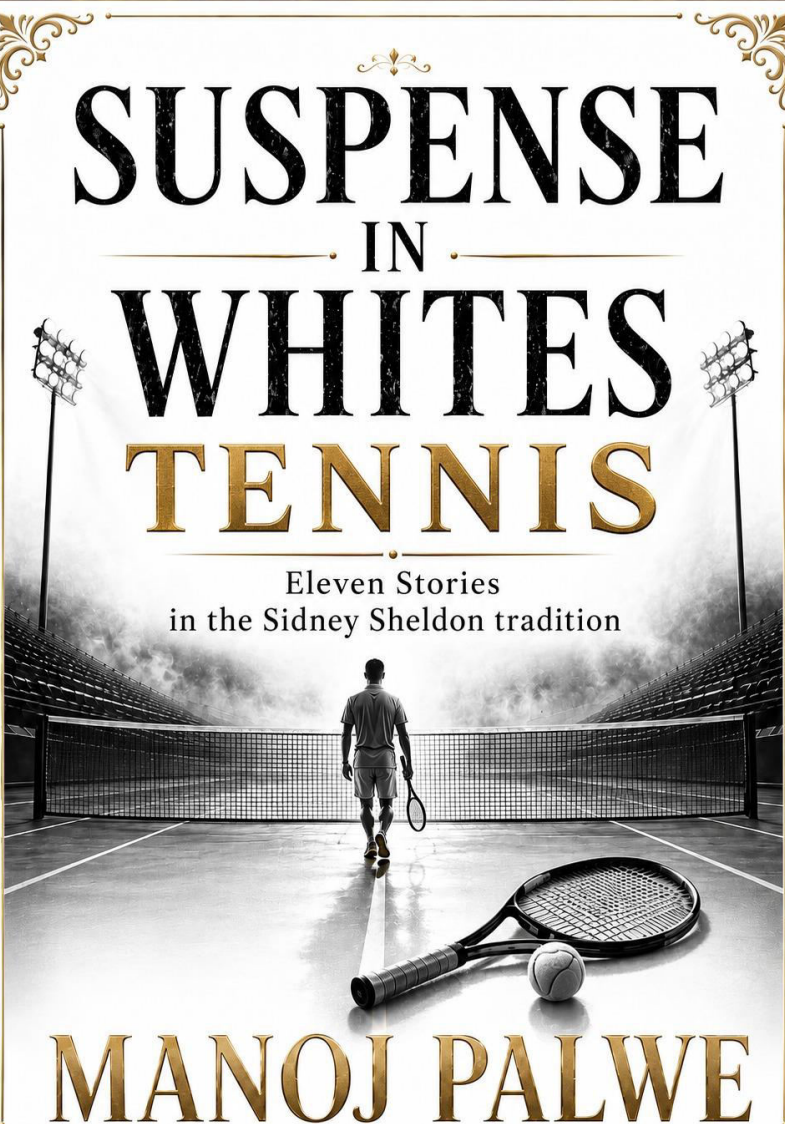


SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories



SUSPENSE
IN
WHITES
TENNIS

Eleven Stories
in the Sidney Sheldon tradition

MANOJ PALWE

Senior Immigration Consultant
🌐 dreamvisas.com

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MANOJ PALWE

May 2026

About the Author

Manoj Palwe knows that the most dangerous deceptions always happen inside a closed system.

For over two decades, he has operated at the highest levels of global immigration law. As a Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultant (RCIC R422575), a CAPIC Fellow (R11592), and President of Taurus Infotek (Dreamvisas) in Canada and India, his career has been defined by reading the fine print, analyzing complex international frameworks, and understanding how rules are enforced—and how they are broken.

Behind this sharp analytical mind is a man raised on the masterpieces of suspense. As an avid, lifelong reader who spent decades devouring the works of Sidney Sheldon, Dick Francis, and Frederick Forsyth, Manoj became obsessed with the mechanics of the perfect plot twist.

He paired this literary obsession with a boundless, high-energy love for the arena. A truly energetic sports enthusiast, Manoj has spent over fifty years keenly following, analyzing, and actively playing almost every single sport featured in his universe—from tennis and cricket to hockey and football (gladly leaving the high-speed cockpits of motorsport to the professionals). He knows the physical toll, the locker-room dynamics, and the psychological grit of these games firsthand.

In his groundbreaking 12-book series, *Clean Sport*, *Dirty Games*, he fuses his professional mastery of institutional systems, his athletic background, and classic page-turning thriller structures. The result is a premium collection of technical, high-stakes suspense thrillers that expose the gritty reality behind the glamorous facade of elite sports. When Manoj writes a cliffhanger, he isn't just inventing fiction—he's writing from a lifetime of knowing exactly how the world, the game, and a great book work.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES *TENNIS*

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SUSPENSE IN WHITES

TENNIS

Eleven Stories

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organisations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual events, or actual organisations is entirely coincidental.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have, for as long as I can remember, loved two things equally and in roughly the same way: the literature of suspense, and the ritual of the white-flannelled game.

Sidney Sheldon taught a generation of readers that a thriller could begin on any continent, in any drawing room, with any kind of woman — provided she was clever, beautiful, and inadequately accounted for by the men around her. The white-flannelled games, in their own way, do the same. A Grand Slam final runs five sets. There are scoreboards, cameras, polite handshakes, and an entire economy of secrets running beneath.

These eleven stories are an experiment in placing the one tradition inside the other. All eleven are set against the architecture of tennis — the Centre Court at Wimbledon, the Monte Carlo terrace, Roland-Garros at midnight, the Melbourne heat, the Flushing Meadows lights, the Indian Wells desert, the Dubai players' lounge, a Stockholm doubles tie, the Cincinnati qualifier draw, the Paris Olympic court, and the Shanghai Masters press room. All eleven are entirely fiction. The crimes are imagined. The people are imagined. The audit trails, the consortiums, the brigadiers, the umpires, the wives, the daughters, are all imagined.

A word of reassurance is owed here, because tennis is a small world and these stories run close to its real shapes — a former world number one, a returning player who vanished, a wife on the cover of a magazine, a chair umpire at a Grand Slam final. So let me be plain. Every player in this book is invented. Every coach, spouse, official, fixer, and intelligence officer is invented. No story here is a roman-à-clef; none is a coded account of any real champion, any real

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disappearance, any real marriage, any real match. Where a story is clearly in conversation with a real issue — a player silenced, a sport used to move money, an academy that failed to protect a child — it engages the issue, never a real individual, and any resemblance between a character here and an actual person, living or dead, is coincidence and nothing more.

What is not imagined is the central proposition. Wherever very large amounts of money cross very many borders in front of very large crowds, there is always — and there has always been — a second match being played, in a quieter language, on a darker court, by people the cameras never quite catch.

These are stories of those people.

And one last word on what is true. Tennis is full of real ground that bears looking at: an individual sport in which a young woman travels the world more or less alone, sponsored by people she does not choose and cannot easily refuse; wildcards and invitations that are never only about tennis; academies entrusted with children; a tour that crosses every border on earth, which has always made it useful to people whose interest is not the tennis. I have taken these real features of the game — the silenced player, the arranged marriage, the academy that looked away, the match that was never only a match — and asked, of each, the only question a suspense writer ever really asks: what if there were something inside it that was never meant to be found? Everything else I made up. The courts are real. The secrets are mine.

I hope you enjoy them. I hope, more, that they remind you why we never quite take our eyes off the ball.

— Manoj Palwe Pune, 2026

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STORY 1

THE WIMBLEDON WIFE

*She had given up her career for him. She had not given up her
sense of arithmetic.*



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1

The day before the quarter-final, Caroline Vauclain stood in her dressing room and counted the pills.

There were thirty-two of them, laid out in four neat rows of eight on the marble countertop, each in its own translucent gelatin capsule, each the colour of pale apricot. She had been told, by the very expensive private oncologist in Lausanne, that twenty-four would be sufficient. She had eight to spare.

She did not, that morning, intend to use any of them. She intended only to know that they were there. They were a door. Every woman, she had decided at the age of nineteen on the locker-room floor of Court Philippe-Chatrier in Paris, deserved a door.

By the time she had finished counting, she had decided, instead, to use the eight spare ones on her husband.

2

Caroline was thirty-eight. She had married Marcus Vauclain at twenty-two, in the summer she had been ranked twelve in the world, in a ceremony at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Reims that Paris Match had spent four pages photographing.

