That was typical of Mint. Humiliating Chili on purpose and using her *Tennis Nurse* collection to show off. The deal was sealed with a handshake and Polly now had two books of her own. But the

conversation at the table had died down. Mint had turned back to arranging her novels by publication date while Chili was staring at Polly.

The Canadian turned around, wanting to leave again when Candice called her name from the other table.

“Come sit with us for a minute,” the communications manager said. She patted the chair next to her and Polly obeyed.

“What have you got?” Natsumi asked curiously, and Polly displayed her new treasures.

“Good ones,” Agnes smiled, popping another strip of bacon into her mouth.

They chatted for several more minutes before Polly excused herself. She felt they were trying to cheer her up, as they knew about her mother’s situation. But Polly didn’t want cheering up.

“Hey, how are you?” The unexpected question startled Sasha. She spun around, ready with a cool reply to get rid of the intruder. It was Martina Rodriguez. Sasha exhaled in relief. Martina and her girlfriend, Antonia, were among the few people who knew about the incident when she had broken her nose in the Istanbul nightclub. They also knew about the pictures, as they had been given one, too. They didn’t know about the second fracture, which had been caused by Lulu’s punch in the hospital.

“I’m great,” Sasha lied. “Had a super off-season.”

“Good,” Martina said hesitantly. “How is your nose?”

“Fantastic. A welcome side effect is that I can breathe even better now.” Sasha gave the Argentine a big smile, realizing that Martina seemed not convinced.

“How about you? Did you have a nice vacation with Antonia?” she managed to ask in a friendly manner.

“Christmas with the family. Her family,” Martina chuckled. “Crazy Italians. Lots of food.” She grinned at the thought. Sasha smiled again. She, too, had spent the holidays with her family at home, she informed Martina. She didn’t mention it

had been far from relaxed due to them all demanding to know what had happened to her nose. She had given them a flimsy excuse, as she couldn't have possibly told them about the flying punch bowl, or Lulu Galloway, or the picture that had caused all the trouble in Istanbul.

Sasha sighed while packing her training shoes into her bag. "Any news from Tom?"

"No," Martina shook her head. "But Ted told me on the flight that they were working on a list of suspects."

"Well, that's a start. They better be quick at finding this person. The pictures are pretty provocative, at least in your case."

"Yes, they are. But nothing had happened since Luxembourg," Martina said pensively, but Sasha could tell she was worried. "Nobody has contacted us or sent us more prints. It's really strange."

"Yes, I wonder what this is about. Let's see what the boys come up with. If Ted and Tom make no progress we should take matters in our own hands. I just don't like the thought that we depend on two guys who have completely botched up and who are the main reason why we are in this misery."

Martina nodded. Then she looked up.

"Have you contacted the Galloways about the picture?" she asked.

Sasha snorted. "Why should I?"

"One of them is in the picture with you," Martina replied, a little surprised by the vehement reaction. "Wouldn't it be fair to warn them? And perhaps they were given a picture, too. If a picture was given to them in a city other than New York or Luxembourg, it might have clues pointing to a suspect."

Martina was right, Sasha had to admit. It could definitely narrow down the list of suspects.

"Yes," she said, smiling at the Argentine. "Good idea. I'll let them know."

It was a frightening thought and Sasha had no intention of getting close to the twins. But Martina's argument couldn't be easily dismissed. After saying goodbye to Martina she shouldered her bag and left the locker room. Wandering down the hallway she then realized that she hadn't thought about her big nose for

more than fifteen minutes. Instead she now thought about the Galloways, which was just as bad.

This was definitely a great place for a wedding, Ted thought, turning his head towards the sea and feeling the breeze on his face.

Mighty waves were rolling in on the beach and the majestic rocks that lined the shore along the Great Ocean Road looked like they would remember a wedding vow until the end of time. They weren't called Apostles for no reason. You had to mean it.

"Now without the shirt!" The command and the subsequent whistles brought Ted back to reality. He nodded at the photographer and the grinning lighting crew and pulled the shirt over his head. No time to dream about weddings that would never happen. At least not for him.

They had been working all morning on a photo shoot for his sponsor and, after a couple more shots, the photographer called for a quick break.

When Ted sat down on a set chair to enjoy the scenery a car came down the track and stopped next to the makeup van. Ted immediately tensed up, when he saw who had arrived.

"Hey, guys," Carina Gnocchi waved to the whole team, then walked over to Ted and sat down next to him. Ted had forgotten that their sponsor had scheduled them together for the photo shoot.

"Hi, Carina," Ted said without looking up. He didn't want to give her any hope for a deep conversation.

"How are you?" she asked. "Have you processed the loss?"

Oh dear, Ted thought. Carina was quick at cutting right to the chase. Ted held on to his soda for a little while, counted five of the Twelve Apostles, then turned to the German.

“Sure did,” he said with a smile. “How about you? Is your No. 1 ranking in danger?” Carina had lost in the fourth round, just as Ted had.

She sighed very loudly. “It might be. I only have two hundred points more than Mrachova, and I have about a thousand points to defend in the next six weeks. Not a good start for me, I have to admit.”

“Renard is closing in on you, ready to take the spot as the best German player,” Ted teased her, glad that the conversation was no longer focusing on his loss.

“Oh please,” Carina snorted. “She is just having a nice little run here.”

“Quarterfinal, no less,” Ted said. Apparently Carina didn’t like Elise. Ted raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to either, as Carina was just gathering speed.

“I can’t see her reproducing this for very long. She is surrounding herself with the wrong people.”

Looking down onto the ocean Carina nodded to herself. Then she leaned over to Ted. “Homosexuals,” she said, lowering her voice. The word alone dealt Ted a little blow, but it was Carina’s audible aversion that made him clench his teeth. Like he would do on the court when he got angry or faced a break point he breathed in and exhaled very slowly to get his heart rate down.

“Well, that’s no surprise,” he eventually said with a casual shrug and turned around to a frowning Carina. “I heard that 82.7 percent of the women players are lesbians. You cannot not hang out with them.”

“82.7 percent!” Carina yelled, shocked and confused by the precise figure. “No, that can’t be right, Ted. Most players are straight. I know them.”

She began counting silently and Ted saw her fingers twitch. One, two, three. Another one. Finally, Carina spread out her pinky, then she stopped and looked up. Ted concluded she must have come to the end of her list of friends.

“No,” she said again, albeit less vehemently. “That can’t be right.”

“Well, perhaps I mixed up the digits,” Ted said lightly. “Perhaps it was 87.2 percent.”

Carina gave him a suspicious look and Ted feared she had seen through his mockery. But then the German reached out her hand and stroked his arm.

“I can assure you of one thing,” Carina murmured. “I like men, and I know someone who’s single again and might be in need of a cheering up.” She winked at him.

Oh dear, Ted thought. He had successfully kept Carina at arm’s length during the last season and Felicia had been a great excuse. But he had since ended the little agreement he had with Felicia. Fortunately for the Australian singer, she had found a substitute with the speed of light.

“I’m trying celibacy,” he said, giving his words a weighty and solemn emphasis.

“Oh.” Carina raised an eyebrow and withdrew her hand. “I completely approve,” she then said. Ted rejoiced at hearing the disappointment in her voice. “I’m all for celibacy until marriage.”

Marriage. Ted looked down again at the rocks in the sea.

“I hear Sasha wants to get married,” Carina said. “She is engaged to Jaro Bradka. She is so in love she even skipped Brisbane.”

“And the sponsor party in Melbourne,” Ted threw in, glad that they had found a new topic.

Carina snorted. “Didn’t keep her from designing a huge brim visor for her own fashion line. Did you see it?”

Ted had.

“It looks absolutely ridiculous,” Carina continued. “Inspired by elderly ladies in Florida, no doubt. Next thing she will come up with is a walker with colors matching her skirt.”

For once Ted had to concede a point to Carina. The visor was laughable.

“Miss Gnocchi!” One of the make-up artists came running towards them.

“We need you in the makeup van,” the flustered young man said, shooing Carina towards the transporter which served as the ad hoc makeup room, and saving Ted from the obnoxious German. Thank god for homos everywhere, he thought while looking on at the odd couple disappearing into the camper.

On the screen Luella Galloway could be seen getting ready to serve. She tossed the ball high into the air, brought the racquet back behind her head, swung it – and hit an ace. Under the applause of the spectators she went to the other side of the baseline. Another great serve, followed by a hard-hit forehand crosscourt, winning her the game. It was now 5-2 for Luella in the third set.

Sitting on a bench in the locker room Gabriella leaned back and watched her sister sit down on her chair. This match would be over quickly, she knew it. Luella's opponent was ranked in the Top 100 and had come through the qualifying draw. Even though she had played a fine match on the whole, she had more or less given up half an hour ago.

A couple of minutes later Lulu stood in the middle of the court, giving the cheering crowd a regal wave with her hand. She hadn't played a great match. Her serve was broken twice in the first set and she had to fight back from one set down. But she had won the second set and eventually the match, and at the end of the day this was all that mattered.

Gabriella grunted in disgust. As a Top 10 player Lulu was given a top seeding. She had the advantage of being drawn only against low-seeded players in the first round, whereas Gabriella could encounter a dangerous player early, in the third or fourth round. In fact, she had to play against one today.

Yelena Kovalenko had been sidelined for a couple of weeks in the fall, losing many points and slipping down the rankings. But now that she was back at her old strength, her game was far better than her current ranking suggested. Gabriella knew it would be a tough test, but she had to stand her ground.

On TV, Luella was on her way to leaving the court. Kids and even grown-up fans had gathered at the exit and held out big, yellow tennis balls for Luella to sign. She wisely took the time to leave her autograph on every single one of them. Before entering the exit tunnel, she turned around again and waved for a last time to the cheering fans. Gabriella jumped up and climbed onto the

bench beneath the TV. Stretching to reach the button she put an end to the Luella Show.

Who cared that Lulu won a match? Who cared that she could do a freaking back somersault on a trampoline? Luella was nothing but a show-off. She hadn't won anything big yet. She only had her *name* on the Wimbledon trophy. What's in a name? She hadn't earned it. That was all the difference. It was Gabriella who knew how to win big and tight matches. That had always been her strength.

But nowadays every match was big, and unfortunately, also tight. She had not only lost her opening match in Auckland, but also her second round match in Sydney. Coming into the Australian Open she had played three matches and had only won one of them. The worst start to the year since she had begun playing professionally on the tour. But could she really compare this year with the previous years? She and Lulu had had a huge advantage, switching matches depending on their opponents' playing styles. Now she played every match herself.

Gabriella let her head hang down. She knew better than to accept such a flimsy excuse. Her bad start had nothing to do with the new circumstances. She had been playing for herself for half a year now and she hadn't had any problems in the latter half of last year.

"Stop comparing yourself with Luella," Fredrik had told her the other day. "Don't follow her game, don't look at her ranking."

He was a smart guy who clearly understood Gabriella's motivation behind having her own team, and her desire to rise in the rankings as fast as possible. She appreciated him allowing her to find her own way, her own game.

But he couldn't understand why she couldn't stop comparing herself with Luella when she had copied her twin for years and years. And how could she not follow Lulu's career when, for both of them, the goal had been a Top 10 ranking? How could she not look at Luella's ranking, knowing that this, in fact, should have been Gabriella's Top 10 ranking? It was impossible.

The gigantic mouth swallowed people one by one and Polly was a bit surprised that, when the small group walked into the gorge, the sun was still shining on the other side of the jaw.

For today Paola had ordered Polly, along with the British girls, Gemma Heffington and Robyn Lawrence, and Spanish player Chili, to go to Melbourne's Luna Park, an amusement center located near St. Kilda Beach and which you entered through a big, steepled gate made to look like the open mouth of a clown's face. Above the mouth entrance, two eyes greeted the visitors. But they didn't look friendly or smiley. They were quite scary, Polly had to admit. She would have preferred to have stayed alone in her hotel room and read her new *Tennis Nurse* novels, but when Paola had approached her she hadn't been quick enough to give a good excuse, and she didn't feel like letting the journalist in on her mother's condition either. Polly just hoped they didn't have to engage in anything that involved lots of chatter or silly activities.

"We will film you riding the roller coasters," Paola had explained on the way to St. Kilda. So, Polly only had to smile and wave a bit. She looked at the darkening sky and hoped it wouldn't take too long, so that she would soon be back at the hotel to reward herself with a whole evening engrossed in *Tennis Nurse and The Lotus Lily*.

They strolled along with the excited families and followed Paola who led the way to the entrance of the biggest roller coaster.

"Alright, girls," Paola said, turning around to the group. "Here's the plan. First you go with Lars, who will be sitting in front of you and filming you. Then you again and this time Lars will film from the ground."

Lars, Gemma and Robyn took the lead and as soon as the train had stopped and the disheveled looking kids had tumbled out of the cars, they jumped into the front row.

"Come on, hurry," Chili said, tugging on Polly's sleeve. They sat in the car behind Gemma and Robyn and the train

started moving. Polly tried to relax. At least she didn't have to feign having fun, as long as Lars was still fumbling with the camera.

"Have you started reading *The Lotus Lily* yet?" Chili asked while they were slowly chugging up the railway tracks. Polly remembered Chili's look earlier that day when Mint had given her the novel.

"Yes, I started right away. I will be done in no time," she said with a smile. "Do you want to read it afterwards? I could lend it to you."

"Would you?" Chili seemed surprised by the generous offer.

"Sure," Polly nodded. "I'm always looking for people to swap books with."

Chili smiled but then opened her eyes wide in panic. The train had reached the highest point of the tracks and was steadily inching towards the first slope.

When they rattled into the abyss, Polly and Chili screamed in delight and fear. She hadn't planned on uttering any form of joy, but after the train had coasted down and decelerated, Polly felt better. All the worries that had crushed her chest in the last couple of days since the bad news about her mother had reached her now seemed to have left her with one loud scream.

Or perhaps it was the free-fall that gave her the feeling she was still levitating.

"The second time will be even more fun," Chili giggled. "I won't be scared then."

Polly nodded as they began ascending again. She was looking forward to the second dip, too.

"Sorry for being nasty this morning," Chili said suddenly. "It was way too early for me, and I hate it when Mint plays me off against someone else. She always does that."

"Perhaps she just wanted to read *The Bagel Factory* that badly," Polly suggested.

"No," Chili shook her head. "She's just trying to keep me at arm's length. She's offended because I will be playing doubles with Teresa for the next couple of months. We want to try and

enter the Olympic competition. I heard you will be playing with Bernadette.”

“Yes,” Polly replied with a smile. She couldn’t fail to notice the impressed tone in Chili’s voice. Everyone knew how good a doubles player Bernadette was, and together they were getting better and better. “Perhaps Mint can find someone, too.”

“See, that’s the problem with Mint,” Chili said with a shrug. “She always wants to boss you around, even on the doubles court. But she is not a good doubles player, precisely because she won’t listen.”

Polly leaned back as they approached the dip again, and grabbed the handle, still listening to Chili who paused for a moment, thinking about something. Before the little cars swerved down the slope, Chili turned to Polly.

“She’s actually not a good friend.”

High above the Yarra River, in a hotel room that seemed to touch the dark clouds which hung above Melbourne, Morgana Doré lay on her stomach surrounded by heaps of books and writing utensils and was reading *Tennis Nurse and the Case of the Lotus Lily*, the latest publication of the novel series. Outside, the hotel tower was beleaguered by strong winds, and while flashes of lightning illuminated the horizon, heavy rain showers began gushing against the panorama window.

But Morgana was unfazed by the looming apocalypse.

She had been reading for fifteen minutes now, relaxed at first and laughing about the absurd chase through the jungle in the first chapter. But then she had paused, staring in disbelief at the pages. A new character had been introduced – Dorothee Margeaux. She didn’t need a PhD to understand on whom the new character was based. Morgana gasped. How long had she been studying the novel series? How much time had she invested in making the correct connections between the characters and the actual players on the tour? She had worked so hard on her literary

thesis, now running at almost four hundred pages. It felt like an award, having her own character in the famous novel series.

Morgana looked outside the window and greeted the loud thunder with a big smile and a nod.

“*C’est fou!*” she giggled, then bent over the book again.

Dorothée seemed to be on a dangerous mission, transferring money to the Yakuza. What for? Morgana quickly turned the page. While being observed by Jane, Dorothée sat down in the restaurant. Soon, she was served a deliciously decorated blowfish. Morgana knew it was a Japanese delicacy, so she nodded in approval. Unfortunately, Jane left the scene and went back to the tournament site as there was an emergency with one of the players.