She had retired from professional tennis the day she had married him. She had been told, gently, in the morning room of his agent's flat in the Avenue Montaigne, that the marriage required a clear narrative. The narrative did not include a wife with her own ranking. Marcus was, the agent had explained, on the brink of a particular kind of stardom that required, like all serious stardoms, a single

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protagonist. Caroline would be, of course, the most adored wife in tennis.

Caroline had laughed. She had said, “How extraordinary.” She had then signed the contract.

Fifteen years later she had two children, a charity for girls in the banlieues, a household staff of nineteen, a magazine column, a foundation board seat at the Louvre, and — she had been told, the previous Sunday afternoon in a wood-panelled consulting room in Lausanne — terminal pancreatic cancer.

Stage four. Six months at the outside. The oncologist had been kind. He had taken both her hands in his. He had recommended, gently, that she spend at least one month of those six in a small clinic he could personally arrange, in a chalet outside Gstaad, where the palliative care was discreet and the cuisine excellent and the staff entirely committed to her dignity.

She had nodded. She had thanked him. She had walked out into the Swiss afternoon.

She had then gone to a small pharmacy on the rue Centrale where, in another name, she had asked the proprietor, a tired Algerian woman of about sixty, whether she might run a urine sample for two specific markers. The proprietor had not asked questions. The proprietor had run the test that evening.

Caroline had collected the results on the Wednesday afternoon.

She did not have cancer. She did not, on the markers tested, have any indication of cancer whatever.

3

She did not, immediately, tell her husband. She did not tell her doctor. She did not tell the agent. She did not tell her sister in Annecy.

She did, on the Friday morning, hire a private investigator.

She had used the firm once before, four years earlier, in a small matter concerning a tabloid. The firm was Swiss, expensive, and as discreet as the law permitted. The investigator she had requested was a woman of about fifty named Elke Brunner, who wore unremarkable grey suits and who had once been, Caroline had been told over a quiet lunch in Geneva, the chief of station of an intelligence service.

Elke listened. Elke asked four questions. Elke quoted a fee. Caroline wrote a cheque.

Six days later, on the Thursday afternoon before the Wimbledon quarter-final, Elke arrived at the rented villa on Wimbledon Common with a small black case and a face like a closed door.

She set the case down on Caroline's dressing table. She opened it. Inside were forty-three documents.

“Caroline,” she said, “you need to sit down.”

4

There were three principal facts.

The first was that Marcus, for nine years, had been transferring assets, in small and untraceable instalments, into a trust controlled by a young Argentine woman named Soledad Vasquez whom Caroline had met once, briefly, at a charity gala in Buenos Aires in

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2019. The trust held, at the most recent valuation, approximately one hundred and forty million Swiss francs. It was registered in Liechtenstein.

The second was that the trust documents had been notarised by Caroline's brother. He had received, in the same period, just over four million Swiss francs in consulting fees from a Geneva law firm whose principal client was Soledad Vasquez.

The third was that the oncologist in Lausanne was on the payroll. The pills in Caroline's dressing room were placebos. The diagnosis was a fabrication. The plan, Elke explained, calmly, was to persuade Caroline into the small clinic outside Gstaad, where, three months after Wimbledon, she would be quietly euthanised by a Swiss doctor whose licence had been suspended in 2019 and who had, since, found other patrons. The death would be certified as natural, the body cremated within forty-eight hours, the inheritance executed with great speed, and the public mourning of Marcus Vauclain would, the agent had no doubt, sell several books.

“Who is running it,” Caroline asked.

“A man you have never heard of,” Elke said. “He is based in Monaco. His name is Étienne Brévaud. He is the principal fixer to the agent. He has, in the past eleven years, arranged the marriage, the press strategy, the trust, and now the diagnosis.”

Caroline did not weep. She had not wept on the locker-room floor at nineteen. She did not weep now.

She thanked Elke. She paid the rest of the fee in cash. She walked out into the garden, sat in a teak chair beneath the wisteria, and listened to her seven-year-old son, on the lawn, ask the nanny, in his very

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careful English, why Daddy's friend kept giving Maman special vitamins from a brown bag.

5

Caroline went to Wimbledon on the Wednesday in a cream Chanel suit and a wide-brimmed hat. She sat in the players' box. She kissed her husband on both cheeks before he walked out onto Centre Court. She waved to the cameras.

Between the second and third sets, she went, alone, to the BBC commentary box, where an old friend, a former British number one turned broadcaster named Jane Allardyce, was working between rotations.

Jane looked up. Jane had known Caroline since they had both been eighteen, on a Federation Cup weekend in Eastbourne.

Caroline slid a small envelope across the desk.

“What is this,” Jane said.

“It is,” Caroline said, “a USB drive, a notarised affidavit, and the home addresses of four people. If anything happens to me or to my children between this moment and Sunday morning, you will, please, send the second envelope which is at present lodged with a London solicitor whose card is in this one, to Geneviève Marchais at Le Monde. You will, alternatively, on Sunday morning at ten o'clock, walk this envelope directly into the office of the editor of The Times.”

Jane looked at her for a long moment.

“Caroline. Are you alright.”

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“I have never,” Caroline said, “been more alright.”

She walked back to the players' box. Marcus won in four sets. She kissed him on both cheeks again. She told him she was tired and would go home early. She rode back to Wimbledon Common in the chauffeured car.

6

In the car, she opened the brown bag of vitamins that lived, by Marcus's standing instruction, in the back seat pocket. She took out the eight pills she had decanted that morning from the supply on her dressing-room counter, and she replaced them with eight identical-looking pills she had purchased, in another name, at a pharmacy in Knightsbridge.

The replacement pills were not placebos.

They were a fast-acting beta-blocker that, in combination with the medication her husband had been taking for nine years for an old back injury, would induce, within approximately ninety minutes of ingestion, a fatal arrhythmia indistinguishable, in any standard post-mortem screen, from natural cardiac failure.

She had asked her cousin, a cardiology consultant at the Pitié-Salpêtrière in Paris, a hypothetical question over lunch in March. He had answered her, frankly, in the manner of someone who had not, in twenty years, found his cousin's hypotheticals to be anything other than that.

Caroline watched Marcus take the first one with his post-match protein shake at half past nine.

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She kissed him goodnight at eleven.

He died at twelve forty-seven.

7

The autopsy, conducted on the Friday morning by a coroner who happened to be a personal friend of the Vauclain family of forty years' standing, returned a verdict of natural causes. The press conference, held by the coroner on the Friday afternoon, was attended by two hundred and ninety journalists. The world wept.

The will was read three weeks later, in a small panelled office in Geneva, by a notary who had served the family for two generations.

Soledad Vasquez received nothing. Caroline's brother received nothing.

The trust documents Caroline had photocopied the previous Sunday turned out, in fact, to have been forgeries. The Liechtenstein trust did not exist; the transfers had never happened; the four million in her brother's account had never come from any law firm. The whole structure had been theatre, expensively staged by Étienne Brévaud, for purposes Caroline could not yet identify.

The day after the funeral, Caroline received a single white rose, no card, delivered to her door on Wimbledon Common. Inside the cellophane was a Lausanne medical report. Her own. Dated the previous Friday.

The report was from a different laboratory than the Algerian woman's pharmacy. It was, on three independent biomarkers, a definitive diagnosis. Stage four pancreatic carcinoma, with hepatic and

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peritoneal metastases. Six months at the outside. The signature was that of a senior pathologist of impeccable reputation. The bloods had been drawn, the report indicated, from a sample obtained without Caroline's knowledge at a charity ball in May.

She sat on the white silk sofa in her morning room. She read the report twice. She set it down on the side table.

Then, very slowly, she began to laugh.

She had won the match. She had not, it appeared, won the tournament.

8

Six weeks later, on a clear October morning, a long black car drew up at the gate of the villa on Wimbledon Common. The man who got out was sixty-two, tall, slightly stooped, in a charcoal-grey overcoat. He had narrow eyes and a face like a closed book.

He was admitted to the morning room. He bowed slightly. He did not extend his hand.

“Madame Vauclain. I am Étienne Brévaud.”

“Yes,” Caroline said. “I know.”

“I have come,” Brévaud said, “to make you an offer.”

“Please sit down.”

He sat. He took a small silver case from his inside pocket. He opened it. He laid a single business card on the low marble table between them.

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“The diagnosis,” he said, “is real. The cancer is real. You have, at the outside, four months from this morning. The clinic outside Gstaad is, however, also real. The doctor at the clinic is, despite his suspended licence, a man of considerable skill. There is, at present, in his care, an Israeli oncological protocol that is not, technically, legal anywhere in the European Union. The protocol has, in the small private series, produced complete remissions in the cancer you have. The chance is approximately one in five.”

Caroline did not move. For one moment, beneath the stillness she had spent nineteen years perfecting, something in her went very cold and very far away. She had built the whole of the last fortnight on a single fact she had verified herself, in another name, with her own urine on a tired Algerian woman's bench: that she was well. That the door was hers to keep shut. She had killed her husband as a well woman correcting an injustice, not as a dying one buying time. And now this stooped stranger was telling her, in the unhurried voice of a man reading a weather report, that the lie had been wrapped around a truth all along — that they had drawn her blood at a charity ball and known, before she did, the shape of her own ending. She felt the floor of it open. She did not let it show. She had learned, on a locker-room floor at nineteen, that the only thing worse than being afraid was being seen to be.

“In exchange,” she said.

“In exchange,” Brévaud said, “you will, when I require it, in the coming twelve months, sign three documents. I shall not, until the day I require them, tell you what the documents are.”

She looked at him for a long time.

Then she said, very gently, “Mr. Brévaud. You killed my husband.”

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“No, madame. You killed your husband. You are, by the way, alone in this world in possession of that knowledge.”

“My husband,” Caroline said, “killed me first.”

“Yes, madame. He did.”

She picked up the card. She held it in both hands.

She thought about her seven-year-old son, on the lawn, asking the nanny about the brown bag. She thought about Court Philippe-Chatrier at nineteen.

She thought about the door.

9

She drove herself to Gstaad on the following Tuesday. She told her children she was attending a wellness retreat. She told her sister she was taking some time. She told her brother nothing.

On the Wednesday, in the small panelled office outside Gstaad, she received the first infusion.

On the Friday, she signed the first document. It was a power of attorney. She did not, when she signed it, read it.

On the Sunday, the Algerian pharmacist on the rue Centrale received an envelope containing two hundred thousand Swiss francs in cash, and a single typewritten line: For the daughter you did not, in 1973, abort.

On the Monday, Étienne Brévaud, on his morning walk along the Promenade in Monaco, was struck by a delivery van travelling at

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considerable speed, dragged thirty metres, and certified dead at the scene.

On the Tuesday, in the small office in Gstaad, Caroline Vauclain looked up at the doctor and asked, quietly, whether the second infusion might be brought forward by twenty-four hours.

The doctor said it could.

She had not, after all, given up her sense of arithmetic.



STORY 2

THE MATCH-FIXER'S DAUGHTER

He had taught her to play. He had not taught her everything.



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1

The voice on the phone was male, English-accented, and very polite. It told Mira Solokov that her father had been match-fixing for thirty-one years. It told her that he had been match-fixing on the day she was born. It told her that he was about to be arrested in Monte Carlo, on the first morning of the clay season, unless she, personally, lost her first-round match in straight sets without dropping more than three games.

Then it told her that she had ninety-six hours to decide.

Mira hung up.

She sat on the edge of her hotel bed in Stuttgart and looked at her phone for a long time. The bedside clock said ten past nine in the evening. The room smelled faintly of the lemon polish the cleaners had used that morning. Outside, on the Königstrasse, a tram passed with a bell.

Then she went to the lobby, asked the concierge for the address of the nearest Catholic church, walked there in the rain, and made her first confession in eleven years.

2

Mira Solokov was twenty-one. She was, the previous Monday, ranked number nine in the world. She was an American citizen with a Russian father and a French mother. She had been born in Boca Raton, Florida, in a private hospital that had once treated three United States presidents. She had a boyfriend named Daniel who played the cello and who was, that week, in Berlin. She had a coach

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of fourteen years named Anton Petrenko, who was not Russian but Belarusian, and who had taught her, from the age of four, the particular fast, flat forehand that had made her famous.

Her father was Yuri Solokov. He was sixty-three. He was, on paper, a tennis academy proprietor based in southern Florida. He had defected from the Soviet Union at twenty-four with a tennis racquet and ninety dollars sewn into the lining of his coat. He had built, in the suburbs of Boca Raton, the most successful tennis academy in the southern United States. He had coached three Wimbledon finalists and one Australian Open champion. He had, since the age of four, coached Mira every weekday morning at six in the small private court behind the family bungalow.

He was a small, quiet, sad-eyed man who read Chekhov in the evenings and who, on Mira's tenth birthday, had given her a small silver crucifix on a chain that she still wore.

She thought of him, sitting on the church step in the Stuttgart rain, the way she always thought of him: on the small private court behind the Boca Raton bungalow, at six in the morning, the Florida light still grey and the sprinklers ticking on the next lawn over. She had been six. She had served into the net eleven times in a row and on the eleventh she had thrown her racquet, and her father had not shouted — he never shouted — he had simply walked the length of the court, picked the racquet up, knelt in front of her so his sad eyes were level with hers, and said, in his soft accented English, 'Mira. The net does not hate you. The net is not even thinking about you. The net is the only honest thing on this court. Everything else will lie to you one day — the crowd, the umpire, the men in suits. The net will never lie. So we do not get angry at the net. We learn it.' Then he had stood behind her, folded his big quiet hands over her small ones on the grip, and

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tossed the ball, and together they had served it clean over the honest net and into the corner. She had been serving it into that corner ever since. She had never, once, suspected that the man teaching her not to be lied to had been, every morning of her life, the largest lie in the house.

She did not, in the church in Stuttgart, tell the priest what she had decided. She had not, in the church in Stuttgart, decided.

She told the priest, instead, about Daniel. She told him she had not been to confession in eleven years. She told him she did not know what to believe. The priest, an old German man with very gentle eyes, listened. He told her, in faintly accented English, that she should pray. He told her, also, that she should ring her mother.

3

She did not ring her mother. She flew to Monte Carlo on the Saturday morning. She practised on the Tuesday afternoon under the eye of Anton Petrenko, who watched her hit forehands for twenty minutes and then said, in his soft, dry voice, “Something is wrong, Mira.”

“I am tired,” she said.

“You are not tired,” Anton said.

He did not press her. He never pressed her. He had, in seventeen years, never raised his voice.

On the Wednesday morning, she walked onto Court Rainier III at noon for her first-round match. She was the heavy favourite. Her opponent was a qualifier ranked one hundred and forty-eighth, a

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sweet Czech teenager named Tereza Novakova who had never been past the second round of a Grand Slam.

Mira won the first set 6-0 in nineteen minutes.

She lost the second 4-6, on purpose, with three deliberate double-faults and a forehand into the second row that the crowd took for nerves.

She walked to her chair at the change of ends and looked, for the first time in the match, into the players' box.

Her father was not there.

4

She won the third set 6-3.

She had, in the end, not done what the voice had asked.

She did not see her father at the post-match press conference. She did not see him in the practice corridor. She did not see him at the players' restaurant.

At eleven that night, the Monégasque police rang her hotel room and asked her, very courteously, whether she might come to the underground parking garage of the Hôtel de Paris.

Her father had been beaten to death with a tennis racquet.

Her racquet. The Wilson she had used in the first set. The grip had been wiped. The racquet, when she identified it on a table under a fluorescent light, was completely intact except for the central string bed, which had been broken in a single, precise place.

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Mira did not faint. She did not weep. She gave a statement in two languages, signed a French police form she did not read, and rode back to the hotel in a Monégasque police car at three in the morning. She rang her mother in Paris from the back seat.

Her mother arrived at five a.m.

Her mother, when she walked into the suite at the Hôtel de Paris, did not embrace her. She set down her overnight bag. She poured herself a glass of mineral water. She sat down opposite Mira on the small cream sofa. She crossed her legs.

“Darling,” she said, “I am going to tell you everything.”

5

Yuri Solokov had not been a defector. He had been, in 1984 as in 2026, an officer of an organisation that had, in his lifetime, gone by three different names but had always done the same work. He had been assigned to a long-duration cover in the United States in 1984. He had married Mira's mother in 1988. Mira's mother had, of course, known. Mira's mother had, since the year before her daughter's birth, been an officer of the same service.