Being a thorough reader it wasn’t an easy decision for Morgana, but after giving it some consideration she resolved to skip the next pages in which Jane took care of Daria, one of the top players, and quickly scanned the text for Dorothée Margeaux’s name. After a couple of pages Morgana rejoiced. There it was again! She went back two paragraphs and began to read again.

The smile vanished from her face with a velocity as fast as the wind which howled outside the window.

Dorothée Margeaux’s body was found in her hotel room.

Morgana looked at the words again. But there it was. In black and white. Dorothée was dead. Poisoned.

“*Merde,*” Morgana whispered. “*Merde.*”

She couldn’t believe that this was happening to a character – *her* character. Why would the author introduce a new protagonist in the second chapter of a book, only to kill her off in the next chapter? Morgana sat up, deeply disappointed. No adventures of Doro Margeaux. No job as the sidekick of the famous Jane. No merits on the court for the French character. Nothing. Just a dead body in a Japanese hotel.

Morgana took the book and was about to throw it against the huge glass pane, when she stopped mid-air. A lightning bolt flickered outside and the following thunder made the glass shudder.

It was a warning.

Morgana slowly put the book down as the realization sank in. Of course, it was a warning. Only a few months ago, she herself had sat in a Japanese restaurant, eating a blowfish. She had invited Agnes Lion to dine with her. Agnes was too scared to eat the blowfish. During the dinner, Morgana had tried to find out more about the mysterious game of Task Tennis, which was mentioned in the *Tennis Nurse* novel series but never explained. She had casually alluded to its secret rules. Only a handful of people knew about them and Agnes was one of them, Morgana suspected. However, her French team colleague had kept a straight face throughout the conversation and never let her guard down. But here was the proof that Agnes was one of the secret bearers! At least she had to know the author of *Tennis Nurse* or had told somebody about Morgana's research. And that somebody seemed to be worrying about her. It was a warning directed at Morgana. They wanted her to stop her research. It could only mean that she was close to solving the mystery.

Suddenly she heard a sound and looked up. Had something hit the window pane? She listened closely. There it was again. Someone was knocking on her door. Morgana grew stiff, her mind racing. She could see herself lying on the bed. Police officers surrounding it. Her coach and team crying in the corner. There was the knock again.

"No, no, no," she scolded herself. The warning didn't make sense if they planned to silence her completely. A warning meant they were giving her a chance. Morgana got up and walked to the door. Through the spyhole she saw a familiar face, the short hair hidden underneath a hoodie.

Morgana exhaled in relief. It was only Polly Duke, who seemed to have developed an obsessive reading habit in the last two weeks.

How she hated packing. Especially if it meant she had lost a match. Gabriella threw a suitcase onto the bed and grabbed the remote control of the TV to switch on the music channel.

She had lost a very tight match. Actually she had played really well but in the end it didn't matter. She had lost the important points and it had cost her the match. Yelena Kovalenko would stay in Melbourne. Even worse than her loss of the match was the loss of ranking points. Last year, Gabriella had reached the quarterfinal, and a loss in the third round meant that her ranking would suffer a small setback. Again.

Gabriella began packing the suitcase, sluggishly throwing in her shirts and pants. The last week had been less than brilliant. Lulu had beaten her in that stupid trampoline game – and not only in terms of playing the better tennis while jumping in the air, but also by entertaining the whole TV crew with funny anecdotes and by acting the big shot. When the first episode of their TV show had been aired two days ago, Luella had had much more air time than Gabriella. Her twin had been shown having fun, while Gabriella had been portrayed as the gloomy, close-lipped sister who failed miserably at the game. That was so wrong, Gabriella growled. After seeing the episode, she considered calling Paola Scetti to complain about it but then refrained. She remembered that she herself had boasted about winning Grand Slams. Hadn't it been Gabriella who had loud-mouthedly declared her intent to surpass Lulu's ranking and to even become No. 1? So far, she hadn't backed up her words. Far from it. Her sister had to be laughing at her right now. While Gabriella was out of the Australian Open, Lulu would play her fourth round match tomorrow against Natsumi Takashima. It would be a night match.

Just when she closed the lid of her suitcase and hauled it to the already packed bags next to the door, the music channel began playing the next song.

“Oh god,” Gabriella moaned as soon as she heard the opening chords. There was no getting away from the misery. By staying far away from her twin, Gabriella had hoped she could avoid the constant acoustic onslaught by Lulu's favorite singer, Enrique Martinez. But to no avail. Australian radio stations couldn't get enough of the new collaboration between Aussie singer, Felicia Del Castro, and Enrique Martinez.

With one big leap she jumped in front of the TV, looking for the button to switch the channel. She couldn't find it. Where was the remote control? Scanning the room, Gabriella shook her head in desperation while Felicia and Enrique were crooning their terrible tune.

"Oh, god. Please help!" Gabriella cried. The remote had to be here! She raked through the rest of her clothes scattered over the bed and the chair but it was nowhere to be found.

At this very moment a sound coming from the hallway made her look up. A small envelope was being squeezed through the gap between the door and the ground. But the gap was too narrow. The envelope got stuck. Gabriella jumped up, heading towards the entrance.

"Hello?" she called through the closed door. The envelope stopped moving. Then she heard footsteps running away.

Gabriella flung the door open and looked down the hallway. But no one was there anymore. Carefully she picked up the envelope and opened it. It was a picture – of Luella and Sasha Mrachova. Nothing else was in the envelope.

"What is this?" Gabriella wondered. Who had given this to her? Why would someone show her a picture of Sasha lusting after Lulu? To make her angry? Well, that person clearly succeeded, Gabriella had to admit. It wasn't news to Gabriella that Sasha had been following Lulu around. What the Czech player didn't know was that it was Gabriella whom she had kissed in Cincinnati. She still believed that it was Luella. This being the reason she had hit on Lulu in Istanbul, whereon Lulu hit Sasha on the nose. And now Sasha was avoiding the twins at all costs.

"Ridiculous," Gabriella said with disgust. "Absolutely ridiculous." How was Lulu attracting everyone? Even hot gay girls like Sasha were after her, even though her twin wasn't interested in them at all.

"It's just not fair," Gabriella yelled. Furiously, she turned back to the TV.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Gabriella hissed at Felicia and Enrique who were looking each other in the eyes.

This had to stop now! She felt the urge to take the TV and throw it, together with the photograph, through the glass window. But then the heavy rain would have flooded the room. Again she examined the frame – this time for a power button. But whoever had constructed the evil device seemed to have had a bad day, as the button was missing.

As a last resort Gabriella dove behind the TV and pulled the plug. Immediately, a heavenly silence pervaded the room, and exhaustedly, Gabriella sat down on the floor still with the cable in one hand and the picture in the other. To her amazement she felt tears building in her eyes, but her hands felt too heavy and tired to wipe them away.

“Everything goes wrong,” she whispered. “Why?”

But nothing in the quiet room provided an answer. Clutching the TV plug, Gabriella listened to the wind outside her room while the tears fell and disappeared into the thick carpet.

A thunder clap woke Elise up with a loud bang. For a moment she looked through the gap of the curtains into the black, stormy sky, bewildered by the weather’s ferocity. Elise turned her head to Amanda who was lying next to her, but the Australian was sound asleep. A look at her watch confirmed that Elise had slept for only three hours. It was 1 a.m.. She needed to get back to sleep, as she was to play her fourth round match tomorrow and it was scheduled first on Rod Laver Arena, the Australian Open’s center court. She looked outside the window again. Perhaps it wouldn’t stop raining? Perhaps she wouldn’t have to play tomorrow? But then she let her shoulders sink, as she remembered that the arena had a roof.

Quietly, she pushed the blanket aside and slipped out of the big bed. In the bathroom she drank some water, then sat down on the toilet lid.

It was only a match, she and Amanda had decided when they were having dinner. Two hours perhaps. They had played against each other before. Elise began counting the tiles on the

wall above the bathtub. Four times, they had played. Well, admittedly the last encounter was a while ago and long before they had become lovers. At the U.S. Open they could have met in the quarterfinal, but Elise had lost her fourth round match, so they never had to play against each other and Amanda went on to win the title.

And now they were here at the Australian Open. Amanda had never fared well in the Australian tournaments, but this year she was more successful than the years before. Amanda had reached the semifinal in Brisbane and the quarterfinal in Sydney. Tomorrow she could reach the quarterfinal of her home Slam. With each match Amanda seemed to gain confidence and the usual nerviness didn't seem to hamper her this year. Nothing was in her way – nothing but Elise.

Elise stopped counting and buried her head in her hands. Not since she had played her first competitive match at the age of nine had she ever chickened out from a challenge. Never had she quit during a match, even when it was foreseeable that it wouldn't end the way she wanted. Never had she faked an injury or physical discomfort in order to avoid an encounter on the court. Never had she deliberately tanked a match.

But here she was sitting on a toilet seat, considering all of these possibilities. Not because she was afraid she couldn't win against Amanda – but because she believed she could. Whenever they had played practice matches during the off-season, Elise had beaten Amanda. She had the weapons that gave Amanda trouble, a big serve and a flat forehand. And Elise was doing fine so far this season. She herself had reached the semifinal in Auckland and the third round in Sydney. This was the best shape she had been in since she had come back from her injury. If she beat Amanda tomorrow, she would possibly encounter Tamara Parova in the quarterfinal. Tamara's playing style suited Elise, so she had a better chance than Amanda to beat the Russian. A semifinal match against Marieke Bender seemed possible, and Elise had beaten the Top 5 player before, while Amanda had a terrible head-to-head against the Dutch player. Even though her Australian girlfriend was on a roll, the next

match-ups could quickly put a stop to her tournament. All in all, Elise had a better chance to reach the final.

When the bathroom door opened and Amanda stuck her head in, Elise looked up. She had to be sitting here for eons. Amanda gave her a questioning look.

“Can’t you sleep?” she asked with raised eyebrows. Elise shook her head.

“Because of the storm?”

Elise shook her head again.

Amanda gave her a little smile, took Elise’s hands and pulled her up.

“This won’t be the last time we’ll have to play against each other,” she said while leading Elise back to the bedroom.

Elise nodded. “I know.”

“Here’s what we will do,” Amanda said. “We’ll hit some balls. Like we always do. No big deal. And the better one will win.”

Elise wasn’t convinced it would be that easy. She shrugged but then climbed into bed again. Amanda lay down on the other side and gave Elise a hug under the blanket.

“If you win, you’ll order me that expensive Swiss Orange & Rum chocolate,” she continued. “If I win, I’ll read you the whole *Tennis Nurse* novel as compensation.”

“Now I really should consider tanking the match,” Elise laughed, thinking about hours and hours of listening to Amanda’s voice.

“Yeah, me too,” Amanda sighed. “Okay, if I win you order the chocolate for me as a reward, and if you win, I’ll be your reading slave. Deal?”

Elise nodded. While the storm was howling outside, she soon fell asleep again warmed by Amanda’s embrace and comforted by the thought of Amanda’s face when the Australian would open the box of chocolates arriving from Switzerland.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Melbourne, Australia

“Are you excited for the Olympics yet?” Agnes asked, pouring Monica a glass of Molly Dooker. They had lost their doubles quarterfinal the day before, but there was no need to hurry out of town as Candice, Agnes’s partner, was working at the Australian Open until the final day.

Monica grinned. “Yes. I think we will have fun.”

The Olympic spirit had recently hit the WTA summer camp with the younger players demanding to hear stories from those who had participated in previous Olympic games.

“But I know, when it’s over, my heart will break.”

Most of the players, even those who were already considered veteran players, had only played in the 2008 Olympics. Only a few could claim to have attended twice. For Monica, however, it was the fourth time she would play for her country. Agnes knew it would also be the last time for her and she was sure Monica wanted to make it count.

“Yes, it’s special, isn’t it?”

They both nodded silently, thinking back to the previous Olympic Games they had participated in. Agnes had taken home a silver medal in the doubles competition, but the most memorable event had occurred off-court. She grinned, thinking about it. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Monica was grinning, too.

“By the way, Boom Boom’s back!”

Agnes laughed. Like so often, they were having the same thought.

“Yes, I was so surprised to hear that.”

Marieke Bender, the highest-ranked Dutch player, had announced that she wanted to play doubles at the Olympics with her retired compatriot, Michelle van der Boom. They planned to team up first at the American spring tournaments in Indian Wells and Miami, and then play the Olympic competition together.

“I wonder what she has been doing all this time. I’m pretty sure she’s bored with normal life. We have to convince her to come back to the tour as a commentator.”

Agnes chuckled. “That would be a grossly negligent endangerment of everyone’s privacy.”

They both laughed out loud. Michelle sure had a reputation to lose. Besides tennis, she specialized in indiscreet gossip.

“Honestly, I’d love to have her back. She sure knows how to live it up. By the way, I’ve talked to Morgana about playing doubles at the Games. We will play the grass season together, and perhaps the American spring season to see what we need to work on. We might have a good chance.”

Monica nodded. “Yes, Morgana is doing fine in singles. I’m sure if she commits to doubles you two have a chance to win a medal.”

Agnes gave her friend a side glance. “I’ll come back to you after the Olympics.” She patted Monica’s shoulder until the American laughed.

“How very noble of you,” Monica smiled. “I might not come back to *you*, however. I’m really looking forward to playing with Gabriella. Love to give the girl some guidance. She seems to struggle a bit these days.”

Agnes laughed.

“Good girl. Inspire and motivate the youth,” she winked at Monica. She raised her glass and Monica joined in on the toast. “To age.”

Agnes chuckled, but then she remembered something she wanted to tell Monica. “Bernadette has recruited Polly,” she said pensively.

“Her only chance,” Monica shrugged. “There’s no one else nearly good enough in the Canadian team to win a medal, and Polly has a good game for the grass.”

“We should keep an eye on them,” Agnes mumbled.

Monica raised an eyebrow. “It’s just tennis. Half a year of preparing for the Olympics. I don’t think we need to worry. But while we are at it – you should keep an eye on Morgana. Check what she is doing and where she is digging. I doubt she has been put off by the warning shot.”

Agnes looked over at Monica, then nodded. “I had it in mind when I asked her to play doubles.”

They both raised their glasses again but this time silently. The year had only begun, but Agnes had the feeling it would be a topsy-turvy one. They should enjoy the peace as long as it lasted.

Sasha knocked on the hotel room door and waited for Kurt to open it.

“Please sit down,” Kurt said pointing to the couch.

Sasha didn’t like the stressed undertone in his voice. What was it now?

“We have a little problem, Sasha,” he began. “It’s about your ol’ factory business.”

Sasha frowned. Kurt had given the issue with her nose this code name, so as to avoid telling details, but Sasha hated it. Her hitting partner in Sydney had even asked her if her family owned a factory in the Czech Republic. Instinctively, she touched the tip of her nose, hiding the organ from view for a couple of seconds.

“We monitored the internet and – surprise – your dear fans are speculating about some mysterious incident in Istanbul.” Sasha sighed.

“Something slipped out. They know about – ,” he tipped his nose. “And even though nobody knows exactly what happened this only opens the door to even wilder speculations. They have started to believe that Jaro beats you.”

Sasha looked up, shocked. “That’s horrible. Why would they think that? We published nice pictures of us before Christmas.”

“You know how people are,” Kurt shrugged.

Sasha was still shaking her head. It was unbelievable. All this because she had taken an interest in the Galloway plot.

“It’s not nice but we have to find an answer to the problem. For the first step we need you to make more appearances with Jaro,” Kurt explained. “We need to make absolutely sure nobody questions the authenticity of the relationship.”

Sasha clenched her teeth, but nodded. How was she supposed to concentrate on her tennis and on regaining the No. 1 spot if she was burdened with faking a non-existent love life?

She got up. “I have a massage in fifteen minutes. I’m confident you’ll think of a great solution,” she said, then headed out of the room.

Walking down the hallway, Sasha inhaled deeply. The massage had been a lie. She just didn’t want to think about her ol’ factory business, about Lulu or the past few weeks. She felt so tired, hiding away from the world. Sometimes it seemed unreal that she had confidently posed in front of cameras only a few months ago.

“Sasha!”

The well-known, high-pitched voice made her stop in her tracks and gave her goosebumps. This was the last person she needed to see right now. Slowly, she turned around to face Luella Galloway.

“What do you want?”

Lulu approached her quickly. She didn’t look friendly.

“No, Sasha,” the Galloway twin cut her off. “What do *you* want?”