“And me,” Mira said.

“You, darling, were not, at first, intended for the family business. Your father was very firm. You were to be exactly what you appear to be. An American tennis player.”

“At first.”

Her mother sighed.

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“You are, darling, very, very good. The academy, of course, was not, in any usual sense, a tennis academy. The academy was a recruiting station. Half the prize money you have won, half the prize money your father's other students have won, has been routed through a sequence of accounts that, at the far end, funds operations I have spent twenty years pretending not to know about. The voice on the phone in Stuttgart was telling you the truth. Your father has been match-fixing for thirty-one years.”

“Then why was he killed?”

Her mother was silent for a moment.

“Your father was killed,” she said, “because three days ago, in a hotel in Frankfurt, your father met his handler from Moscow and told him that he was, finally, going to defect for real. He was going to take you with him. He was going to publish, in a Frankfurt newspaper, in his own name, a memoir of thirty-one years.”

“Why now.”

Her mother looked at her hands.

“Because of Daniel,” she said. “Because, darling, you were going to marry the boy from Berlin, and your father had decided, finally, that he could no longer permit his daughter to enter a marriage with a German cellist while being, herself, the unwitting daughter of a Russian intelligence officer. He had decided that he would, at last, do one thing well.”

Mira stared at her mother.

“Did you know.”

“Of course I knew, darling. I begged him not to do it.”

6

Mira played her second-round match the next day. She won.

She played her third round the day after. She won.

She did not weep. She did not speak to her mother. She did not, between matches, leave her hotel room. Anton Petrenko sat in the players' box at every match in a small, dark grey suit, his face quite still, and at the change of ends he raised one finger, very briefly, as he had done a thousand times when she was a child on a Florida court. It meant the same thing it had always meant. Well played. Now play the next point.

On the morning of the quarter-final, Mira had her first conversation with the man whose voice she had heard on the phone in Stuttgart.

He met her in a small bistro in Beaulieu-sur-Mer, a town along the coast from Monte Carlo. He was English. He was forty-six. He had grey eyes and a faintly raffish smile. He ordered an espresso. He did not introduce himself.

“Miss Solokov,” he said, “I am sorry about your father.”

“Are you,” she said.

“I am. He was a colleague.”

She looked at him.

“I worked,” he said, “for the same service your father was about to defect to. I have been, since 1996, his case officer.”

Mira set down her cup.

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“He had asked us,” the Englishman went on, “to look after you in the event of his death. He did not, of course, expect his death to occur in a parking garage at the Hôtel de Paris. He had, however, made arrangements.”

“What arrangements.”

“The men who killed him,” the Englishman said, “are at this moment on a yacht in the harbour at Antibes. They will, if you say yes, be dealt with very quietly within forty-eight hours. No one — not the press, not the WTA, not your coach or your boyfriend or your mother — will ever know.”

“And the cost.”

“The cost,” he said, “is that you will, for the rest of your career, occasionally answer phone calls from me. You will not be asked to fix matches. You will be asked to attend dinners, to accept invitations to particular yachts, to wear particular pieces of jewellery, and, once or twice, to lose particular tournaments. In exchange, you will continue, very visibly, to win the others.”

He smiled.

“It is, Miss Solokov, the offer your father was, three days ago, in the process of refusing on your behalf. It is, alas, no longer an offer he is in a position to refuse.”

7

Mira looked out at the harbour. She thought about Daniel, in Berlin, at that moment in a rehearsal room, working through a passage of Bach he had been working through for weeks.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

She made herself, looking at the water, lay the pieces out in order, because her father had taught her that a player who cannot name the court she is standing on has already lost. There were two services, and they were not the same. There was the one her father had truly served for thirty-one years — the one in Moscow, the one whose handler he had met in Frankfurt, the one her mother had also served, the one that had turned a Boca Raton academy into a recruiting station and her prize money into a pipeline. And there was the one across the table from her now: the Englishman's service, in the West, the one her father had decided, three days before he died, to defect to — to come in, to confess, to take her out clean. Her father had been trying to cross from the first to the second. He had been killed before he could finish the crossing. And the man who had stopped him was not either service's faceless soldier; it was Anton, who held one finger up at the change of ends, who had stood behind her exactly as her father had, who had been — she saw it now, whole — her father's first recruit, then his successor, then, since she was four years old, the patient officer running her. Three men, then. Her father, who had wanted at the last to tell the truth. The Englishman, who was offering her the truth's price. And Anton, who had killed the truth to keep the network intact. She understood, finally, which court she was standing on.

She thought about her father, and the ninety dollars in his coat, and the four-year-old girl on a hot Florida court who had loved him.

She thought about Anton Petrenko, in the players' box, raising one finger at the change of ends.

She said, very quietly, “Yes.”

The Englishman nodded.

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Eleven Stories

He set down a small white business card on the table. He paid for the espresso. He stood. He extended one hand.

Mira did not, at first, take it. She looked, instead, out at the harbour.

“There is one thing,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Anton Petrenko.”

The Englishman did not move.

“Anton Petrenko,” Mira said, “is also one of you.”

It was not a question.

The Englishman, after a long moment, smiled.

“He was, Miss Solokov, recruited the year before your father. He was, in fact, your father's first agent. He has, since 2009, when your father retired from active work, been the principal officer of the network. He has been, since the morning you were four years old, your case officer.”

“Did my father know?”

“Your father knew. Your father was, in fact, fond of Anton. Anton, however, did not approve of your father's decision in Frankfurt three days ago. Anton was, in fact, the man who, two nights ago, in a parking garage, persuaded your father not to defect.”

Mira did not move. The harbour was very blue in the morning light.

Then she took the Englishman's hand.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

8

Six months later, in the final of the US Open, Mira double-faulted on match point against a player she should have beaten in straight sets. The crowd booed. The commentators were puzzled. Mira walked to her chair, smiled, and waved up at the players' box.

Sitting in the front row, in a navy blazer, in a seat that had been arranged that morning, was a man Mira had been told was dead.

He was thinner. His hair was white. He was wearing the small enamel pin he had always worn on the lapel of his Boca Raton tracksuit. He raised one finger, as he had done a thousand times when she was a child, on a court in Florida.

It meant the same thing it had always meant.

Well played. Now we play again.

She had not, after all, been the one being recruited.



STORY 3

ROLAND GARROS, MIDNIGHT

*The greatest comeback in tennis history. The greatest crime in the
history of the Court.*



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

It was a hundred and ten degrees on Court Philippe-Chatrier at four o'clock in the afternoon, and a heatwave had closed the Métro at Châtelet, and the Seine was at its lowest level in two hundred years.

The Spaniard was two sets down. He was thirty-seven years old. He had been broken twice in the third set. He served at love-thirty on his own delivery, with a thirty-degree wind in his face and a serve that had topped out at one hundred and ninety-six kilometres per hour all afternoon.

His next first serve was a 218-kilometre-per-hour ace down the T.

His next first serve was another.

His next first serve was a third.

From her chair, eight metres above the net, Inès Belarbi, who had been watching tennis for thirty years, knew at once that something was wrong.

She looked at the radar gun. She looked at the player. She looked at the umpires' supervisor, two seats to her left, who was already standing up.

2

Inès Belarbi was thirty-three. She was French Algerian. She had been born in Oran in 1992, raised in Marseilles from the age of four, and trained as a tennis official in the WTA umpires' programme in Antalya from the age of twenty-two. She was the chief umpire of the Women's Tennis Association. She was, today, on the first Sunday in

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

June, the only female chair umpire ever to officiate a men's Grand Slam final.

She was unmarried, childless, and lived in a small fourth-floor flat in the Marais with two cats and an eighty-one-year-old retired schoolteacher mother who came to dinner every Wednesday.

She had been the youngest chair umpire ever appointed to a Grand Slam quarter-final. She had been the first chair umpire to overrule a Hawk-Eye challenge in a Grand Slam semi-final on the strength of a slow-motion review of her own clay mark. She had been, two months ago, in a small office in the Roland-Garros administration building, offered the chair of this final by the tournament director personally, who had told her, gently, that he had decided this was the right year.

The Spaniard finished the over with his fourth consecutive ace.

The crowd, eleven thousand people on Court Philippe-Chatrier, rose to its feet for the first time.

3

He won the match in five sets. He saved seven match points. He hit, in the fifth set, forty-three winners in eleven games. He served, in the final game, at speeds the radar gun had never read from him, in a career of nineteen Grand Slams, in any previous match.

The crowd, who had paid up to nine thousand euros for a ticket, rose to its feet at the end and stayed there for eight minutes.

Inès Belarbi, at the change of ends after the deciding game, called the player to the chair. The player, who had walked off Court Philippe-Chatrier seven times in his career as a Grand Slam champion, smiled

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

up at her and asked, in his soft Mallorcan Spanish, whether she had enjoyed the match.

“Tremendously,” she said.

She did not sleep that night.

At one in the morning, back in her small flat in the Marais, she watched the third set again on her laptop.

At two, she watched the fourth.

At three, she made a list of every shot the Spaniard had played that, in her professional judgment, he could not have played.

There were forty-six of them.

By four, she had a hypothesis. By five, she had decided, for the first time in her professional life, to take it to a journalist before she took it to her own federation.

4

The journalist was a woman she had known at the Sorbonne, an investigative reporter at Libération named Camille Aurelles. Camille's husband was a senior anti-doping official at the World Anti-Doping Agency.

Camille listened. Camille's husband, when shown Inès's list at seven that morning at the kitchen table of their small flat in the eleventh arrondissement, looked at it for a long minute and said, “Inès, this is not doping. Doping does not do this. This is something else.”

“What else,” Inès said.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

“I do not know,” Camille's husband said. “But I will, by the end of this week, find out.”

5

He did not find out by the end of the week. He found out by the end of the next.

He came to Inès's flat on a Thursday evening. He sat at her kitchen table. He drank a glass of red wine. He told her, very quietly, that he was leaving in the morning for a long-planned holiday with Camille in the Cévennes. He told her he would be unreachable for ten days. He told her, before he left, that he would tell her one thing.

“The something else,” he said, “is a hidden second muscle. A six-millimetre piezo-electric actuator, surgically embedded along the Spaniard's racquet arm and lower back, that fires on a wireless trigger and makes the real muscle contract faster than it can on its own. It was built in 2018 by a Korean and Israeli consortium to help stroke patients move again. The gain it gives is small — small enough to vanish in any standard biomechanical study. But a small gain, on a man already in the top fifty in the world, is the difference between losing in straight sets and the greatest comeback in the history of the game.”

Inès stared at him.

“How do you know.”

“I have, this week, examined,” he said, “the man who designed it. He is a Korean doctor of biomechanics. He is, at present, recovering from a fall in a private clinic in Tel Aviv. He has been, for some weeks, a great deal more talkative than is, perhaps, prudent.”

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

He set down his wine.

“Inès. You should leave Paris for two weeks.”

“Pourquoi.”

“Because, my dear, the man whose money built the device, and the man whose money paid for the Spaniard's coach to install it, and the man whose money will be lost if anyone publishes a single word of this, is not a man one publishes a single word about. He is also not, technically, a man one easily refuses.”

“His name.”

Camille's husband shook his head.

“I will not, on this kitchen table, in this flat, in your hearing, speak his name. I will say only that he has, since 2016, held the largest single private bet on the men's draw at this year's French Open. The bet was placed, through a chain of intermediaries in seven jurisdictions, at eighty to one. The bet pays out four hundred and forty million dollars.”

He stood.

“I am very fond of you, Inès. Please. Take a holiday.”

6

She did not take a holiday.

On the Tuesday afternoon, while she was eating a small lunch in a brasserie in the Place des Vosges, her flat was entered with no signs of forced entry. The list of forty-six shots, kept in a single notebook on her kitchen table, was removed. Her laptop was untouched. Her

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

cats were unharmed. A single white envelope was left on the kitchen table.

Inside the envelope was a colour photograph of her eighty-one-year-old mother, taken from approximately four metres away, that morning, in the nineteenth arrondissement, on a park bench where her mother, every Tuesday from ten to eleven, fed the pigeons.

Inès Belarbi did not, at first, return to her flat. She turned and walked, calmly, back along the rue de Birague, took the Métro at Bastille, changed at République, and rode the Line 5 north to her mother's flat. She arrived at half past three. She did not tell her mother why she was visiting. She made her mother tea. She helped her mother sort through a box of old photographs.

At seven o'clock she said, "Maman. I should like to take you to Geneva for two weeks. Tomorrow morning."

Her mother looked up.

"Geneva, chérie?"

"Yes."

"And why Geneva?"

"Because, Maman, what I am about to do is, alas, going to put you in a small amount of danger, and I should like very much for that danger to be elsewhere."

Her mother set down a photograph of Inès at six, on a beach in Camargue.

"Chérie," she said, very gently. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what, Maman."

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

Her mother smiled.

“Tell me, chérie, what you have been carrying around for two weeks. The first time you have carried anything around for two weeks since you were nine.”

7

She told her mother. She told her, sitting on the same small sofa on which she had told her mother, at the age of fifteen, about a boy named Yannick. She told her about the third set, and the forty-six shots, and Camille's husband, and the photograph in the envelope.

Her mother listened. Her mother stood. Her mother walked, calmly, to a small chest of drawers in the bedroom. Her mother returned with a single business card, in her hand, that had been in the second drawer of the chest of drawers since 1979.

“Chérie,” she said, “you will, tomorrow morning, ring this man. He is in Geneva. He runs a small firm. He will, on a single sentence from me, agree to look after this for you.”

Inès looked at the card. The card had a name and a Swiss telephone number. The name meant nothing to her.

“Maman. How do you know this man.”

Her mother smiled.

“Chérie,” she said. “There are a great many things you do not know about your mother.”

8

Inès flew to Geneva on the Wednesday morning with her mother and her two cats. She rang the number on the card from a payphone at Cornavin station. She was met, at a small office in the rue du Mont-Blanc, by a slim, grey-haired man of perhaps sixty-eight who introduced himself only as Monsieur Vautier.

Monsieur Vautier listened. Monsieur Vautier asked four questions. Monsieur Vautier quoted a fee.

Inès Belarbi did not have the fee. Inès Belarbi's mother had, in a small private account in Geneva that Inès Belarbi had not, until that morning, known existed, slightly more than the fee.

Monsieur Vautier accepted the cheque. Monsieur Vautier told Inès that she should, for the next twenty-eight days, do precisely nothing.

Eleven days later, the German coach who had installed the device on the Spaniard was found dead in a hotel room in Tel Aviv, a heart attack at fifty-eight. Three days after that, the Spaniard collapsed in the warm-up at Queen's Club, was airlifted to a London hospital, and was discharged thirty-six hours later with a statement that he was retiring with immediate effect for personal reasons. Six weeks after that, on a Tuesday morning in late July, a hedge fund in London ceased trading.

Inès Belarbi was named, in October, the first woman to chair the umpiring committee of the International Tennis Federation. In her acceptance speech, she thanked her mother. She did not mention Roland-Garros.

9

On the morning of her appointment, a parcel arrived at her flat in the Marais. It was small, brown, and bore no return address.

Inside was a single tennis ball, slightly worn, with a date written on it in black marker: the date of the Roland-Garros final. There was also a card. The card said, in three languages, Thank you for your service.

Inès turned the card over.

On the back, in the same hand, was a single line.

“Madame Belarbi, I have, this week, been appointed by a consortium of sovereign wealth funds to a position on the board of a body that, beginning the following January, will oversee the funding of all four tennis Grand Slams. You will, of course, be reporting to me. — Y.”

Inès sat down on the small chair by her front door. She held the card in her left hand and the tennis ball in her right.

Outside the window, on a window-box across the courtyard, an old woman was watering geraniums.

On a clay court, Inès Belarbi had been taught, by an old Spanish coach in Marseilles in 2008, you never see the trap until you have already stepped in it.

She sat with the card and the ball for a long time. Then she did the only thing she had ever known how to do. She set the ball on the windowsill, in the morning light, where she would see it every day. She put the card in the second drawer of her own chest of drawers, beside the space where her mother's card had waited forty-seven years, because she understood now that this was simply how the women in her family kept their accounts — not by refusing the trap,

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

which was not on offer, but by knowing precisely where it lay. And on the first Sunday of the following June, in a hundred-degree heat, Inès Belarbi climbed the small steel ladder to the chair, eight metres above the net, and looked down at two players and a radar gun and a man in a private box she now reported to, and she called the match the way she had always called it: every line, every let, every mark in the clay, exactly as she saw it. They had bought the board. They had not, it turned out, bought the chair. She intended to make them regret the distinction for as long as she was permitted to sit in it.