She stopped right in front of Sasha and pulled something out of her handbag.

“Was that you?” She pressed a letter-sized photograph against Sasha’s chest. From the corner of her eye Sasha recognized the picture. It was the one of her looking at Lulu. So someone had indeed given Lulu the picture.

“What was me?” she asked.

“Did you slip that photo under my door?” Lulu hissed.

“No!” Sasha almost screamed out. Then she steadied herself. “When did you receive it?”

Lulu hesitated. Sasha could see in her eyes that she was wondering why Sasha had asked about this particular detail. Also, Lulu didn’t seem to like being in the position of being questioned.

“Please, tell me,” Sasha said calmly. She hated being the supplicator but this information could be important.

“Three days ago,” Lulu finally revealed.

Sasha’s heart sank. Three days ago a million players had been running around in Melbourne. There was no way to narrow the search.

“I know something is up with you,” Lulu spoke again. “Leave me alone.”

To underline her point, she took the picture into both hands and slowly tore it apart. “Stop stalking me.”

“I’m not stalking you. You are dreaming. I have a fiancé.”

“But of course you have,” Lulu smirked. “Just stay away from me.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

For a while Lulu looked Sasha over, then she took a step back, flung the remaining pieces of the picture into Sasha’s face and turned around for the grand exit.

“Good,” she said while walking away.

After Lulu had disappeared behind a corner, Sasha sank down onto her knees and began collecting the shredded pieces. No need for anybody to find them.

There was half her mouth, one eye, the other half of her mouth, the second eye. There were pieces with Lulu in the background, and pieces with Sasha's hair.

And then there was her nose. Sasha closed her eyes. How had it come to this? What did Lulu want? The Galloway had kissed her. Sasha hadn't done anything at first. And when she finally approached Lulu in Istanbul, the twin had broken her nose.

Sasha shook her head. She didn't understand this woman. She didn't understand anything. How could she have become so helpless, so confused? She opened her eyes and looked at herself in little pieces. She was literally torn.

Elise placed her racquet bag on the floor, let herself fall onto the couch and closed her eyes. Her morning had been quite busy. She had just finished an autograph session, followed by a photo shoot with Tom for the WTA site. Now she felt almost as exhausted as she had after the fourth round match against Amanda. From the corner, she could hear the buzz of a vending machine. Three players were talking in staccato Spanish, and from the other end came the giggling of a group of Russians.

"Good morning," a voice next to her said, and Elise opened her eyes. Natsumi was beaming at her, gesturing for her to move over and make room on the couch.

"Waiting for Amanda?"

Elise nodded. "They are in the second set," she said. "Won the first."

Amanda was playing mixed doubles with fellow Australian, Angus Leslie.

"So this will only take four or five hours longer, right?" Natsumi smirked. "I'll probably finish before them."

Elise jabbed her in the ribs. Her fourth round match against Amanda had lasted four hours and nine minutes. It was one of the longest matches in the history of the Australian Open and it had a good chance of being voted best match of the

tournament. But in the end only one of them could win the grueling match and advanced to the quarterfinal – Elise.

However, the match against Amanda had taken its toll. Even though she had had one day of rest to regroup she, couldn't keep up with Tamara Parova in the quarterfinal. After a close first set, she lost the match 5-7 2-6, barely able to move in the second set.

“Take Tamara out for me, will you?” Elise asked.

“I'll do my best,” Natsumi promised. She had upset Marieke Bender in her own quarterfinal and for the first time in her life she would play in a Grand Slam semifinal. She was scheduled for the first evening match, beginning in one hour.

Suddenly the sound of a computer game jingled from Natsumi's handbag.

“Your phone.”

Natsumi frowned. “Yes, people have been trying to call me all day. They want to wish me luck. I'm not answering anymore.”

The phone wouldn't stop ringing. Elise looked at Natsumi.

“Okay, okay,” she sighed, rummaging through the bag. When she took the phone out and looked at the display she squealed. “My mom,” she informed Elise, then answered and listened.

After a few seconds her face dropped.

“*Hai*,” she said, then hung up. Slowly, she turned to Elise, who had begun to feel nervous about the sudden change of mood.

“My mother is on her way to the hotel,” Natsumi mumbled. “She wanted to surprise me and flew in for the match.”

“Oh, that is great, Natsumi. She must be so proud of you,” Elise smiled. But Natsumi didn't look happy about the family support.

“She wants to stay in my room,” Natsumi croaked.

“Is it very untidy?” Elise wanted to know, thinking about hers and Amanda's room. She wouldn't want her mother to set foot in it.

“No.”

“Don’t you like your mom?” Elise asked uneasily.

Natsumi looked up. “No, that’s not it. She is just – very nosey.”

“Did you leave something lying around?” Elise was becoming curious.

“Maybe.” Natsumi turned away, seemingly unwilling to say more and Elise didn’t dare inquire. But then Natsumi almost jumped around again, taking Elise’s hands.

“Can you do me a favor? Now?” The intensity startled Elise. She looked at the TV screen. Amanda and Angus were up two breaks of serve in the second set.

“Can’t I wait for Amanda?”

“Yes, yes, alright!” Natsumi moaned. “But then please rush to the hotel and get something from my room. Will you do that?”

Elise hesitated. What could that be? You never knew with Natsumi. Last year she had dragged Amanda to a nude sushi dinner. Once again, the Japanese player squeezed Elise’s hands. Her hands were ice-cold.

Elise finally nodded.

“What a wonderful day for a Grand Slam semifinal,” Hugh exclaimed.

He had adjusted his headset and switched on the microphone.

“Let’s get started.”

Samantha Watts sat down next to her colleague and grabbed her gear. She looked out onto the Australian Open’s centre court. It really was a beautiful day. Not a single cloud was in the sky.

“It will be so hot later,” she mumbled.

“Yes,” Hugh nodded and pointed behind himself. “I stocked up on water for us.”

Sam grinned. Even though Hugh could be a real blabbermouth, he was still a thoughtful colleague. Dangerously

balancing against the wall was a huge pile of water bottles. Samantha leaned over and gave him a playful peck on the cheek.

“One minute,” they heard through their headphones.

Broadcasting would begin half an hour before the match started, and Sam and Hugh were expected to bridge the time with useful, preliminary information. They got ready and as soon as the red light indicated that they were on air they began introducing the TV spectators to this year’s semifinalists.

“We have two very experienced players who could reach the final today,” Hugh started.

“Yes, Tamara Parova and Sasha Mrachova,” Sam added. “Parova looked great in all her previous matches. She is a very consistent player, comfortable on all surfaces, and her high level at this Australian Open shows her confidence in her game. It will be very hard for Natsumi Takashima to beat her today.”

“Sasha Mrachova, on the other hand, looked down and out in a couple of matches earlier,” Hugh considered. “The fact that she reached the semifinal demonstrates that she can fight herself out of holes if she needs to. And her opponents love to falter against her. She has this aura of steel around her that helps her get through horrible matches. Honestly, Mrachova’s third round match was rather dreadful. I poured myself a drink in the second set.”

Sam chuckled. Hugh was at his finest when he forgot commentating etiquette. But his analysis was definitely true. In two matches Sasha had had match points against her, but each time her opponents had crumbled and squandered their chances with unforgivable mistakes. In the end they gifted their matches to a mediocre Mrachova. Well, sometimes you just had to be lucky.

“And then we have two first-time Grand Slam semifinalists,” Sam chimed in. “Natsumi Takashima and Antonia Sapore. I must say I was most surprised to see Takashima having such a great run. Sapore already showed great signs last year, so her first appearance in a major semifinal is not a huge surprise. She really has the potential to become a strong force and Top 5 player, but Takashima has turned on the accelerator since Sydney.”

“She didn’t have a good start in Auckland. Went out in the first round,” Hugh explained. “When asked what she did after that shock loss, she only smiles. Clearly the results speak for themselves. She reached the final in Sydney, losing to Marieke Bender, but got her revenge only two days ago, here in the quarterfinal, taking out Bender 6-2 6-4.”

“She’s not an inexperienced player,” Sam remarked. “She’s been around for quite a while, and she has played against Parova before and won.”

There was movement down on the court and the spectators began to clap. Lynn Pebblestone had entered the court and begun measuring the net height and taking out the balls out of the cans. The arena was beginning to fill nicely and a first drop of sweat gathered on Sam’s forehead. She reached behind and grabbed a water bottle. It wouldn’t be her last.

“This is so typical,” Amanda ranted. “Much ado about nothing, I tell you!”

She and Elise rushed down the stairs to the garage where a car was waiting to bring them back to the hotel.

“She seemed really anxious,” Elise remarked.

“Yes,” Amanda said over her shoulder. “Because she will be playing a Grand Slam semifinal in thirty minutes.”

They climbed into the waiting car.

“I really wanted to see the match in the arena,” Amanda sighed.

“TV for us then?”

Amanda nodded. “Let’s order something from Killer Kurry.”

Thinking about food soothed the Australian, and Elise patted her thigh. It was only a ten minute ride along the Yarra River, so Amanda immediately called the number of the Indian home delivery service she had on speed-dial to ensure the food would arrive on time.

The hotel lobby was buzzing with tennis people, clearly visible from afar by their sports clothes, tan lines and huge racquet bags. Some of them were coming from Melbourne Park, others were leaving town, as the huge mountains of bags and suitcases on hotel trolleys indicated. There was only one person who stuck out. Not by height by any means, but by a swift, determined forward movement. A petite woman was making a bee-line through the lobby to the reception desk.

“Oh dear, that’s Natsumi’s mum,” Amanda exclaimed. “She’s already here.”

“Let’s hurry,” Elise said, checking the number on Natsumi’s key card. “Tenth floor.”

When the elevator doors closed they saw Mrs. Takashima grabbing a key card of her own and turning towards the elevator as well.

“One minute lead perhaps,” Amanda diagnosed.

The elevator reached the tenth floor and they both began to run but the heavy racquet bags slowed them down.

“Let’s leave them here,” Elise panted. She threw her racquet bag into a corner and kept on running. Amanda followed suit. Now they were significantly faster. After turning two corners, Elise stopped.

“Here it is!” She swiped the key card and opened the door.

Natsumi’s room lay dark and still, and immediately Amanda and Elise switched to whisper mode as Amanda went inside the room and turned on the nightstand lamp. “It’s under the bed, she said?”

Elise nodded. She kneeled down and reached under the bed with her hand.

“There’s something,” she whispered.

She pulled out a long wooden box that was sealed with duct tape. A look beneath the bed confirmed that there was nothing else, so that had to be the item Mrs. Takashima wasn’t supposed to find.

“Let’s go,” Amanda pressed.

They turned out the light, left the room and ran down the hallway. Just when they reached their racquet bags, Natsumi's mother stepped out of the elevator.

"Amanda?"

"*Konnichiwa*, Mrs. Takashima," Amanda grinned awkwardly. Elise stood behind her, waving a little with one hand. With her other hand she held the wooden box behind her back. "We were jogging a little bit. Didn't have enough exercise today."

"Of course. You haven't changed one bit, Amanda," Mrs. Takashima smiled, squeezing Amanda's arm and nodding to Elise. "I will just put my suitcase in Natsumi's room and then take a cab to the tournament. The match will be starting any minute. Will you join me?"

Amanda shook her head. "Sorry, we just ordered dinner. We will cheer from the hotel room."

They said goodbye, grabbed their bags and took the elevator to the next floor.

"Man, we could have watched the match in Natsumi's box," Amanda said grumpily, but lightened up as soon as she saw the Killer Kurry delivery man waiting in front of their hotel room.

Inside, they switched the TV on, jumped on the bed and Elise began unwrapping the food cartons when she noticed that Amanda was fumbling with the duct tape on the wooden box.

"You want to look inside?"

"Yes? Don't you?" Amanda replied. "I think we deserve to know what this is about."

Elise got excited. "Perhaps it's a Samurai sword."

Amanda tried for several minutes but the tape was too strong.

"Take this," Elise suggested, handing Amanda the plastic Killer Kurry knife. With a brisk cut Amanda swung the knife through the tape and opened the box.

Elise blinked her eyes. "Oh."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Well, there you go. Almost a Samurai sword."

They both stared in amazement at the shiny, hand-crafted treasure inside the box.

“Isn’t it a bit long?” Elise asked.

“I don’t think you would actually use it,” Amanda said, nonplussed. “It’s probably something that you put on a shelf. It looks antique.”

The commentators on the TV suddenly began babbling and Amanda and Elise looked up. First Tamara came out of the tunnel and entered the court, then Natsumi was greeted by the spectators that had filled Rod Laver Arena. She looked perfectly content, focused and ready to go.

She and Elise looked at the close-up of Natsumi on the TV screen warming up for the match, then at each other. Then they stared down at the open Japanese box, revealing a huge wooden phallus, while their Killer Kurry Chicken Masala was growing cold.

“Advantage, Takashima,” Lynn Pebblestone announced.

Having the advantage meant a player was one point away from winning a game, but the opportunity itself never indicated the importance of a game. It could be the first game of the match – or the last. It could mean a player had a chance to get a break of serve or get back on serve, or take the lead, or simply hold serve.

Lynn’s eyes followed Natsumi who was heading to the AD court. She’d probably place the serve into Parova’s backhand corner, as this was the weaker side and could easily result in a mishit backhand return. Or she would serve into the Russian’s body so that Tamara would have to step around to hit the ball back. Or just go for the big bomb down the middle. There were many options, and it didn’t make the decision any easier that the Japanese player was one point away from winning the first set.

Sometimes a decision was impossible to make, Lynn reflected. She herself was struggling with some important decision-making at the moment. Tomorrow was the last day she could submit her predictions for the Love Game. Which of the players would become couples? Who would embark on a relationship? In the last four weeks, Lynn had kept her eyes and

ears open for information about what had happened in the off-season, but she had come up with nothing so far. Most of the gay players were already in relationships and the few younger players she had heard of didn't seem to have any connections to each other.

Every year the Love Game allowed each umpire four guesses. Last year, Lynn had correctly predicted the liaison of Martina Rodriguez and Antonia Sapore. But others had gotten that one right, too. It wasn't a big surprise as word about them had spread after they had attended Monica Jordan's New Year's Eve party. Lynn had nevertheless won the Love Game, as she was the only one who had predicted the relationship between Elise Renard and Amanda Auster.

Usually she was one of the first to submit her predictions, and with a little laugh she had noticed during the pre-Australian Open staff party that the other umpires considered her reluctance to place her bets as a sure sign that Lynn was waiting for confirmation on a top-secret couple. She wished it was true and that she really had this information. But there was none. This year she was at a loss for the first time in her career. Moreover, she had to defend her title as Queen of the Love Game.

Yes, she knew what pressure was.

Sitting high on her umpire chair, Lynn observed Natsumi Takashima bounce the ball. Then she tossed it high and the ball went a little above her head. Natsumi had opted for the wide serve to Parova's backhand which kicked up after the bounce – but not high enough to trouble Tamara. It was a timid serve and this time the Russian was prepared. She smashed it back right at Takashima's feet and the Japanese player was only able to slice it in return. It fell short on Parova's side of the court and the Russian dispatched it with a textbook dropshot winner.

"Deuce," Lynn said into the microphone.

Predictable, she thought. Going for the safe serve instead of trying to hit an ace down the T-line. Nowadays everybody was playing it safe, it seemed. Even off-court the girls were stuck in long-term relationships. How boring! And a real predicament for the umpires who played Love Game. Only a couple of years ago everybody was having secret affairs. Playing Love Game was a

gamble and predicting a couple who made it through the year a real achievement. And lamenting the good old times was a sure sign that Lynn was getting old, she scolded herself. With a little sigh the umpire turned her concentration back to the match and watched Natsumi toss up another ball. This time she hit a hard serve, adding a little slice, so that the ball bent towards Tamara Parova. Moving awkwardly, the Russian player got her racquet onto the ball which went high into the air and plummeted into the middle of Natsumi's side of the court. The Japanese player rushed forward, about to smash the ball, but had misjudged the bounce. It went higher than expected and Natsumi had to jump into the air to hit the ball. The smash went right over the line, giving Tamara a break point.

"Advantage, Parova," Lynn said, but her announcement was drowned out by the collective moan of the spectators as the airborne Japanese girl had fallen hard onto the ground, clutching her ankle.

"Have you packed?" Bernadette asked when she entered the cluttered room.