STORY 4

THE MELBOURNE HEAT

A heat rule. A husband. A perfect alibi.



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

The temperature on the court at three in the afternoon was forty-four degrees Celsius. The Australian Open heat rule had been invoked at half past one. The roof of Rod Laver Arena had been closed. The air conditioning had been running at full capacity for two hours.

Greta Halvorsen-Tan was not, at three in the afternoon, on the court. She was, at three in the afternoon, in a suite on the forty-second floor of the Crown Towers, sitting on the edge of a four-poster bed in a navy linen dress she had bought that morning at a small shop in Collins Street, and counting backwards from one hundred.

At one she stood up. She picked up a small overnight bag that had been packed the night before. She picked up a passport that did not, on the photograph page, contain her married name. She walked out of the suite, down the service corridor, into a service elevator she had ridden the previous evening to memorise its route, and down to the loading dock at the rear of the hotel.

A delivery van marked Foster's Brewery was waiting at the loading dock. The driver did not look at her. She climbed into the back of the van and sat on a small wooden stool between two stacks of empty kegs.

The van drove out of the loading dock at twelve minutes past three.

Greta Halvorsen-Tan was, by that point, no longer married, no longer in Australia, and no longer the woman whose photograph had appeared, in February of the previous year, on the cover of *Tatler Asia*.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

2

Greta was thirty-nine. She had been born in a fishing village two hundred kilometres north of Tromsø in 1986, the only child of a fisherman who had run an unsuccessful tennis academy in Phuket in the early 1990s.

She had been a competent doubles player on the professional circuit for six seasons. She had been, in her late twenties, the coach of two Top-10 women's players. She had been, at twenty-eight, broke, exhausted, and at the end of a long affair with a married man, when her father's old academy partner in Singapore had introduced her, at a dinner in Sentosa, to a fifty-two-year-old Singaporean Chinese mining magnate named Donald Tan.

It was the coaching, not the playing, that had stayed in her hands. A doubles player reacts; a coach watches. A coach learns to sit very still through a whole season and chart an opponent's patterns — which side she favours under pressure, what she does on the second serve when she is tired, the tell she does not know she has — and then to say nothing, and wait, and spring the plan in a single match months later when it can no longer be answered. Greta had coached two women into the world's top ten by teaching them that the point is usually won three shots before it ends, by the player patient enough to set it up and disciplined enough not to show her hand. She had never stopped thinking that way. She would, in time, chart Donald Tan exactly as she had once charted a baseliner with a weak backhand: quietly, completely, for as long as it took, until the day the trap was already closed before he understood a point was being played.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

Donald Tan had been recently widowed. He had been polite, attentive, and, in the soft-spoken Hokkien-accented English of certain very old Singaporean families, very persuasive. He had proposed marriage at the end of the fourth dinner. The dowry, paid to Greta's parents, had been seven hundred thousand Singapore dollars.

The marriage had been arranged, in the manner of certain old Singaporean families, by Donald Tan's eighty-three-year-old mother, who had taken Greta's hand at the wedding lunch in the Raffles ballroom and said, in careful English, "You will be a very useful wife."

Greta had been, for eleven years, a very useful wife.

She had not, in eleven years, been alone in a room with another man. She had not, in eleven years, been allowed to leave Singapore without a member of Donald's security detail. She had not, in eleven years, held a tennis racquet.

3

The first wife had died in a single-car accident on the Princes Highway outside Geelong in 2011. The verdict, in a Coroner's Court in Victoria, had been driver inattention. There had been no second car. There had been no other party at fault. The first wife had been thirty-six years old. She had been seven months pregnant.

Greta had learned, in the seventh year of her marriage, in a conversation with a Singaporean private investigator she had hired in cash, that the first wife had not been driving inattentively. The first wife had been threatening, on the morning of the accident, to give a witness statement to a Singaporean corruption inquiry concerning

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

her husband's mining concessions in the Riau Archipelago. The first wife had, in fact, on the previous afternoon, sent her sister-in-law an envelope of documents to be opened in the event of her death.

The sister-in-law had, the day after the accident, returned the envelope to Donald Tan unopened. She had been rewarded, in the following month, with a substantial improvement to her own husband's mining concessions.

Greta had spent four years getting in touch with the first wife's daughter. The daughter had been three at the time of the accident. She was now, in this Melbourne summer, twenty-six. She was a research lawyer in Oslo. Her name was Mei-Ling Tan-Halvorsen. She had, by happy coincidence of Norwegian residency rules, been adopted under Greta's family name as a small precaution four years earlier, with her own consent.

Mei-Ling had spent the past four years receiving, from Greta, in carefully delivered hand-written letters from PO boxes in Bangkok and Bali, the documents her dead mother had assembled. The documents named seventeen Singaporean ministers. They named two Malaysian princes. They named a current sitting Australian federal cabinet minister. They named, by initials, the actual name being concealed by an offshore trust, the man who at this moment held the power of veto over Singapore's next election.

4

Donald Tan had been, for nine months, administering low-dose thallium to his wife in her morning fruit juice.

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Eleven Stories

Greta had discovered it by accident. In the second year of the marriage, she had stopped drinking the juice — not from suspicion, but because a Buddhist meditation manual had given her a morning routine that pleased her more. She poured the juice, instead, into the bonsai on the dining-room window-sill, a wedding gift from Donald's mother. Two years later, the bonsai died.

She took the soil to a friend in the chemistry department of the National University of Singapore. He ran the test twice, then asked her, very quietly, when she had last had a heavy-metals screen. She had one the next morning, under another name, at a clinic across the border in Johor Bahru. From that day she did three things, every morning, without fail: she took a countervailing dose of Prussian blue from a phial Donald did not know existed; she accepted the juice from his hand and poured it away; and once a week she bottled a thirty-millilitre sample of it. After nine months there were thirty-nine bottles, packed into a refrigerated case at the bottom of her suitcase the night before she left for Melbourne.

5

On the night of the women's quarter-final, Greta and Donald Tan attended a charity gala in the Crown Towers ballroom. She wore Valentino. She wore the rubies that the first wife had been wearing the night she died.

Donald handed her, at the dinner table, a bottle of mineral water with his right hand. She accepted it. She did not, when she stood up to excuse herself at fourteen minutes past ten, take the bottle with her.

In the women's powder room, she met, for forty seconds, a maid who had been employed at the Crown Towers for eleven years. The maid

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

took the bottle, which Greta had, in the inside pocket of her clutch bag, removed from the table on her way past. The maid handed the bottle to a chambermaid who had, that afternoon, completed her last shift at the Crown Towers. The chambermaid, in the staff parking lot, handed the bottle to a former Singaporean police officer who had been waiting in a hire car since six in the evening.

The former Singaporean police officer drove to Essendon airport. The bottle was on a private aircraft to Kuala Lumpur, in a refrigerated case, by eleven that night. The bottle was at the forensic toxicology laboratory of the Universiti Malaya by half past six the following morning. The thallium concentration, run against the standard curve, would be available by the end of the working day.

By that point, Donald Tan had been arrested.

Greta had not, in fact, replaced the original water with anything else. The original water had been, in every sense, fine.

What she had, however, done, that night in the powder room before she left, was send a single email.

6

The email was sent from a Proton account she had set up four years earlier and used twice. It went to a Singaporean lawyer named Mr. Reginald Lee. It contained one sentence:

“The bottle.”

Mr. Lee, sitting in his office in Robinson Road, where it was four hours ahead of Melbourne time, opened the email at one in the

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

morning. He had been expecting it, on a standing instruction, for four years.

He picked up the phone. He rang a number in a fishing village in Trengganu. The man who answered the phone in the fishing village had, for nineteen years, been Donald Tan's driver. He had retired four years earlier with a pension and a small house by the sea.

The driver said, "Yes, Mr. Lee."

Mr. Lee said, "Tonight."

The driver hung up. The driver took a small encrypted device from a drawer in the kitchen. He pressed one button.

An audio recording, eleven years old, was released from a server in Reykjavík to a journalist at the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong, a partner at a barristers' chambers in Lincoln's Inn, and a senior officer of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau in Singapore.

The recording was of a conversation, in Hokkien, between Donald Tan and a man who had since become a minister of state in a country Greta did not care to name. It concerned the disposal of a body.

The body was the first wife's.

7

Donald Tan was arrested in the Crown Towers ballroom at twelve minutes past eleven on the same Wednesday night. By then, his wife had been in the back of a Foster's Brewery delivery van for fifty-nine minutes.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

She did not, in the end, fly out of Australia on a private aircraft. She did not need to. She walked, in the early morning, with her overnight bag, into the Avis counter at Melbourne airport, hired a small grey hatchback, and drove out of the city through the western suburbs, north and west across the Hume Highway, past Bendigo, past Echuca, into the dry plains beyond the Murray.

She drove for two days, alone, with the air-conditioning on low and the radio off.

On the third afternoon, she crossed into New South Wales, drove a further three hundred kilometres, and stopped in a small town called Hay, where she ate a counter meal at a pub, slept in a motel, and rang the Singapore lawyer Mr. Reginald Lee at four in the afternoon.

“It is done,” Mr. Lee said.

“Thank you, Reginald.”

“Greta. The girl is asking to see you.”

“Tell her I shall be in Oslo by the second week of March.”

8

Donald Tan was sentenced, in a Singaporean High Court, in October of the following year, to twenty-eight years' imprisonment. He served the first eleven years of the sentence and died of a heart condition in the prison infirmary at Changi at the age of seventy-three.

Greta did not, in any official sense, return to Singapore. She did not return, in any official sense, to tennis. She did not write a memoir. She did not give an interview.

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

She went home to a small fishing village in northern Norway, the village her father had left at twenty. She took with her Mei-Ling Tan-Halvorsen, the daughter of Donald Tan's first wife.

Six months after the sentencing, on a clear August morning, Greta and Mei-Ling drove to a courthouse in Tromsø. Greta adopted her. Mei-Ling was twenty-six. The adoption was, legally, redundant, since Mei-Ling already bore Greta's family name. Greta did it anyway.

On the drive home, along a road that ran beside the slate-grey water, Mei-Ling asked, very quietly, when Greta had first decided.

Greta thought for a long time. The light was very pale on the water. A flight of birds rose from a small island offshore.

Then she said:

“The morning I married your father.”

Some matches, Greta had learned on a Phuket clay court at the age of nine, are won by the player who waits eleven years.



STORY 5

FLUSHING MEADOWS, FINAL SET

*She had nothing left to play for. Which was exactly when they
needed her.*



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

Fourteen years ago in Belgrade, on a Saturday afternoon, Lena Marković's older brother had been shot in the head outside a café on Knez Mihailova. The shooter had walked away through the crowd. The shooter had never been caught. The Serbian police file had been closed in 2014 for lack of evidence.

His name had been Stefan. He had been four years older than Lena, and he had been, in the way of older brothers in that house, the one who made the rules and broke them first. He had taught her to serve in the car park behind their grandmother's building in Vračar, against a chalk line on a brick wall, using a wooden racquet that had been their father's; he had told her, at nine, that she had a better forehand than he did and that this was the single most irritating fact of his life. He had wanted to be a writer. He read everything, argued about everything, laughed at his own jokes before he reached the end of them. On the last Saturday she had spent with him before Cincinnati, he had stood in their grandmother's kitchen teaching her to make čevapi, flour to the elbows, and had announced — entirely seriously, entirely Stefan — that one day he would write something that frightened powerful men, and that when he did she was to deny she had ever met him. She had thrown a dish towel at him. He had been twenty-three. He had not, she would have sworn to anyone who asked, known how to operate a washing machine.

Lena had been nineteen. She had been in Cincinnati that week. She had reached the final of the Cincinnati Open and lost in straight sets to a Russian whose name she could no longer remember. She had not, in the fourteen years since, spoken her brother's name in a press conference.

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Three months ago, in the lobby of a hotel in Paris, a man she had never met before had handed her an envelope and walked away without a word.

Inside the envelope was a photograph. The photograph was of a Serbian businessman, fifty-eight years old, standing on the dais of a state function in Belgrade three weeks earlier, shaking the hand of the President of Serbia. Pinned to the businessman's lapel was a small enamel pin Lena had last seen on the jacket of her brother's killer, in a security-camera still that had been shown to her, once, at the age of twenty.

The envelope had contained, also, a single typed line:

He is in your players' box at the US Open final.

2

Lena Marković was thirty-four. She had been world number one for sixty-two weeks in her twenties. She had won three Grand Slams. She had been out, the previous eighteen months, with a right hip injury her surgeons had told her, in private, would end her career.

She had not, in fact, retired. She had, instead, in the eight months since her last operation, slowly, painfully, on a private clay court behind her parents' house in Cleveland Heights, taught her body to play with a quarter of a millimetre less rotation in the right hip. The serve had been the hardest. She had restructured the toss. She had restructured the kick. She had, in the spring, on the Charleston clay, beaten a player ranked four. She had, at the French Open, lost in the third round in three close sets to the eventual champion.

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She had, in August, in New Haven, walked off the court at the end of her quarter-final win, into the press conference, and announced that the US Open would be her final tournament.

She had not told her family. She had not told her coach. She had not told her boyfriend, a sports physician named Adam who lived in Cleveland Heights and who was, at that moment, sitting in the second row of her players' box at every match of every tournament.

She had told only the envelope.

3

On the morning of the final, Lena walked through Central Park with her coach. The coach was a sixty-eight-year-old former Yugoslav Davis Cup captain named Branko Pajović who had coached her since she was twelve. He did not, on this particular walk, say very much. He had observed, with great care, in the three weeks since New Haven, that his player had changed.

He had asked her, the previous Tuesday, what was wrong. She had said, “Nothing, Branko.” She had said it with a smile he had not, in twenty-two years, seen on her face.

He had not, since, asked her again.

They walked north along the East Drive. The morning was clear and warm. A young man on rollerblades passed them at speed. A woman with two small dogs nodded at them and looked twice. Lena did not acknowledge her.

“Branko,” she said, at the seventy-second Street transverse, “I should like, before the match, to give you something.”

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She handed him a small white envelope.

“What is this, Lena.”

“A letter for my mother. If anything happens this evening that I am not able, personally, to explain, you will please give it to her in the morning.”

Branko Pajović stopped walking.

“Lena.”

“It is nothing dramatic, Branko. Please.”

“Lena. Tell me.”

“Branko.”

He looked at her for a long moment. He had not, in twenty-two years, asked her a question twice.

He took the envelope. He put it in the inside pocket of his light tan jacket.

They walked on.

4

She had told no one what she was going to do.

She would, that evening, in front of twenty-three thousand people on Arthur Ashe, in front of a sitting United States Vice President in the presidential box, in front of one hundred million viewers in seventy countries, in her trophy speech if she won and in her runner-up speech if she did not, name her brother's killer.

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She would, immediately afterwards, hand to the chair umpire an envelope that contained a sworn affidavit, a set of bank records that had cost a Romanian forger six months' work, and the address of a self-storage unit in Long Island City that contained the gun that had killed her brother.

The gun had been recovered, three years ago, by a private investigator from Belgrade whom Lena had paid out of her own match earnings to the amount of three hundred and twelve thousand United States dollars over four years. The investigator had been killed in February, in a hit-and-run in Belgrade, three weeks before Lena had been handed the envelope in Paris.

What Lena did not know, walking north along the East Drive in Central Park on the Saturday morning of the US Open final, was that she was not, in this story, the player.

She was the ball.

5

The Serbian businessman in her players' box was named Dragan Vuletić. He was fifty-eight. He was the largest single private real-estate developer in Belgrade. He held, jointly with his wife, four passports. He had, the previous week, on a private aircraft registered in the Cayman Islands, flown from Belgrade to New York via Vienna and Reykjavík.

For sixteen months, a small task force operating jointly out of an office in Langley, an office in Vauxhall, and a building near the Sava in Belgrade that did not appear on any Belgrade municipal map, had been building a case against Dragan Vuletić.

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The thing they were trying to break was, at bottom, simple: a machine for turning sanctioned Russian oil into clean Belgrade real estate, and anyone who noticed into a closed police file. The case concerned the routing, through a Belgrade-based real-estate consortium, of two hundred and twelve million United States dollars in proceeds from a sanctions-evading oil scheme operating between Russia and the Western Balkans. The case was, in intelligence terms, ready.