"Almost," Polly answered. She knew Bernadette was just being nice and trying to take her under her wing a bit, but her motherly tone bothered Polly. Only her mom was allowed to talk to her like that and she didn't like the thought that someone else was taking her place. Nobody would ever take her mother's place, no matter what happened. Polly dedicated herself again to getting a grip on the chaos in her room. A week ago her mother had been released from the hospital and Polly had pushed the frightening thought of her mom's heart condition far away again. Until the next time.

Bernadette strolled through the room, checking on Polly's wardrobe, her racquet bag and her laptop which was still lying on the desk. It was the last item Polly would pack. It was the lifeline to home and to a world which – unlike herself – didn't seem to move at all.

Sitting down on the bed, Bernadette grabbed the book that Polly was about to pack into her hand luggage. It was *Tennis Nurse and The Eighth Player*.

“So, you are reading this trash, too?” Bernadette said. She sounded disappointed.

“I don’t think it’s bad,” Polly replied. “It’s entertaining.”

“It’s cheap,” Bernadette spat out. She flipped through the pages, stopping at one point. She opened the book and took a closer look. Leaning over her shoulder to see what Bernadette was doing, Polly realized that the older player had spotted the annotations Morgana had left all over the book.

“Did you write this?” the older player asked.

“I actually don’t speak French,” Polly replied while she continued to pack.

“I do,” Bernadette said without looking up. “Whose book is this?”

“I borrowed the book from Morgana. She has the best collection as she studies the novels for her PhD,” Polly explained.

“I don’t understand what’s there to study,” Bernadette grunted, but then turned the page. “Let alone for a university paper.”

For the next twenty minutes, Polly finished piling clothes into her suitcases while Bernadette had settled back on the bed and was reading the *Tennis Nurse* novel. When Polly closed the lid of the last hard-top case, Bernadette looked up.

“Now you got me hooked,” she said with a wry smile, tapping her finger on the book.

Polly chuckled. She wanted to remark that Bernadette had not even started reading from the beginning but Bernadette had already bent over again, skipping through the pages. Indeed, she wasn’t reading the novel, Polly realized. She was only reading Morgana’s notes.

“What did Morgana write down?” Polly inquired.

Bernadette shrugged. “Nothing interesting. Just her usual *ramassis de foutaise*.”

Polly shook her head, not understanding a word. She zipped her last bag up and grinned. “Ready!”

“Good,” Bernadette jumped up. “Let’s have dinner!”

They left the hotel room and walked down the hallway. When they had come back from Melbourne Park in the afternoon, planning the last night out on the town, Polly had insisted on taking Bernadette out and paying for the dinner. Not only was she feeling much better since her mother had been released from the hospital, but the new Canadian doubles dream team had reached the quarterfinal in the doubles competition, where they had beaten the Dutch team of Marieke and Michelle. Even though Bernadette and Polly had fallen short in the semifinal the good run meant that she had made a good deal of money at the Australian Open. The first time in her career that she had earned that much.

When they turned the corner they almost bumped into a couple of people filling up the area in front of the elevator. A small woman was directing a couple of hotel boys who were maneuvering trolleys with bags through the hallway into the elevator, causing a traffic jam.

“What’s going on?” Bernadette asked.

Heads turned toward the Canadians, among them the familiar faces of Amanda Auster and the Germans, Angela Porovski and Elise Renard. They all looked distraught.

“Natsumi had to retire with an injury,” Angela explained. “Looks like she has torn some ligaments in her left leg.”

“Oh god,” Polly moaned. An injury this grave would cost a player months and months of time spent in rehabilitation. “Is she in the hospital?”

“Yes, but her mother is taking her back to Japan for surgery,” Amanda remarked. “Natsumi’s dad is a well-known doctor.”

“It’s probably for the best to go home right away,” Elise said. Polly nodded but from the corner of her eye she saw Amanda pouting and shooting Elise a knowing side glance, but saying nothing.

Sasha sat down on the chair and tried to steady her breath. The last rally had been over ten strokes long, and in the end Antonia Sapore had played a great dropshot. Sasha had run to the net but hesitated for a split second too long, and even though she had reached the ball, she had hit it into the net.

She cursed into the towel and pulled it over her head. All her opponents knew that she felt uneasy coming to the net. That she would rather dictate play from the baseline. The crafty Italian was hitting short dropshots all the time, forcing Sasha to leave her comfort zone in the back. But since the season had started, Sasha's inadequate abilities in the front of the court were no longer the main reason she made way too many errors at the net.

The closer she was to the net the closer she also was to the photographer's pit. There they were, sweaty and expressionless, crouching together, with their cameras hiding their faces and waiting for her to come closer. The snapping of cameras. It seemed impossible to her now that she once used to love the rattling sound of it.

These days, every time she heard the continuous sound of a camera shutter, she wanted to grab her visor and pull it down further. How could she play tennis with these idiots slobbering around? Sasha took a deep breath. It had already been unbearable in the other matches but today it was worse. The photographers were lining up and waiting for her next error. They could smell the upset of an aging champion by an upcoming, good-looking Italian.

Sasha clenched her teeth. No longer did she hold her head up high. She walked with her eyes staring at the ground. She really couldn't remember the last time she had posed confidently in front of a camera.

Under the towel it was dark and Sasha closed her eyes. When she was a child her father used to tell her a fable about a boy who had been enchanted by a witch, after he insulted the ugly woman. He grew a big nose and stayed very small. His own family didn't recognize him anymore, chased him away and the boy had to work as a cook. Sasha couldn't remember how the story ended. The boy probably had to find a magic herb to break

the spell. As it happens in fairy tales, he probably found a beautiful princess and lived happily ever after.

“Time,” Anastasia Stea said into the microphone.

Sasha swallowed hard. She raised the towel and got up. When she walked over to the baseline, she looked away from the photographers and down onto the ground. The heat coming from the blue concrete was unbearable. It crawled up Sasha’s legs and enwrapped her mercilessly. No magic herb would grow on these grounds. Nothing that could save the dwarf with the big nose.

LIVING IT UP, GOING DOWN

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Keep it safe, Natsumi had said. Don't you lose it!

The telephone call had been hurried. Natsumi had called Amanda from the hospital in Melbourne just before her mother had picked her up to fly back to Japan. Her Japanese friend had sounded dead serious. Amanda's suggestion to mail the box to Japan was vehemently dismissed by Natsumi.

Don't you dare send it to me! Keep it! Keep it safe!

Amanda didn't understand the reason behind Natsumi's vehement instruction, but finally gave in. So here she was observing her bag with the wooden box inside slowly disappearing into the x-ray machine at the airport, while she removed her shoes with sweaty hands and placed it in a plastic tray. When she walked through the scanner it didn't beep but the security guards eyed her suspiciously. The guy screening the bags suddenly stood up and leaned over to another guard. They were whispering. Then they nodded at a female officer. With a sign, the security officer ordered Amanda to come with her. Looking around for Elise and her parents, she saw another female officer

grabbing her bag. Elise was nowhere to be seen. The two women accompanied her into a bleak room and placed the bag on a table.

“Open!”

But Amanda couldn't move. Her feet seemed to be stuck to the floor.

“I, I can't,” she croaked.

“Open!” they demanded again, but when Amanda didn't step forward, one of the women put on a pair of rubber gloves, zipped open the bag and pulled out the wooden box. Amanda felt the sweat gather on her forehead. She needed to get away.

“It's not mine,” she stammered while making a step backward. Then she took another step – and stopped. The other officer had grabbed Amanda by her shoulders.

“It's not mine!” Amanda now screamed.

“Be quiet,” the officer behind her purred. “Be quiet.”

Amanda began to struggle to break free from the woman's grip but to no avail.

“Open,” the woman said again. “Open your eyes!”

Open your eyes? Her eyes were wide open, Amanda thought. What was going on? The high-pitched sound of an airplane was piercing through her ears. Amanda blinked. There was Elise staring at her, shaking her shoulders lightly.

“We are almost there,” Elise said. “You need to put your backrest up.”

Amanda moaned, but was relieved. She shouldn't have fallen asleep. The plane ride from Doha to Dubai wasn't that long. “I just had a nightmare. I dreamt that I tried to take – ,” Amanda quickly looked around to see if anyone was listening to their conversation. “I tried to take *it* with me in the hand luggage.”

Elise shook her head. “You're a fool, even in your dreams,” she whispered with a smile. “But I do wonder how we will get it through customs here. Do you think they are strict?”

Walking through the baggage claim, Amanda found that the Emirati security officers looked very strict. Strict and not up for any fun with big penises. They picked up their bags and headed to the exit. A big, green sign showed them the way: Nothing to declare. But in the past their huge amount of bags had

often attracted the custom officers' attention and it was not unlikely that they would want to open every single bag.

"I need to go to the bathroom," Amanda blurted out. She tugged on Elise's shouldered racquet bag to gesture her to come with her. With Amanda's loaded trolley they entered the next washroom.

"I can't go through," she said, shaking her head.

"It's not a crime to carry a dildo with you," Elise whispered, but she didn't seem convinced herself.

"It's bad enough with an ordinary sex toy, but this one is antique. There might be a law against importing antique goods into the Emirates," Amanda mumbled. "I should have looked that up."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to split it up," Elise suggested. "I take the box and you the dildo."

"Stop calling it a dildo. It's a *marā*, a ritual phallus. Not a dildo."

"It's not helping that you are being such a smartass," Elise snapped. She opened the wooden box and took out the phallus. "Here, take it!"

"No, I'm not taking it. I smuggled it into Qatar last week," Amanda said. "You take it this time."

"What if I have to open my suitcase? My parents are here."

"That's actually an argument for you being the one to take it. They will take one look at you and your parents and wave you through," Amanda said persuasively. "You look innocent."

Elise gulped and looked at the huge phallus.

"I took it through customs in Doha," Amanda reminded her again. "In my pants."

"Okay, okay, give it to me," Elise sighed, stashing the carved wood between her racquets.

Nervously, they approached the customs officers again. Elise's parents were waiting with questioning looks.

"They just pulled Luella out of the line," Robert Renard said. Amanda and Elise turned their heads and saw the Galloway twin in a small room next door, unzipping one bag after another while a group of smirking officers surrounded her.

“Quick,” Elise whispered. “It’s now or never.”
And through they went.

Screw Dubai. Really. Screw it! And screw the stupid TV show.

Gabriella threw her racquet bag onto the bed and let herself fall next to it. Why was she even here? She wasn’t playing the stupid tournament.

As if it wasn’t enough that she had gone out in the second round of the Doha tournament. How absurd it was to fly to Dubai for one day – and go skiing?

Gabriella spread out her arms and legs on the bed. After losing her match, Gabriella and her team had begun to arrange their travel to Monterrey in Mexico, the tournament she had planned to play next. But then her phone had rung. Admittedly, she had been stoked when Paola had called her on short notice and asked her if she wanted to participate in a new edition of the Supersport show. This was her chance to prove that she wasn’t just the grumpy sister of a Grand Slam champion, like she had come across in the last installment of the show. She was a fun-loving, friendly girl. In her youth she had gone skiing quite often with her family, so she’d cut a fine figure on the slopes. Also tempting was the fact that Luella wouldn’t be there. When Paola had phoned, Luella had just reached the next round in Doha and even though she had lost today’s match she wouldn’t be here in Dubai until tomorrow, Gabriella had concluded, so the sisters wouldn’t have to meet.

Freddie had been easily persuaded to go ahead to Monterrey and take a day off, while Gabriella would pay a short visit to Dubai. Excitedly she had boarded the plane in Doha. But the short trip ended on a rather low note – in the customs office of Dubai.

Even though she hadn’t brought any forbidden items it took almost half an hour to unpack and repack all her luggage. When the customs officers finally dismissed her she noticed the voicemail from Paola on her phone.

“We’ve already started shooting. Take a cab and come to the Mall of the Emirates. We are in the indoor ski hall.”

With a smile the driver nodded when Gabriella told him the destination. They sped away and Gabriella relaxed, thinking about racing down the slopes. She hadn’t gone skiing for ages. Suddenly the cab slowed down. Midway through the Sheikh Zayed Road that connected the airport with downtown Dubai, a large truck blocked the way. The cab driver began swearing in Arabic and even though Gabriella didn’t understand a word, her heart sank.

One hour later she finally arrived in the large indoor ski area.

“We have just finished shooting,” Paola informed her. Then she shrugged. “I don’t really know what to do with you now, Gabriella. We can’t get the ski instructor to stick around for another hour just for you.”

A ski instructor? Gabriella almost laughed out loud as she imagined Gemma and Robyn creeping down the baby slopes. That was great. Gabriella would look great compared with them.

“I don’t need an instructor, Paola,” Gabriella said. “I can already ski.”

Paola raised an eyebrow, considering the new information. But then she shook her head.

“No, I can’t let you go alone. You are not covered by insurance without an instructor. But I have another idea.”

And so Gabriella’s day ended on a plastic sledge in the Family Snow Park. Screw Dubai. Really.

Gabriella grabbed the hotel flyer on her nightstand and skipped through their catalogue of activities and services. At least she could stay in the players’ hotel for one night. Should she go for a massage? Or for a swim? Then she got up. Today she definitely deserved both.

“Alright, ladies,” Tom declared more enthusiastically than he really felt. “Here’s the list Ted and I have put together.”

Martina Rodriguez and her Italian girlfriend, Antonia Sapore, took the paper and stuck their heads together to look it over. Tom's invitation had been pretty spontaneous, but the two players had agreed to offer their time. Tom was relieved that they hadn't confronted him again about why he had taken such an indiscreet picture in the first place. He still felt embarrassed about it, even more so now that the picture had fallen into the wrong hands. But the two girls sat down on the couch and – after struggling briefly with their conscience – readily accepted a sugar-high, induced by the heap of nut-filled *mammoul* cookies Tom had found today in a small pastry shop.

“That’s a pretty long list,” Antonia announced while munching the sweet sin. “How do you guys expect to figure out who the anonymous person is?”

“See, that’s where you come in,” Tom explained, pointing to the list. “We need to figure out if any of these people have a reason to harm you or to benefit from putting you under pressure.”

Martina and Antonia looked at each other, then at the names on the list again.

“Do you have a dispute with anyone on the list?” Tom inquired. “Perhaps an old affair?”

The two girls looked at Tom, then at each other again. They hesitated, then they each grabbed another *mammoul* and stuffed it into their mouths.

“Take your time,” Tom said, realizing that he sounded like a police officer who was showing mug shots to some witnesses. Mug shots, he thought. That would have been nice. It might also help the photo recipients to reanimate their memory. He was making a mental note to find pictures of the suspects on the WTA site when his thoughts were interrupted.

“Well, it was a long time ago,” Martina spoke up. “But I did have a little affair with Anastasia once.”

“With Anastasia?” Antonia looked at her girlfriend, almost choking on her cookie.

“It was ages ago,” Martina said defensively. “No need to look at me like that.”

She shrugged and handed Tom the list. Tom moved uncomfortably in his chair. Perhaps it would have been wiser to invite the girls separately. Who knew what skeletons these lesbians had hidden away in their closets?

“I’m not judging you,” Antonia blurted out. “I just wonder why you never told me.”

“Because it was just one night,” Martina groaned in exasperation. “It wasn’t serious.”

Tom lifted his hand. “Girls, please. No need to get upset about old love affairs.”

“I’m not upset!” Antonia screamed. Little pieces of nut came flying towards Tom. He dodged a little to the right. “All I’m saying is that if Martina had told me that she had a one-night-stand with Anastasia then I would have told her that, well –,” the Italian rolled her eyes, “– that I had a fling with Anastasia, too. Ages ago.”

“Did you?” Martina asked, looking her lover over. “I’m not surprised. Like myself you have a great taste in women.”

They giggled a little, appreciating their pre-monogamous love lives and now it was Tom’s turn to roll his eyes at so much commotion. He cleared his throat to get the two girls’ attention again.

“So you both had an affair with Anastasia,” he noted, circling the umpire’s name on the piece of paper. “Would she have any reason to be jealous of you or your relationship?”

Both girls shook their heads. “She never seemed the jealous type,” Antonia explained and Martina nodded in confirmation. “She’s pretty easygoing, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I think I understand,” Tom said with a wink. “We’ll just keep this information in mind. Is there anybody else on the list you would consider suspicious or capable of pressuring you with these pictures?”

Martina and Antonia shook their heads. So they only had Anastasia Stea so far. Tom thanked them and accompanied them to the door. Just when he was about to close it, Martina turned around.

“I thought of someone,” she said pensively. “I don’t really know her. I think most of the gay girls stay far away from her because she is a known homophobe.”

“Who are you talking about?” Tom asked, in his mind going through the list again. He couldn’t think of anybody.

“The Knocker,” Martina whispered before she turned around and left.

“Is this really necessary?”

Sasha stared at the pile of brochures which Kurt had spread out on the glass coffee table in front of her. When her manager announced his visit to Dubai, picked her up at the airport and called an immediate meeting in his hotel room, Sasha knew that it meant trouble. She hadn’t even had time to bring her luggage to her room.

“We need to get this out of the way, Sasha.”

Her manager leaned back on the couch and sighed, which made Sasha angry. It wasn’t him who had to make a decision.

“Where and when?” she finally asked.

“I thought, London,” Kurt said, happy that Sasha would actually go along with his plan. “During the Olympic Games would be a good time, I think. Right after the tennis competition.”

“But after the Olympics I need to get ready for the hardcourt season,” Sasha protested, rubbing her nose nervously. “Can’t we do it after the U.S. Open or in the off-season.”

But Kurt shook his head.

“This is urgent. Waiting so long would send out the wrong signal to our sponsors and business partners,” Kurt reminded her. “Also, during the Olympics we will get the most media attention, and not just tennis media.”

“I need to talk to Jaro first,” she said.

“I already talked to his management,” Kurt threw in. “They are happy with the timing, even more so with the location. It’s in the middle of the Premier League season.”

This had to be a conspiracy, Sasha thought. Did she have any say in this at all?

“So, what’s your plan with these?” Sasha said defiantly, pointing at the brochures.

“Well, we can’t organize it ourselves, can we?” Kurt shrugged. “We need a wedding planner, of course.”

“Of course.”

Sasha picked up a brochure, overflowing with roses and ornaments, and frowned.

“I want a small wedding,” she proclaimed. “Jaro, too! We talked about it last year in the fall. Nothing big, just some friends.”

“Alright, alright,” Kurt calmed her down. “Now, let’s please take a look at the wedding planners I prescreened. All of them are based in England and have good reputations.”

But before she could take a look, he picked up one and gave it to Sasha.

“I think we should go with these,” he said, tapping the brochure. He was apparently excited about the plan. Sasha took a closer look at the information. A photo on the back of the brochure told her that the ‘Happy Ever After Wedding Planners’ were Mr. Alvin Clutterbuck and Miss Daisy Hardwood. They looked like a couple in their sixties. Was Kurt really sure these two were capable of throwing a party?

“I hope this is the right decision,” she said.

“Knock on hardwood,” Kurt joked. “But they are the only ones willing to come and visit us abroad for an appointment.”

With her schedule that was certainly convenient, Sasha had to admit. But she couldn’t help it that Miss Hardwood’s permed hair and Mr. Clutterbucks thick eyeglasses gave her a bad feeling.

“I’m still not sure this is necessary,” Sasha mumbled.

“Yes, it is, and it’s not that hard,” Kurt said. “Just say ‘yes’.”

He winked at her, but Sasha couldn’t laugh at his little pun. This could only end as a nightmare. A horror movie. The

title would say ‘For Whom The Wedding Bells Toll’. Starring Sasha Mrachova.

With a little hop Morgana jumped over a pile of books she had taken out of her suitcase and stacked on the floor. These were the new novels, published in the last six months. The Frenchwoman kneeled down and counted the piles. Yes, everything was in order. There were the rare collector’s items, dating back to the late nineties, tattered by the many hands they had passed through. Next to the small heap another stack of books contained the novels that had come out between 2000 and 2004. Then there had been a hiatus of almost two years before the next *Tennis Nurse* novel was published. Morgana wondered if the players back then had ever found out why the author didn’t write during that time. She made a mental note to inquire about the publication gap. The third pile was the largest, not only because publications of new books had become more frequent after 2006, but also Morgana had been able to buy them right away before they went out of print and could only be obtained by trading during the Grand Slam *Tennis Nurse* dinners.

Carefully, she placed them back into two medium-sized metal suitcases she had bought solely for the transport of her book collection. She closed the suitcases, turned the combination to lock them and placed them under the desk. Then Morgana pulled out a smaller suitcase. She hauled it up onto the desk and turned the lamp on.

“*Les autographes*,” she mumbled to herself, grabbing a pack of pictures and placing it carefully on the table. They were almost complete. Only two autographs of players who had been competing between 1998 and 2004 were still missing.

She then sat down on the chair and looked through the rest of the sheets she spread out on her desk. In the last couple of days, she had started compiling a list of players who had been active in the late 1990s and early 2000s who had played doubles with each other. The quest had been quite laborious as there were

no complete records available online. After some fruitless searches, Morgana had finally persuaded Alice Chevallier, a service staff rookie, to do the research for her. The French girl wasn't happy about it but couldn't say no either. Morgana had promised to return the favor one day. On her days off, she had gone through the records excerpting the data she needed.

The first two players Morgana investigated were Monica Jordan and Agnes Lion, who had become a very successful doubles team in the last couple of years. After hitting the tour in 1996 Monica had mostly played with Brazilian star player, Alessandra Calhau, if she played doubles at all. Usually, they only played during the Grand Slams. Only in a couple of matches had she partnered with other players, among them Canadian players Susan McKay and her sister Jamie, as well as Bernadette LeBlanc. Morgana had only completed the list up until 2001, the year Monica had left the tennis tour under a huge scandal, only to vanish without a trace for several years.

Agnes Lion, on the other hand, had only played doubles occasionally in the early stages of her career. She sometimes played with Bernadette or with Italian Florentina Bonelli. The Italian player's highest ranking was No. 13 in 1999, when she made quarterfinals of both the French Open and the U.S. Open. She had left the tour in 2001 with a back injury.

Morgana checked her watch. It was 9:30 p.m.. She got up to get ready for bed.

She really needed to find out more about these players, Morgana thought while she brushed her teeth. The only ones still active from that generation were Monica, Agnes and Bernadette, and Morgana took into account that this fact was perhaps misleading her to make erroneous conclusions. Perhaps these were not the players connected with the *Tennis Nurse* novel series at all, but then again there was the blowfish incident and the death of her character, which undeniably led to Agnes. However, Morgana had to admit that it could be someone else who had been informing the author of the novel series of what was going on on the tour. A reporter maybe. Or a physio.

She went to bed and closed her eyes. But she couldn't fall asleep, her mind kept on working. There was someone else

who seemed good friends with Monica and Agnes, and who had a reputation of being very open with intimate details of other players' lives. Yes, Morgana thought, making a mental note. She needed to talk to Michelle van der Boom.

Gabriella felt a little better. But just a little. The view from the rooftop swimming pool had been stunning and the massage had done wonders to her back and her legs, but had also relaxed her to the point that all the disappointment of the last weeks had rushed freely through her body. In the end, she had been lying on the massage table and crying through the hole in the headrest. While going down in the elevator, she decided to go to bed – and go directly to bed and not pass the hotel bar.

The elevator door opened and all Gabriella could see at first was a huge mountain of bags and suitcases piled onto a cart, which moaned under the weight and which came rolling towards her. Gabriella couldn't see who was on the other side of the trolley but she could hear a woman huffing and puffing. People were so selfish, Gabriella thought. That person could have at least taken a look before she decided to occupy the whole elevator. The last thing Gabriella wanted after her bad luck today was to be crushed to death by an overloaded luggage cart, so she stepped to the side of the cabin and retreated into the back corner.

She heard the woman step forward on the other side of the trolley and push a floor button. The doors closed and the elevator began to ascend. She was going up again!

“What did you do?” she asked across the heap of luggage. “I wanted to go down!”

“Oh,” the voice on the other side sounded startled. “I didn't know anybody was in here.”

There was a bit of a rustling sound and a bag was removed from the top of the luggage mountain. From the other side, Sasha Mrachova was staring at her.

“Sasha,” Gabriella said coolly. She reconsidered. It was probably better to be rolled over by a luggage cart than spend time with Sasha, who was lusting after her irresistible twin sister.

The Czech’s jaw had dropped but she didn’t say anything. Then she pushed the bag back, blocking the view, and – judging from the sound of it – began hammering the floor buttons.

“What are you doing?” Gabriella yelled over the luggage.

“I’m stopping the elevator. I’m sorry,” Sasha stuttered. “I will get out. You can have the elevator to yourself. I don’t need it.”

Gabriella had to chuckle. Of course! Sasha thought it was Luella in the elevator. Nobody knew that Gabriella was in Dubai except Paola, Gemma and Robyn. Sasha was probably afraid she’d knock her out again.

“You better be quick or I will come over,” Gabriella shouted to the other side.

“No!” Sasha stammered. She was still hitting the buttons but the elevator didn’t stop.

“We are on the twelfth floor. Why don’t you just press thirteen?” Gabriella suggested smugly.

“Yes, I did,” Sasha cried. But the elevator didn’t stop. “There’s something wrong.”

Of course, now it was the elevator. Gabriella snorted. No wonder Sasha was after Luella. She had to be as feeble-minded as Rafael. Her sister seemed to attract those people. Perhaps Gabriella should be glad that Sasha didn’t want her. How annoying it would be to have a girlfriend like her.

“I’m coming over,” she declared with a Terminator voice.

“No,” Sasha begged. “I found the right button. I’ll get out in a second.”

A clank, followed by a long beep was audible from across the heap of luggage. Then the elevator came to a screeching stop. Gabriella waited but the doors didn’t open.

“What did you do?” she asked once again. This time Sasha didn’t answer.

With a sigh Gabriella pulled down the topmost bags from the trolley, then pulled herself up and peered over to the other side. Sasha was cowering on the floor, covering her face with her hands. Was she crying? Gabriella shook her head. How could she have once found Sasha attractive or interesting? This girl was anything but impressive. Turning her head, Gabriella took a look at the floor button board. Most of the buttons had been activated and one button blinking. Sasha had broken the glass and pressed the emergency stop button behind it.

“That button is in case the ropes snap,” she explained impatiently. “Now we are stuck.”

“I’m sorry, Luella.” Sasha was sobbing. She really was crying.

Gabriella sighed and crawled over to the other side.

“Come on,” she said conciliatorily and reached out her hand. After a long moment, Sasha took her hand and Gabriella pulled her up. When was the last time they had touched? A handshake at the net, no doubt. The Wimbledon final? Yes, Gabriella thought but then had to correct herself. No, the last time had been in Cincinnati and she had kissed Sasha in front of a vending machine. Only half a year ago, in a hallway, late at night. How could she have forgotten about it? For weeks and weeks, she had craved the taste of coconut and peanut butter in her mouth.

Sasha was standing inches away from her, stiff and silent. It would be so easy. So easy. Yes or no? Heads or tails? Flipping an imaginary coin Gabriella looked into Sasha’s eyes – and didn’t wait for the metal to fall. This was meant to be. An easy reward for a hard day. She closed her eyes and softly kissed the Czech on the lips.

“Hot,” Elise declared.

“You are tickling me,” Amanda mumbled, but the German wasn’t listening. Elise let the sensation spread over her tongue, then she lowered her head again.

“Very hot,” Elise exclaimed.

“Stop it!” The Australian wriggled under Elise. “What are you doing anyway?”

“Hold still!” Elise ordered. “You will spill all the spices.”

After a hard hit in the Dubai sun, Amanda and Elise had taken the afternoon off and paid a visit to the Old Souk. In the long narrow alleys, they had raided the small stores, haggled with the shop owners and in the end brought home an impressive array of herbs and spices. Now Amanda occupied the bed, lying on her belly and reading her e-mails on her laptop, while Elise had the glorious idea of pushing up Amanda’s shirt and spreading the various spices over Amanda’s lower back. Leaning over the Australian, she dipped her tongue into the powders to test their hotness.

“Too hot,” Elise yelled, jumping up like a scalded cat. She rushed to the bathroom and stuck her tongue under the tap. “Don moo,” she uttered with her tongue hanging out.

“Have you had enough now? Can I turn around?” Amanda shouted gleefully from the room.

“No,” Elise yelled back. “You ha go wai. I sill need do gasde he frui powers.”

After ten minutes, when her tongue had stopped feeling like it had been roasted, Elise emerged from the bathroom and sank onto the bed again where Amanda was still waiting with colorful lines of mango, banana and coconut powders running over her spine.

Amanda turned her head to Elise and chuckled.

“Sweating?” she grinned. “By the way, Natsumi’s rehab is going well,” she reported, pointing to the e-mail she was reading.

“Great,” Elise smiled. “When will she be back on the tour?”

“Clay season,” Amanda answered without enthusiasm. “Not earlier.”

They both knew what that meant. They had to transport the wooden *mara* from the Emirates to the United States, from the American west coast to the east coast and from there to Stuttgart. The clay tournament in the German city was their first stop of the European tournament season.

Elise sighed. "Why can't we send her the stupid thing?"

Amanda shrugged. "She prohibited it explicitly. We have to carry it around with us."

"I wonder if it's very valuable," Elise mumbled while she tasted the banana powder. "I searched on the internet last night. It's possibly from the Edo period which spans over 250 years. So it could be really, really old or not so old."

Amanda had to smile at her girlfriend's amateurish approach to historical research. But she continued to listen on while Elise sucked up the remaining spices from her back.

"Have you seen the little hole in the bottom? It's probably for a screw," Elise explained. She turned away from Amanda's back and pulled out the wooden box from one of her bags and opened it. Little hole? Screw? Amanda finally turned around.

"What's going on with you tonight? Is it all the hot spices you ate? Are you randy?"

"Who's Randy?" Elise asked, absentmindedly. An idea had taken hold of her and she reached out and grabbed the bags with the spicy treasures.

"It means - ," Amanda started explaining to her German girlfriend the depth of the English language, but then stopped. "Nevermind."

Elise had turned back to the Japanese box and begun arranging the little plastic bags of spices around the phallus. After stuffing the last bag into the box she proudly presented the spicy hiding place to Amanda.

"Now, isn't that smart?" she exclaimed. "The box now looks as if it was made for the spices."

Her mind was wandering back and forth. She wasn't concentrating at all. And yet all of her balls seemed to find the lines in miraculous fashion. Even the few visitors who were strolling between the practice courts in the morning sun seemed

to stay and watch longer than usual. The effortless and ease of her stroke-making surprised Sasha herself.

“As long as you can reproduce this in tomorrow’s match everything is fine,” Sasha’s coach said, giving her a pat on the back. Sasha just nodded. Tennis was not on her mind today.

Back in her hotel room, she opted for a short afternoon nap before she had to get ready for the players’ party. She snuggled into bed, and for a short moment Sasha was disappointed not to smell the scent of last night’s sensations on the pillows. While she had been at the tournament site, the maids had changed the linen. But then again, she didn’t need a reminder.

As soon as she relaxed under the blanket all the memories came flooding back. The kiss in the elevator that seemed to never end until finally the hotel technicians were able to unlock the breaks and the elevator doors opened on the next floor. The silent walk through the hotel corridor. Her own alertness of the woman walking next to her and the amazement that she was still there. Lulu helping her to unload the luggage trolley. Lulu’s body under the sheets. The warmth of her skin on hers. Lulu’s confident moves.

The scenes were floating through Sasha’s body, layer upon layer, slowly weaving a cover of comfort. So Sasha had been right about the Galloway twin. Lulu wanted her just like Sasha wanted Luella. The moment in the locker room at Roland Garros, the kiss in Cincinnati and the painful encounter in Istanbul revealed Lulu’s feelings and her struggle to come to terms with them. To this, Sasha could relate. When she was younger she herself had tried to resist her emotions. What happened last night was promising, to say the least, even though Lulu didn’t seem completely comfortable with the situation yet.

“Don’t approach me and don’t call me,” Lulu had said standing in the doorway, looking back at Sasha in bed. “I’ll call you.”

Sasha had smiled at her. She was fine with a tentative start. Also – she sighed, thinking about it – she needed to be extra cautious now that everybody believed she was a soon-to-be wife.

The phone rang and Sasha sat up immediately. Perhaps Lulu was already missing her. Perhaps she wanted to see her again before they had to kill time at the players' party pretending they didn't like each other.

"Hello?" she said. But the joy of anticipation vanished immediately as the receptionist told her that the local fashion designer was waiting with dresses for the players to wear at the party.

Walking into the lobby, she spotted Luella right away. For a second the Galloway twin was looking at her, but she didn't smile or wink at her. No sign that there was anything between them but a fierce rivalry. Sasha sat down on a lounge chair and observed Lulu from the corner of her eye. The Galloway was joking around with Marieke Bender and Stephanie Moeller then walked over to someone standing at the reception desk making arrangements. Rafael. Sasha frowned. She had completely forgotten about the fitness trainer who traveled with Luella and was well-known to be her boyfriend. Was he really? Or was he just a friend who covered for Luella like Jaro did for Sasha?

Sasha was inclined to go with the latter explanation. Also, why worry after only one night? She really was getting ahead of herself. Who cared what Lulu did with Rafael as long as she kept on spending nights with Sasha? And why should Sasha rack her brains about the Galloway at all? Breaking
Sasha's nose was pretty excessive to say the least, whether Lulu was confused or not.

Technically, it was only fair that she receive some compensation for her mutilated nose.

HEARTS BEATING JUST AS ONE

Indian Wells, United States

After looking over the names, Amanda slowly pointed her finger at one name. She was sitting with Ted and Tom on a terrace, happy to have found a quiet place outside the busy players lounge of the Indian Wells tournament.

Ted and Tom looked at each other.

“Anastasia?”

“It was a while ago. Three or four years,” Amanda said.

Ted cleared his throat. “Okay, let’s get this straight. You have a history with Anastasia Stea?”

The Australian hesitated. “Well, I wouldn’t call it a history,” she finally said. “We met occasionally.”

Ted and Tom nodded. They had heard this before. Everything began to make sense.

“Anyone else on the list you have a history with?”

Amanda shook her head.

“What about Carina?” Tom asked.

“Carina?” Amanda laughed. “Are you crazy? Wild horses couldn’t drag me there.”

Tom chuckled. "I didn't mean to suggest you had an affair with her. I wanted to know if you had a bad experience with her."

"No," Amanda said. "But I admit she's an obnoxious pain in the ass – on the court and off the court."

She got up and grabbed her jacket. "I've got to go. Elise will be back from her helicopter flight and we want to watch a movie tonight."

She went to the door but then turned around. "You won't tell Elise about Anastasia, will you? I don't want her to get the impression I was sleeping around."

Ted and Tom shook their heads and put their index fingers on their mouths. The secret of Amanda's adventurous past would be safe with them. After the Australian had left, they sat down on their bed and looked over the list.

"It must be her," Ted said. "She's had affairs with *everyone* who received a picture. Martina, Antonia, Sasha and even Amanda."

Tom wasn't convinced by Ted's theory. "But Amanda wasn't the recipient. It was Elise."

"She knew if she gave it to Elise it would land in Amanda's hands eventually."

Tom tilted his head. "I still don't understand her motive."

"Jealousy?" Ted suggested. "Perhaps Anastasia is jealous of other people being happy. She used the pictures to cause mischief and to worry her former lovers."

"Could be," Tom said.

He had spoken to the outgoing and friendly chair umpire at different occasions and had always enjoyed the chats with Anastasia. The Romanian gave the impression of someone who savored the life on the tour and was easy-going with the girls. A clandestine campaign to trouble her ex-lovers seemed completely out of character.

But who knew what went on inside a person who only ever said "30 –15" or "Love – 40" or "Advantage Curry" for hours and hours? Perhaps she was actually a very dangerous psychopath.

"Let's keep an eye on her," Tom said.

Sasha was nervously tapping her foot against the floor. Outside the window a high palm tree was swaying in the wind, gently disrupting the view of the Indian Wells mountain ridge.

“Sasha?” Kurt sounded irritated.

Sasha turned to her manager. “But it’s not necessary anymore. I’m winning matches again. I’m playing more consistently again. Besides, it’s not like I was doing horribly bad all the time. I made it to the semifinal in Melbourne.”

Kurt spread his hands defensively.

“Sasha, I beg your pardon,” he chuckled ironically. “You were crying and moaning after that semifinal that you couldn’t play tennis anymore, that people thought badly of you and Jaro. You said you felt like a *dwarf*.”

He shook his head in incomprehension, and Sasha grimaced with pain. She should have never let Kurt in on those bewildering feelings she had had after that match. Of course, this had only given Kurt an excuse to proceed further with the wedding plans.

“I don’t feel like that any longer,” she snapped. “I’m feeling great.”

“Well, I can see that,” Kurt replied. “You’re being your old self again. I certainly appreciate that fact. But we still have those rumors about you and Jaro.”

“They will die on their own when I play better again,” she retorted.

Kurt shook his head. “Jaro hasn’t been that careful either. There are massive rumors that your relationship is only a farce. We *have* to do something about it, and you know it.”

Yes, Sasha knew it.

“Sponsors are already asking what’s going on,” Kurt informed her. “There are two contracts that need to be renewed in the summer.”

Sasha closed her eyes.

“How do you make your money?” Kurt asked quietly.

Sasha smiled a little bit. They had been playing this quiz game since she was sixteen.

“I win a lot of matches?” she replied, already knowing his answer.

“Nope, guess again!”

“I get good sponsors.”

“That’s correct,” he winked at her. “And how do you get good sponsors?”

“By winning a lot of matches?”

“Nope, guess again.”

“With my tits and my ass?”

“That’s correct,” he rejoiced. “And how do you make a lot of money with your tits and your ass?”

Sasha grinned.

“By being smart,” Kurt answered for her.

“And trusting you,” Sasha finished the sentence.

“That’s correct.”

“Enrique Martinez?”

Polly pulled a face and handed the headphones back to Elise.

“I know, I know. Amanda hates him,” Elise chuckled.

“I’m not allowed to listen to the new album when she is around.”

“Understandably so.”

They were walking through the hotel lobby after the Supersport Channel crew had dropped them off at the front entrance. The flight over the mountains and through the valleys had been fun and they had shot a nice sequence along with Chili and Robyn.

“I liked the song you let me listen to on the way back.”

“The Jetlips,” Polly explained. “Famous Canadian chick band. I’ve got their whole catalogue.” She patted her MP3 player which she carried in the front pocket of her sweater.

“Perhaps you could give me some of their songs?” Elise asked when they stepped into the elevator.

“Sure, we can copy it onto your PC now if you like. So you have something to play aloud when Amanda is around.”

They got out on Elise’s floor and walked to the room she shared with Amanda. When they entered, Amanda was slouched on the bed and was watching videos on her laptop.

“How was the helicopter flight? Did you girls have fun?”

Elise and Polly nodded.

“It was pretty amazing actually,” Polly said. “I’m glad they chose us for the task.”

“It wasn’t really a task. Not like the trampoline thing,” Elise said while getting her laptop out of her bag. “More a nice fun activity.”

“No match between Gabriella and Lulu then?” Amanda asked with a grin.

“They weren’t with us this time,” Polly explained.

“Thank god,” Elise exclaimed, switching on her laptop. “Enduring them together is terribly exhausting now that they are not talking anymore. Gabriella is all grumpy around Lulu.”

“They are very different,” Amanda said pensively.

“Well, one is a lesbian and the other a slut, basically,” Polly chuckled while handing Elise her MP3 player.

“You know that Gabriella is gay?” Elise looked up.

Polly shrugged and handed Elise her MP3 player. “I figured she was since she was hanging with you guys a lot.”

“Not really that often anymore,” Amanda threw in.

“We should ask her to come over and watch the movie with us tonight,” Elise said to Amanda.

The Australian nodded, then looked at Polly. “You want to come, too?”

“Yes, I’d love to,” Polly said. She stepped towards the window and looked outside at the hotel garden, which was drenched in the warm light of the setting afternoon sun. Then she turned back and sat down at the table to wait for Elise to copy the new songs into her music library, when something caught her eye.

“What’s this?” Polly asked.

Elise looked up and gulped. She and Amanda quickly exchanged looks.

“Spices!” they squealed in unison.

“May I?” Polly asked, picking up the wooden *mara* box.

“Sure,” Amanda said with a strained voice. Elise and Amanda both watched Polly open the old box and take a look at the accurately stashed spices.

“Colorful.”

“Yes,” Elise laughed awkwardly. She jumped up, waving the MP3 player. “Done.”

Before Polly had time to take out one of the little plastic bags and discover the hard fact behind the hot and sweet spices, Elise grabbed the box away and quickly slipped the MP3 player into Polly’s hand instead.

“Thank you for the music. I’m sure Amanda will like it as well,” she said with a grin. “Shall we call you after dinner and you come over to watch the movie?”

Polly agreed. She gave them her phone number, said good-bye and Elise closed the door behind her with a big sigh.

“We really need to be more careful with the dildo.”

“*Mara*,” Amanda insisted. But she was already stuffing the wood box deep inside one of her bags. “No need for Gabriella to ask the same questions.”

“I think it’s a good time to aim for the bigger tournaments,” Gabriella told Freddie. The coach nodded slowly.

“Well, the beginning of the year has been a bit of a bumpy ride, but your current ranking will set you up well to tackle the Top 15,” he said. “Now that your game is coming together again I see no reason that it shouldn’t work.”

Gabriella put her feet up on Freddie’s hotel room couch and smiled. Her revival had begun in the smaller tournaments in Monterrey and Acapulco. She had arrived from Dubai with new enthusiasm, a much bigger punch to her strokes and a big grin on her face. Her coach had wondered how one skiing day in Dubai could cause a 180 degree turn in his player, but eventually attributed her good mood to the fun they had in Mexico – which

included a night out on the town in Monterrey, a big Mardi Gras party and finally, a tournament win in Acapulco. She had played magnificently in the last three matches, implementing Freddie's advice and executing her game plan from the first ball played until the last.

"I'm glad we are working together," Gabriella said, even though she knew it wasn't Freddie's coaching alone that had lifted her game in the last two weeks. Neither had it been the fun she had with the other players, running around in Mexican costumes. She knew that the reason she had turned things around and that confidence was flowing through her veins again, was accredited to a certain Czech player.

In hindsight, nothing could have been more daring than kiss Sasha in the elevator. Who knew what the Czech would do after Luella had broken her nose in Istanbul? It could have been entirely possible that Sasha might have started screaming, as she clearly believed it was Lulu with her in the elevator. Gabriella still grinned at the thought. It was such a ludicrous idea that she had spent the night with the most-desired girl in the WTA because said girl believed her to have been Luella Galloway, the straightest girl in the WTA.

Sasha thought she knew Lulu's little secret, as she had called it when they had faced each other in the Wimbledon locker room. As Sasha had a little secret of her own, she understood the need for collusion. When Gabriella had forbidden her to call her or talk to her, Gabriella had of course thought of the possibility that Sasha might contact Lulu by accident. But the Czech had nodded immediately. She wouldn't put everything she had worked for at risk.

This was the best situation Gabriella could have hoped for – a lover on the side who ignited her energy and revitalized her game. After her good runs in Mexico and Columbia, Gabriella felt more confident about making an even bigger step forward in the rankings, the Top 15 only being a stopover. Thinking about the little note she had written down before the season started, she felt certain again that she could crack the Top 10.

There was another reason Gabriella wanted to play the larger tournaments. Lulu would play them. And if Lulu was playing, Gabriella could meet up with Sasha.

Polly opened the door and had to laugh. Bernadette was waving with a *Tennis Nurse* novel. The older player sighed.

“I’m hooked.”

“You were fast!” Polly exclaimed. “How could you read that in two days.”

“I only read the interesting parts,” Bernadette said and slipped inside Polly’s hotel room. “Can I borrow a new one?”

Polly wondered which parts of the story might have been more interesting than the others. Was Bernadette only reading the love scenes? Polly grinned. There were quite a few in every *Tennis Nurse* novel.

Bernadette stepped towards Polly’s nightstand and picked up one of the old novels Polly had gotten from Morgana.

“I thought I’d take you out for dinner and we talk about the tactics for our first match,” Bernadette suggested.

Polly hesitated. “I will be watching a movie tonight. With Amanda and Elise.”

She saw her doubles partner frown.

“Sorry,” Polly said.

“Well, we’ll both be sorry if we lose in the first round. But that’s your decision.”

“How about discussing it over breakfast tomorrow morning?” Polly suggested quickly.

Bernadette nodded. “Alright.”

She picked up another novel and began flipping through it.

“So, how was the week at home? How is your mother?”

Polly smiled, relieved that Bernadette didn’t seem miffed. “Much better again.”

She had spent a whole week in Canada visiting her family, and her mother had been feeling well enough for them to go for a few walks through the park.

“She is still waiting for a new heart, right?”

“Yes,” Polly answered. Of course, her mother was waiting. They were all waiting. Just because her mother had been released from the hospital again didn’t mean she had been cured. Polly let her shoulders hang down.

“Is she on a waiting list?” Bernadette asked.

“Yes,” Polly said.

“It can take forever before a matching heart is found.” Bernadette said while looking through Morgana’s *Tennis Nurse* novels. “First, somebody has to die, which is not very pleasant. Then it must be someone healthy, and last but not least, it must be someone willing to donate an organ. Most people would consider donating a kidney or their liver when dead. But the heart?”

“It’s not easy to find someone,” Polly admitted. She had sunk down on the bed. All her excitement had vanished and a familiar fear was creeping up her spine.

“Honestly, I don’t think I could donate my heart,” Bernadette said while skimming through one of the old *Tennis Nurse* novels.

“But you wouldn’t need it anymore if you were dead,” Polly said quietly.

Bernadette looked up.

“But it’s mine,” she retorted. “It’s not the same if it beats in someone else’s chest. A heart belongs to someone. You can’t give it away. You mustn’t.”

A long silence followed the tirade. Long enough for Polly to feel her eyes filling with tears.

“Well, that’s just my opinion,” Bernadette added with a shrug. “I hope for your mother’s sake that someone has a different opinion on the matter. Someone who’s heart is a match for your mom. Someone who dies soon. Right?”

Polly managed to nod while tears began streaming down her face. Sometimes she observed women and even men in restaurants or on the tournament sites and judging from their looks she wondered if they could be a matching donor for her

mother. She even imagined what would be the best way for them to die, so the heart wasn't damaged. Whenever she caught herself having these thoughts she felt horrible. She didn't want anybody to die. But it was the only hope for her mother.

"I'm just so scared," she sobbed.

"I know, I know." Bernadette placed the novel on the nightstand and sat next to her. But when her doubles partner put her arm around her, Polly felt a sudden uneasiness. How could Bernadette be so harsh in one moment and then compassionate in the next?

Polly got up and went to the bathroom to wipe her nose with some toilet tissue. Through the closed door she heard the telephone ring. After three rings Bernadette answered it.

Amanda hung up the phone and shrugged at Elise who had just entered the room.

"I can't reach Gabriella. She's not in her room."

Amanda had tried before they had gone to dinner and after they got back to the hotel too, but to no avail.

"Polly's not coming either," Elise remarked. "Bernadette said she wasn't feeling well."

"Bernadette?" Amanda raised an eyebrow. "They've become really good friends, Polly and her."

"You think they are a couple?" Elise wondered.

"No. It's just - ." Amanda got up and began to change into her pyjamas. "Bernadette can be a bit overbearing. But it's probably good that Polly has someone who takes care of her."

"Yes, probably." Elise slipped under the bed sheets and opened her laptop. "What movie have you picked?"

Amanda grinned. "Since we are in the desert I thought of the perfect movie." She pulled out a DVD from one of her bags and handed it to Elise. The cover showed two women wearing old-fashioned clothes and standing in front of a vintage car.

"*Desert Hearts?*" Elise had never heard of it. "It looks very old."

“It’s not that old! It’s from 1984 or so.”

“That is the Stone Age. It is very old!”

“Two years older than I am,” Amanda reminded Elise while putting on a pair of shorts. “So you think I’m *very* old.”

Elise rolled her eyes. “I always forget you were born in the eighties.”

“Best decade ever,” Amanda said smugly. “Good music, too.”

“Oh, cheap shot,” Elise growled. “I don’t listen to bad music. Polly gave me some new songs, by the way. You might like them. The Jetlips. It’s with guitars.”

Amanda pulled her shirt over her head. “The Jetlips?”

“Yes. Do you know them?”

Instead of giving an answer, Amanda got into perfect air guitar stance, swung her arms and started singing.

Speed machine

Speed machine

I’m in love with my sp-e-e-e-e-d machine

Amanda ended her punk rock performance with a little jump, hammering the last chord on the air guitar and falling to her knees.

“Speed Machine,” she explained while getting up and dusting off her knees. “A favorite.”

“Shocking,” Elise grinned and took her hands off her ears. “Can we watch that very old movie now?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Amanda saluted, then jumped into bed. “The movie features good music, too.”

“From the eighties?”

“Nope. Fifties.”

“Fifties?” Elise couldn’t believe it. “That’s the Dinosaur Age!”

What a perfect way to end the day, Gabriella thought.

Nibbling her way up Sasha's latissimus she was still amazed by how easily she was getting laid these days. Just a message delivered by the hotel boy or a short text, and Sasha was ready, knocking at her door.

Below the right shoulder, a muscle twitched slightly when Gabriella let her fingers run over Sasha's spine. She only touched the tiny hairs that stood up on the Czech's back, and with every inch she moved up Sasha sighed quietly. Had she been too rough in Dubai? Thinking back, Gabriella felt a bit guilty. Sasha had seemed so tame and frightened in the elevator. She clearly had been surprised, even shocked by the twin's approach, and the encounter later in Sasha's hotel room probably didn't help to put Sasha at ease. It had been filled with Gabriella's frustration over her losses in the previous tournaments and the urge to reward herself for a demoralizing day in the Emirate's capital.

Today she wanted to make up for it. The Czech had closed her eyes, and when Gabriella bit her gently on her side, she let out a soft squeal.

"Open your mouth," Gabriella whispered to Sasha when she reached her ear again, and the Czech dutifully did so. Quickly, the Galloway twin unwrapped a candy and breaking a little piece from it, she slipped it between Sasha's lips.

"Remember this?" Gabriella asked.

Sasha smiled with closed eyes and nodded. Gabriella smiled, too. She had gotten a whole pack of coconut candy from the vending machine. She had also bought peanut butter cupcakes and now popped one into her mouth. When she leaned over to kiss Sasha, the Czech responded with her whole body, turned around and embraced Gabriella with her legs and arms. Once again, the taste of peanut butter and coconut spread over their tongues and Gabriella thought back to their late-night meeting in the hotel hallway in Cincinnati.

"Did you miss me?" Gabriella whispered.

Sasha moaned in confirmation.

"Did you miss the taste of us?"

Again, Sasha moaned. Yes, she remembered the night in Cincy, too. Had she been thinking about Gabriella all winter? Had she been dreaming about another kiss? Gabriella grabbed

Sasha around the waist and pulled her closer. The Czech's willingness was clearly proof for her desire, Gabriella thought, while their bodies settled into a slow rocking rhythm. But not for long. Sasha had begun to move her hips against Gabriella's hand and she was picking up pace. She was breathing heavily.

"Perhaps we should give you a little rest," Gabriella suggested, lifting her hand.

"No," Sasha protested, moving her hips closer to Gabriella. "Keep on going!"

"Are you sure?" Gabriella teased. "You seem out of breath."

"No," Sasha whispered again. "Fuck me. Please, fuck me."

Oh, well. What could a girl do when asked so politely, Gabriella thought with a little chuckle, then shoved another candy into her mouth and went back to work.

This really was a perfect way to end the day.

Another ten minutes, Sasha thought. It was ten to twelve. It wasn't that late. She could stay a little longer and then go back to her own room. She twirled her finger in Lulu's curls. The girl was sound asleep with her head on Sasha's shoulder. No, she couldn't get up now without waking Lulu.

Was that an owl outside the window? Sasha listened closely but the night had gone dead silent again. Only Lulu's steady breath was audible in the darkness of the room.

She really didn't get a lot of sex, Sasha thought. The last person had been Anastasia. It was almost laughable. Adored and desired by millions, but at the end of the day she lay in bed alone – until now. Since that night in Dubai, Lulu had called her almost every day, summoning Sasha to a different hotel room every night.

She wondered why Luella was bothering with booking extra rooms for their trysts and why Sasha was never allowed to visit Lulu's room. But she didn't want to inquire. The twin wasn't

talkative at all and most often she was already waiting in bed, quick to undress Sasha as soon as she arrived. Not that Sasha was objecting. It was refreshing to have someone as young and possibly inexperienced as Lulu, who was still brisk and demanding. Not even the fling with Anastasia had been as gratifying as the nights with Luella.

A quick look at her cell phone told Sasha that it was midnight. She should get going, the Czech thought with a sigh. She had a match tomorrow and was scheduled on the practice courts at ten in the morning. She tried to free her arm from under Lulu's neck but the Galloway twin was snuggling too close to Sasha. Carefully, she propped herself onto her other elbow and tried again. Luella was moving.

"Are you leaving?" the Galloway asked sleepily into the darkness. The dark waves of hair moved through Sasha's fingers when she lifted her head.

"No," Sasha whispered, to her own surprise. "I just wanted to get some water."

Luella moved to the side and Sasha pulled her arm out from under her. Then she went to the mini bar and took out a bottle of water, feeling Luella's eyes on her naked back. She didn't mind. It felt good. Walking back to the bed, she noticed that Lulu really wasn't shy about looking her body over.

Lying down on the warm sheets and wanting to find the same position again, she stretched her arm out for Luella to lay down on it, but the Galloway twin didn't put her head back.

"Were you awake all that time?" Lulu asked.

Sasha nodded.

"Didn't we make you sleepy enough?" The cockiness in Lulu's voice aroused Sasha.

"No," she replied.

"Oh dear," Lulu teased with a hushed voice. "My bad."

She leaned over slowly hovering with her lips over Sasha's.

Too far, Sasha thought. Lulu was too far away. She grabbed Lulu's head, flung her legs around Lulu's hips and pulled her close, fully aware of what the consequences would be.

There was no way she would get her eight hours of sleep tonight.

FISHY BUSINESS

Miami, United States

Nervously, Sasha looked at the TV that was hanging on the wall of the locker room. The screen showed Luella stepping to the baseline and getting ready to serve. Sasha clenched her fists. Silently, she prayed for the Galloway twin to get a good first serve in. Lulu really needed a good first serve.

But what she saw was nothing but discouraging. After a lame first serve Lulu was soon on the back foot, losing the rally with a wide forehand. Sasha let her head sink down. Were the secret meetings with Sasha confusing Lulu? Or exhausting her? Whenever they had slept together, Lulu seemed to have had a lot of stamina. But it looked like she couldn't carry the good form she had shown in bed over to the court. Perhaps she should talk to Lulu. Lulu was so young and probably a very shy person hiding behind a facade of loud bluntness and attention-seeking. In fact, she rarely spoke about herself when they met up.

Yes, Sasha thought, she really should talk to Lulu. She couldn't just reap the benefits from their sexual encounters and let Lulu wear herself out. A young person like her probably just craved some guidance and assurance. Sasha smiled at the thought that she could be one of the elders now, even though she was only

five years older than Lulu. She had never engaged with the lesbian circles on tour but stayed on her own, so they never asked her for advice or chatted with her. But perhaps it was time to skip the lonely life. Perhaps it was time to find a companion. Perhaps

— .
With a loud bang the locker room door was opened and Sasha quickly turned away from the TV and vanished between two rows of lockers. A last look at the screen confirmed that Lulu was down 15 – 40 already.

From the other side of the lockers, Sasha could make out three voices. Chili, Mint and someone else, whose voice Sasha didn't recognize, had entered the room. They were engaged in a conversation and began opening the lockers to take out their bags.

“Honestly, I've never really talked to her. She is such a recluse.”

“Yes,” Chili said. “A bit weird, too.”

Sasha quietly stuffed her visor between her racquets. She didn't want to draw attention to herself.

“I've dubbed her Miss Nosey,” the unknown person said with a chuckle.

Sasha frowned. Nosey? She straightened up and felt her face turn hot. Were they talking about her? The Czech player suppressed the urge to rub her nose and stepped closer to the lockers to hear them better. But the three players had already changed the subject.

“We need to check out the pool at the hotel. It has underwater grottos,” Mint remarked.

“The whole hotel looks like an underwater world,” Chili added. “Hence the name. *Pisces Palace*. Means fish palace. It's *pescado* in Spanish.”

Sasha sat back on the bench. So Kurt had lied to her! Her nose was not fine. Everybody had noticed that it was bigger now. They even called her Miss Nosey behind her back.

“The fish in my hotel room died,” the unknown person said. “They were all floating on the surface. I had to call the hotel reception to get them removed from the tank.”

The two girls laughed.

Sasha didn't know if she should be relieved that the conversation had turned to the interior design of the players' hotel. She felt like she should have been glad, but on the other hand she needed to know what they thought about her – and her looks.

“Your fish were all dead? Did you feed them some Dutch cheese?” Chili asked.

“Or perhaps some pot? You can tell us, Michelle,” Mint teased.

They all laughed and zipped up their bags.

Michelle van der Boom, Sasha thought. Of course. The most beautiful player of the past decade had come back from retirement to give it a shot at the Olympics with countrywoman Marieke Bender. Beautiful and adored. Loved by the media. Loved by the fans. Not a recluse. Not weird. Sasha swallowed at the thought of Michelle's lovely face.

Then she heard the three players leaving the room. When the chatter had abated behind the door Sasha realized that she was clutching her nose – and Lulu had lost her match.

“What are you going to do with your coins?” Elise asked the other girls.

Polly, Gemma and Chili were sitting in the back of the Supersport Channel van and looking at their little bags in which they carried their gold-wrapped chocolate coins. A souvenir they had been presented with at the chocolate factory they had visited for another Supersport shooting.

“Eat them,” Gemma said. “I have fifteen. So that should be enough for one at each tournament.”

They all nodded. It was out of the question that they would eat them all at once. When they arrived at the hotel, they said good-bye and arranged to meet later at the players' party.

“Want to swap *Tennis Nurse* novels?” Elise asked Polly in the elevator.

“Sure. I have *The Queen of Copenhagen*.”

“I could give you *The Magician of Miami* for it. It’s a really good one.”

“And fitting,” Polly said when she left the elevator. Elise grinned. The book would be even better when read here in Miami.

In her room Elise sat down on the bedside and emptied the bag with the chocolate coins onto the sheets. Twenty-two, she counted. She could eat one coin at each tournament, she thought, and the rest when the off-season started in October. Or she could eat one coin for each win as a reward. She closed her eyes and smiled at the thought of the chocolate coin melting on her tongue. How long had it been since she had had something as sweet and wonderful as chocolate?

Suddenly a knock on her door derailed her train of chocolate-covered thoughts. Was Amanda already back from the tournament site? Her match had started in the afternoon and on the way back from the chocolate factory, Elise had checked the score. Amanda had just won against Luella Galloway in two sets. But that had been only twenty minutes ago. She could not have made it here so quickly.

“Who is it?” she asked through the closed door.

“It’s me,” she heard her dad say. “I need to pick up your racquets to get them to the stringer. Remember?”

Shit! Elise jumped up. She had forgotten about that.

“Just a second,” she yelled at the closed door and pulled her racquet bag onto the bed. There was something she needed to take out.

The wooden box with the dildo inside was hidden in the back corner of her huge bag. She grabbed the box’s edge and pulled at it frantically. It seemed to be stuck under her racquets and her shoe sac. Finally she released it, however too hastily, and in one sweep it flung out from her bag. The box sailed through the air, fell onto the floor and all the spices spilled over the carpet.

“Damn,” Elise yelled.

“Do you need help?” she heard her father say through the door.

“No, I’ll be right there,” Elise shouted.

She needed to get rid of the dildo which had rolled out of the box. She needed to find a hiding place. Why had she forgotten that her dad would be coming by? Her eyes fell on the chocolate coins on her bed. Her dad wasn't supposed to see those either.

"Damn," she said again, however this time quietly.

She picked up the *mara* and put it back in the box. Then she placed the wooden case on the bed, raked the coins up and threw them into the box to obscure the antique pecker. With her feet she shoved the spice bags under the bed. Where could she put the box quickly? She took a look around the room, and found the perfect solution. Ten seconds later, she opened the door to her father who looked at her a bit puzzled but didn't ask what had been going on. He stepped towards the bed and took a look at the racquets.

"I'll have two of them strung a bit tighter. It will be hot and dry tomorrow," he mumbled. Then he sniffed the air. "Your room smells of curry."

"Really?" Elise asked innocently. She pretended to sniff as well but then shook her head. No, she didn't smell anything.

"It's a very extravagant hotel. At least your fish are alive," Robert Renard said with a glance at the aquarium, which enchanted every room in the hotel with a touch of exotic. "I heard from Freddie Nordström that one of his fish died."

He approached the fish tank and took a quick look. Elise hands began sweating.

"Nice underwater landscape," her dad remarked, while shouldering Elise's racquet bag. "With a treasure chest."

When her dad had left the room, Elise checked the fish tank. Everything was alright. The chocolate coins had covered the wooden phallus completely and two goldfish were curiously eyeing the timbered box. Elise sighed. Thankfully, Natsumi would be returning to the tour for the tournament in Madrid to take the wooden troublemaker back. This really had been going on for too long.

The sky was so blue that Gabriella felt she was staring upside down at one of the Australian Open courts which were painted a shiny azure color. But this wasn't the land down under where she had lost one match after another. This was her home country and while Gabriella had reached the quarterfinal of the tournament, Luella had just lost her match against Amanda Auster. Everything was as brilliant as the bright blue sky. Gabriella blinked, then stepped inside the hotel building.

While in theory it was great that Luella had lost her match – as Gabriella would gain more ranking points here in Miami than Luella – there was one little problem

Her sister would probably leave Miami as soon as possible, perhaps even tonight, to get ready for practicing on clay. And if Luella left today and Sasha believed she was having an affair with Lulu, Gabriella would have to act quickly. Really quickly.

She approached the reception desk of the hotel and smiled at the young man standing behind the counter.

“I would like to book a room for tonight,” she explained.

“Yes, of course,” the receptionist said. “Are you not happy with the room you have?”

So, he had recognized her. Good.

“Well, this is my last night here, so I would like a bigger bed.”

“Sure,” the young man replied. “You are Miss Galloway, right?”

Gabriella nodded. “Luella.”

The receptionist typed in her name and the computer gave him the information he needed.

“You currently have a queen size bed,” he read. “We have a room with a king size bed available. We also have a California king size bed – it's extra long. And we have a very nice room with an Olympic queen size bed.”

He looked up to await Gabriella's answer. Gabriella had to smile. After her practice this morning she had taken the time to read through the catalogue of medications and drugs that were considered to be doping by the World Anti-Doping Agency and were banned from the Olympic Games. Gabriella knew that even

if a player was clean, they all had to be careful when they had a cough or a cold. Even harmless medication could contain substances that were considered performance enhancers, and a regular refresher on the various substances was a good thing. It was a scary read, covering steroids, blood doping, hormones and other stimulants.

Thank god, extensive fucking wasn't listed. Considering how her game had developed in the last few weeks it could very well count as a performance enhancer.

"Olympic sounds good," Gabriella said with a grin.

The nights with Sasha were probably the best performance-enhancing drug she knew of, she thought while signing the hotel receipt with Luella's signature. Then she took out her cell phone and sent Sasha a text with the room number and a time. They had three hours before they had to get ready for the players' party.

Enough time to get some red blood cells moving.

"How's the production going?" Monica asked Paola.

After a long day at the tournament site, Monica, Agnes and Paola had decided to sit on the garden deck and enjoy the warm afternoon breeze. Candice had joined them for a quick bite and a wine spritzer before she had to go back and keep an eye on the hustle and bustle. They still had over three hours to prepare the hotel's rooftop for a boisterous players' party.

"It's going great. We did a shoot in a chocolate factory today. You should have seen how big and dreamy the girls' eyes were," Paola said with a smile.

"Oh, chocolate," Monica sighed. It was one of the things players had to forgo.

"I loved the skiing episode," Candice chuckled. It was airing at the moment. "Gemma and Robyn try to learn to ski while Gabriella races down the slope on a sledge."

"They all had a blast."

“She didn’t play Dubai, did she? I mean Gabriella,” Agnes threw in.

Paola shook her head. “She went on to play Monterrey, which turned out to be a good idea in hindsight.”

“She only won a handful of matches before the South American tournaments,” Monica nodded. “She has been playing much better since. Good to see that the collaboration with Freddie Nordström is paying off. Did you see her today? So much swagger. She’s back to her good form she had last year.”

Paola laughed. “To be honest, I always had the feeling she had more potential than Luella. I thought it last year when Gabriella won the tournament here.”

“Her first big title,” Monica remembered.

Agnes took a sip from her spritzer. “All the more surprising when Luella won Wimbledon.”

“Well, she hasn’t been able to live up to it so far,” Monica sighed. “The pressure has gotten to her game. And the money has gone to her head.”

“See, that’s what I am talking about,” Paola spoke up again. “Gabriella gives a completely different impression. More mature.”

Monica tilted her head. “Yes, but she had massive problems in the beginning of the season which were due to pressure, too.”

Paola shrugged. “If Luella keeps losing like she did today Gabriella only has to wait until after Wimbledon and the rankings will be sorted for her.”

The ranking system was brutal and unforgiving if you were out for too long or couldn’t keep your level of performance up. Professional tennis was like being on a merry-go-round in an elevator. Up and down, and if players weren’t careful, their rankings could slide quickly into free-fall.

“Hello, girls,” a familiar voice piped up behind them. Michelle van der Boom and chair umpire Lynn Pebblestone had come over the lawn to sit down with the group.

“We were just talking about Gabriella,” Agnes informed them.

“She is doing fine lately,” Lynn nodded. Then she smiled slyly. “Is there anything I should know for Love Game?”

“It’s not always about love, Lynn,” Monica teased her. “This time we witness the result of hard, hard work.”

“The Galloways play for our team?” Michelle leaned forward. She had been out too long and was eager to catch up on any gossip.

“Just Gabriella. Lulu is straight as an arrow,” Monica reported.

“Well, then I will only invite Gabriella to the party,” Michelle winked. “I’m having a little private beach party tonight. You’re all invited.”

Loud cheering erupted upon the good news. Michelle’s parties were just as notorious as Monica’s. A wild, happy discussion began with everyone throwing in their best memories of past festivities, if they had memories at all.

“Come in.”

Sasha waved Tom inside and retreated back into her hotel room. ‘Room’ was an underestimate, Tom thought when he stepped into the spacious accommodation. The suite actually contained three rooms, as far as Tom could tell by looking around, with a bedroom next door and a small sitting room at the other end of the living room. Sasha gestured him to sit down on the couch. She herself sat down at a writing desk and turned on the desk lamp. It blinded Tom a little as he was sitting low on the couch.

“I wanted to ask you a couple of things,” Tom said, pulling out the list of suspects from his bag.

“First *I* want to know how your investigation is proceeding,” Sasha interrupted him, leaning back in her chair. “What have you found out so far? Have you narrowed down the list of suspects? When can we expect results?”

Tom's mouth popped open a little bit. Why was the Czech so cranky? Earlier today, she had won her match easily. There was no reason for her to act like that.

"Well – ," he stuttered, unsure what to make of the interrogation. "We are working on it. But, it's not that easy. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"It seems you are the only one working on this. Ted is busy with sponsorship duties and photo shoots," Sasha said with a tense voice. "I don't have to tell you that all these things will go up in smoke if your pictures are published. I could lose a lot of money! You sure understand that, as you are in the same situation with Ted. We could lose everything."

"I am well aware of the risk, but so far nothing has happened," Tom said with a shrug. He also thought that both Sasha and Ted would probably not lose any money if the truth came out. Perhaps only earn a little less. But he kept the thought to himself.

Sasha didn't look as if she liked his nonchalant answer. She leaned forward and turned the desk lamp a little further towards Tom. He blinked as the light blinded him even more. What was this, he thought angrily. A KGB grilling? Sasha's face was almost invisible now in the dark.

"May I?" he asked defiantly and reached out to turn the switch of an upright standing next to the couch. Within a second the living room was lit brightly in a mellow, warm light. "Much better. Now I can see your pretty face."

Tom grinned at Sasha provocatively but the Czech had leaned forward, now hiding behind the desk lamp.

"I just want to know who is on your list of suspects," she said. Her voice suddenly sounded tired. "Maybe I can help you if you let me in."

"Well, that's why I'm here."

"Yes, sorry," Sasha said. "I was being impatient."

She began rubbing her forehead with her hand, then she softly touched her nose. It was a subconscious gesture Tom realized, and with a feeling of guilt he remembered the incident in Istanbul, the flying punch bowl and the night in the hospital. He

had been so happy to reunite with Ted that he had forgotten to pay Sasha a visit.

“How is your nose?” he asked.

Sasha let her hand fall on the table and looked up, suddenly aware that she had drawn attention to her olfactory organ. “My nose is fine. Thank you very much,” she almost choked. “Why is everyone asking about my nose?”

“I’m only asking because it is my fault,” Tom said. “I’m really sorry about what happened in Istanbul.”

His apology surprised her. “Alright,” she said, then shrugged it off. “No need to talk about it anymore.”

“Well, perhaps I can make amends,” Tom suggested. “How about I take some pictures of you? You know I can make anybody look good. Not that I would have to work too hard when it comes to you.”

Sasha looked up, suspicion in her eyes. With her icy stare she looked scary but beautiful in a regal way. Tom held her gaze, allowing Sasha to read his face. Finally she relaxed and lowered her head with a smile, accepting the compliment.

“I’ll think about it,” she said quietly.

“Can you take a look at this list now?” Tom asked. He reached out his arm and handed Sasha the list. “Is there anybody on the list you’ve had a dispute with – or maybe a love affair that has ended?”

Sasha frowned and Tom started worrying that the straight-forward question might have angered the Czech again, but then Sasha began looking over the list.

“I don’t really socialize with any of them,” she finally revealed. “There is just one person I had an affair with but – ,” she hesitated, looking at Tom. “Love wasn’t involved.”

She grabbed a pen and circled a name, then checked her watch and got up.

“Please, excuse me now,” she said, shooing Tom from the couch. “I need to get ready for the players’ party.”

The party was already in full swing when Mint, Chili and Teresa stepped onto the rooftop veranda. A light breeze from the Biscayne Bay cooled the night air and ruffled the water in the large pool which spread over the garden rooftop and extended into an indoor spa area.

“*Buenas noches*, ladies!” Chili yelled over at Elise and Amanda who stood at the railing. Mint groaned at the sight of Elise but Teresa was already walking over to the couple. Chili grabbed Mint’s hand and pulled her around the pool to greet the couple.

“Have you stayed strong?” Chili asked Elise. “Or are all your coins gone?”

Elise laughed. “I haven’t touched them yet.”

Mint noticed the short glance Elise gave Amanda, and the Australian’s raised eyebrow.

“When will you be shooting the next task?” Teresa asked.

“I think at the French Open,” Chili said excitedly.

Mint sighed. Since Chili had been taking part in the Supersport Channel show she talked about nothing else. Also, she seemed to have forgotten to dislike Elise.

“I’ll get myself something to eat,” Mint informed Chili and with a little nod to Elise and Amanda she left the group and strolled through the crowd. She really didn’t need to listen to Chili’s constant babbling about the show. Did her friend believe she would become famous with a few TV appearances? The Spaniard was still ranked way below Mint. She was just lucky to have been chosen to participate in the video shoots.

Mint went past the buffet, grabbed a couple of canapés and retreated to a place on a little terrace from where she could overlook the rooftop. Down in the garden, the other players were kicking their heels. Standing in midst a group of male tennis players, Mint spotted Luella. Next to her was Rafael, dutifully carrying her handbag.

But then Mint paused. She also saw the other Galloway twin coming through the entrance. Gabriella smiled broadly, pranced down the steps and walked towards Elise, Amanda and Chili who greeted her enthusiastically. She wore a long slim-

fitting red dress with very high heels. She looked stunning, Mint had to admit. Walking with so much verve, one could almost mistake her for Luella.

“Confusing,” Mint whispered to herself, only to laugh out loud. A familiar face appeared behind a palm trunk. Sasha! The Czech was observing Gabriella with the same look Mint had seen before in the photos she kept on her laptop – full of longing and adoration. But then the Czech paused and turned her head as Lulu’s bright laughter rang through the garden. Sasha looked from Lulu to Gabriella and then to Lulu again. Mint chuckled. Sasha was confused, too. And clearly she still had a thing for the Galloways.

Mint popped the last scampi into her mouth and decided to check the spa, as she hadn’t had time yet to pay it a visit. She went down to the pool and walked to the very end where the water disappeared inside a little grotto that connected the outside area with the pool inside. Using the narrow pathway by the wall, she crouched and stepped inside the grotto. From under the water, green and blue lights threw reflections onto the stone walls. It wouldn’t have surprised Mint if a mermaid passed by and splashed her with her tail.

She grinned at the thought but then held her breath. Underwater a silhouette sped by. Startled by the sudden appearance, Mint stepped back and pressed her body against the wall. What was that? She stared into the green and blue cave. Somebody was diving through the whole grotto basin. At the end of the pool the figure finally burst through the surface with a loud gasp for air.

It was Polly Duke. In the mysteriously glinting light, Polly’s hair resembled disheveled seaweed and her body seemed to have grown scales. She turned around, took a deep breath and dove under the surface again. With amazement Mint watched her swim by to the other end. Again, Polly turned around without noticing Mint, and dove into the green and blue waves once more. She was obviously testing how long and how often she could hold her breath while diving through the basin.

Polly was pretty cool, Mint thought. A tomboy with short, glistening seaweed hair. A merboy, not a mermaid. Mint smiled at the thought.

Quietly crouching against the wall, Mint followed the spectacle for a while until she felt awkward watching someone who obviously assumed she was unobserved.

When Polly went underwater again, she quickly slipped out of the grotto and back to the rooftop garden. But all of a sudden, the sound of chit-chat and giggles, and the rattling of cutlery and music felt wrong. It was too loud and too bright here. Why had she left the magic grotto with the beautiful merboy?

“There you are!” a voice called behind her. Hopping over a low flowering hedge, Chili came towards her. “Where have you been?”

“Just had a bite,” Mint said.

“You need to come with me,” Chili said with a grin. “We are invited to a private party with Michelle.”

Mint shook her head. “You forgot that I have an early match tomorrow. No party for me tonight.”

Chili looked at her with big eyes. “Are you kidding? It’s a private party. With Boom Boom.”

“I’m sure it will be great,” Mint said quietly. She needed to get out of the noisiness. Leaving her flabbergasted friend in the middle of the lawn, she made her way to the exit.

“Hurry up!” Tom said impatiently and gestured Ted to follow him. They rushed down the fire staircase and Tom explained what had happened.

“I saw Anastasia,” he panted, taking two steps at once. “I’m on the balcony to take a last look at the skyline when I see a movement down in the garden. A couple of girls are swimming in the pool and then vanish inside the spa cave, and suddenly I see Anastasia coming through the garden, walking straight towards the pool.”

“So?” Ted asked while running after Tom. “Perhaps she wanted to take a late-night swim, too?”

“No, she didn’t,” Tom retorted. “I bumped into her when she left the player party and thought it would be a good idea to engage her in a conversation and find out a little bit about her relationship with the girls, but she kept the chat very short, claiming she wanted to go to bed early.”

Ted sighed and Tom shot him an impatient glance. Anastasia was the only lead they had so far and even though it was hard to believe that she was a dangerous psychopath, who knew what was going on inside her head?

“And then I see her sneaking through the garden,” Tom continued. “She was clearly following the other players. She is stalking them, Ted.”

“Wait, a couple of weeks ago you said the same about Sasha. That she was stalking the Galloways,” Ted voiced his doubts but Tom didn’t listen. He pushed open the door to the rooftop veranda and hurried down to the pool.

“I’m sure she followed them inside the grotto,” Tom whispered.

He got down on his knees and elbows and began crawling along the basin into the dark cave with Ted close on his heels. Suddenly Tom stopped, causing Ted to bump into him. Anastasia was swimming through the basin towards the other girls who hung onto the pool’s edge and treaded water. In the blue and green darkness Tom could make out Michelle’s graceful black body and the heads of two younger players, Chili and Teresa. When Anastasia was halfway through the pool, they saw her and waved.

“Stalking, my ass!” Ted hissed behind him. “She was just late for the pool party.”

Michelle glided into the water and with a couple of strokes she swam towards Anastasia in the middle of the pool. Ted and Tom crouched behind a couple of fake rocks as Michelle came closer, but the Dutch player was only focused on the chair umpire.

“Oh,” Ted and Tom whispered in unison as Michelle and Anastasia kissed.

Tom turned to his boyfriend. "Michelle is a lezzer?"

Ted nodded. "Didn't you know?"

Tom shook his head.

"She used to beard with Marc Lewinski, who worked as her hitting partner," Ted explained. "I had a brief affair with him a couple of years back, but he's not back on tour with her again as she's only playing doubles this year."

The two girls retreated into a small cave and Ted and Tom were only able to make out their moving bodies.

"I think they are having sex!"

"No, I don't think so. I can see their hands," Tom mumbled.

"Good point." Ted chuckled. "Imagine a lesbian breaking both her hands. Poor girls. They really lack a little something."

"They compensate for it with other talents," Tom grinned and pointed to Michelle who slowly kissed Anastasia's neck, working her way down until she vanished under the surface.

"Oh my god. She's giving her an underwater blowjob."

"I don't think they call it a blowjob."

"Oh, shut up Mister Smartass who knows everything about lezzie sex!" Ted hissed, then tugged Tom's pants. "Let's get out of here."

"We can't," Tom said contritely. Chili and Teresa had begun to swim laps through the pool, coming dangerously close to the two hiding guys. They would have to wait for the girls to leave the grotto.

"I wish –," Tom whispered. He wished he had his camera with him so he could take a few pictures. He would have loved the thrill of it. But then he remembered that this was how the trouble had started in the first place – with the pictures, *30 Love* and the illusory idea that all the gay players should come out at the same time.

Lying there they decided that it was still more interesting to observe Michelle and Anastasia making out than Chili and Mint swimming laps, but after a while Ted couldn't help but yawn.

"I can't believe we are watching lesbians having sex. Who would do this?"

Tom grinned. "Straight guys. We are doing something totally straight."

They looked at each other. "We can't have that," they both said and started kissing.

Sitting at the hotel room desk, Morgana Doré had been working intensively for two hours on her doctoral thesis, right now editing a chapter that was focusing on several *Tennis Nurse* characters and their counterparts in the real world. So far Morgana had successfully detected and outlined hints of who was who in the *Tennis Nurse* universe.

In the last few weeks Morgana had summoned dozens of articles from the archives of tennis magazines which had been popular in the 1990s. In the evenings she had found parallels between the playing style of the players, important matches and events off-court, and scenes in several old *Tennis Nurse* novels.

Monica Jordan's character was the Swedish player, Jordana Munk. If you knew what you were looking for, the connections between some players and the characters were easy to make. As in Monica's case, the names even resembled each other, but there was also an underlying, hidden reference to the real person behind the protagonist's name.

Munk was Swedish for monk. Not only did the English word resemble Monica's given name, it also was a very good description of the impression she had made, at least in the first years of her career. A very early piece had been written about Monica by tennis journalist Hardy Linz, who first had laid eyes on the promising player in mid-1996. Morgana had quoted the relevant text passages in her thesis.

"A designation of grim zealotness accompanies the young player [...] Unseen before in the all-white tennis landscape, Miss Jordan makes it a habit of taking the court in a shabby hooded sweater, earning her warnings from the referees, which she shrugs off, and giving herself the graceless aura of a mirthless monk. [...] She hardly ever smiles."

When she had come across the article Morgana had almost screamed out loud. Mirthless monk. The connection was right there! The first *Tennis Nurse* novel was written a year after the article had been published and Monica Jordan had left her first marks on the tour. This could only mean – Morgana concluded – that the *Tennis Nurse* writer had read Hardy Linz’s article and had used the image to create the name for the character modeled after Monica.

But she didn’t want to jump to conclusions in her argumentation. All this work was merely a foundation. The centerpiece of her dissertation would be an interview with the author – if Morgana should ever find her. But why not? She was getting closer and closer to the core of the *Tennis Nurse* world and to everyone involved in it.

Too bad there was still so much work to do, Morgana thought leaning over the table. She was completing footnotes with page numbers and author names – a nuisance, but a necessary part of the process.

The knock on the door made her jump.

“*Mon Dieu!*”

Morgana pushed the laptop away from her a little and got up. These young kids and their *Tennis Nurse* obsession! She really could relate to the addiction but it was almost midnight. Morgana shook her head as she walked to the door. Who had complained about the *Tennis Nurse* trading dinner going too late? Why couldn’t they better foresee when they would finish their novel and need a new one? It wasn’t that hard to figure out how long a novel would last, was it?

Ripping the door open she was ready to give a lengthy lecture to whoever it was who dared to bother her this late at night. But all her anger subsided at the sight of her visitor. It was a player she had least expected. It was a player she had read about and, after researching, had identified as the *Tennis Nurse* character named Daytona Black.

“*Bonsoir, Morgana,*” Bernadette said with an enigmatic smile. “*Je peux entrer?*”

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