What the case lacked was a trigger. A public, unignorable, internationally televised event that would force the Serbian government, on a Monday morning, to detain Dragan Vuletić before he could board the private aircraft back to Belgrade.

Lena Marković's trophy speech was the trigger.

The envelope she had received in Paris three months earlier had not, of course, been anonymous. The man who had handed it to her had been a junior officer of the task force. The photograph had been real. The man in the photograph had been her brother's killer. But the killing of her brother had not been, fourteen years ago, a private murder. It had been the opening transaction of the consortium Lena was about to bring down with a sentence.

Lena had been recruited, in effect, on the day her brother died. They had simply waited fourteen years, and a hip injury, and a Paris hotel, to call her in.

6

Lena's opponent was a twenty-three-year-old Pole named Maja Sulinska, ranked four, who had never been past a Grand Slam quarter-final and who, on the previous Wednesday, had taken out the

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defending champion in straight sets in a match that had been described, in three newspapers, as the coming-of-age of a generation.

Lena was thirty-fourth in the world. The bookmakers had priced her, in the morning, at five to one against.

She won the first set 4-6.

She won the second set 6-3.

In the third set, she was broken at three-all. She broke back at four-five. She held to love at five-all. She broke again at six-five.

She served for the championship at six-five in the third.

She was down love-thirty. She produced her two best first serves of the match. She produced her cleanest forehand down the line of the match.

At championship point, she hit a slice backhand short and across the court that the young Pole, lunging, just reached. The return came back high and short. Lena's right hip, on the third stride into the open court, produced a single soft click she felt all the way up into the small of her back. She did not, this time, slow down.

She put the forehand into the open court.

She fell to her knees on the blue paint of Arthur Ashe Stadium and she did not, for fifteen seconds, get up.

7

She climbed into her chair. She drank water. The crowd was on its feet. The young Pole hugged her at the net for a long time, and Lena

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did not, even then, weep. The umpire shook her hand. The microphone was handed to her on the centre line.

She thanked her coach. She thanked her parents. She thanked her boyfriend in the second row. She thanked the city of New York. She paused, for what the broadcasters later timed at six and a half seconds, and looked, with great care, at the third row of her players' box.

Then she said, in clear, careful English:

“Fourteen years ago, in Belgrade, my older brother Stefan was murdered outside a café on Knez Mihailova. He was twenty-three. He was a journalist. The case was closed by the Serbian police in 2014 for lack of evidence.”

The crowd was silent.

“The man who paid for my brother's murder is sitting in my players' box tonight. His name is Dragan Vuletić. He arrived in New York on Wednesday on a private aircraft registered in the Cayman Islands. I have, in my hand, the documents that prove this.”

She gave the envelope to the chair umpire.

She did not see Dragan Vuletić get up. She did not see him taken from the stadium, very quietly, through a service door at the rear of the players' tunnel, by three men in plain dark suits whose presence had not, by any guest list, been on the seating manifest. She did not see the Vice President's chief of staff make a single phone call from the presidential box. She did not, that night, see anything at all but the lights, and her parents in the second row weeping, and the crowd on its feet for the third time in nine minutes.

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She did not see, either, that her coach, Branko Pajović, in the players' box, had a hand inside his light tan jacket. The hand was around the envelope she had given him at the seventy-second Street transverse.

He had read the letter three hours earlier.

8

Three months later, in a small flat in Belgrade that the task force had quietly purchased for her in her aunt's name, Lena Marković met for the first time the woman who had run the operation.

The woman was American. She was fifty-one. She had short grey hair, calm grey eyes, and the unhurried movements of someone who had been doing this work for thirty years. She wore a navy cashmere sweater and dark jeans.

She made Lena coffee in a small Italian moka pot. She sat across the kitchen table.

“Lena. I owe you the truth.”

“Yes.”

“Dragan Vuletić is, at this moment, in pre-trial detention in Belgrade. The consortium has been broken. Two hundred and twelve million dollars have been frozen. Three ministers of the Serbian government have resigned. Two have not, yet, resigned, but will, in the next six weeks. The trigger worked, Lena, because you, and only you, could have pulled it.”

“And my brother.”

The woman looked at her hands for a moment.

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“Your brother, fourteen years ago, was not a journalist. Your brother was an agent of this service. He had been recruited at university in London, in 2008. He had been working, at the time of his death, on the file we have, in the last sixteen months, finally closed. He was killed because he was about to expose the consortium.”

Lena did not, for some moments, speak.

“He was twenty-three,” she said.

“Yes.”

“He was twenty-three years old. He did not, when he was killed, know how to operate a washing machine.”

“Lena. He was extraordinary.”

Lena looked at the woman for a long time.

“What do you want from me.”

The woman did not, at first, answer. She picked up her coffee. She set it down.

“Lena,” she said, “I want to offer you a job.”

9

Lena did not, at first, answer.

She walked, instead, to the small kitchen window. The window looked out over a small interior courtyard in the Vračar district. The courtyard was paved with cobblestones the colour of old pewter. In the centre was a single lime tree. A small boy was, at that moment,

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kicking a football against the wall of the building opposite. The football was orange. The boy was perhaps eight.

She watched the boy for a long time.

She thought about Branko Pajović in the players' box, with one hand inside his light tan jacket. She thought about the letter she had given him on the East Drive. She thought about her boyfriend Adam in Cleveland Heights, who had, in the four months since the US Open, asked her twice to marry him, and to whom she had not, yet, given an answer.

She thought about her brother at sixteen, teaching her to make čevapi on a Saturday afternoon in their grandmother's kitchen in Belgrade. He had been laughing.

She turned back to the woman at the kitchen table.

“Yes,” she said.

The woman nodded. She set her coffee cup very carefully into its saucer.

“Thank you, Lena.”

“On one condition.”

“Of course.”

“The letter,” Lena said. “The letter I gave to Branko on the morning of the final. The letter contained the names of three people. Two of them, by now, you have probably identified. The third you have not. I would, before I sign anything, like you to find the third.”

The woman looked at her.

“Who is the third.”

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Lena smiled, very faintly.

“You are.”

There was a long silence.

Then the woman, slowly, smiled back. It was the smile of a professional who had not, in some years, been surprised.

“Miss Marković,” she said, “your brother was, indeed, extraordinary. He was, alas, not nearly as extraordinary as his sister.”

She extended her hand across the kitchen table.

“Welcome to the service.”

Lena had thought she was retiring. She had only just been signed.



STORY 6

THE INDIAN WELLS INHERITANCE

The desert held her father's body. The desert was about to hold her too.



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1

The first thing Carrigan Boal noticed, walking out of the air-conditioned cool of the Indian Wells Tennis Garden into the desert evening, was that the man in the dark linen jacket who had been standing beside her hire car at four o'clock that afternoon was no longer there, but the small white card he had left on the windshield was.

The card said, in a typewritten hand that had been produced, by her quick estimate, on a small portable typewriter manufactured no earlier than 1958: Miss Boal. Your father did not, in fact, die of the bee sting. I shall be in Cabin Six of the Two Bunch Palms Resort at eleven o'clock tonight. I shall not, in any subsequent capacity, be in Cabin Six after midnight. Please come alone.

There was no signature.

Carrigan looked, for a long moment, at the small white card.

She had been told, since the age of eleven, that her father had died of anaphylactic shock from a single bee sting sustained on the seventh fairway of the Pebble Beach Golf Links on the morning of the eighth of June in 2014. She had been told this by her mother. She had been told it, with the practised compassion of a man who had been the family doctor since 1991, by Dr. Henry Patterson. She had been told it, in slightly less practised terms, in the brief obituary that had appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle on the tenth of June in 2014.

She had not, in eleven years, been told it by anyone with a portable typewriter.

2

Carrigan Boal was twenty-six. She was a microbiologist. She had a doctorate in molecular genetics from Stanford. She was, at the moment in question, a senior research scientist at her late father's biotechnology firm, BoalBio Inc., headquartered in South San Francisco, of which she was, by the operation of her father's will, the principal heir.

She had been at Indian Wells, this Saturday in March, for two reasons. The first was that she had won, in the company tombola at the BoalBio Christmas party in December, a pair of tickets in the corporate hospitality suite for the women's final. The second was that her boyfriend, a thirty-one-year-old neurosurgical resident named Tom Eldridge, who was at this moment in the same hospitality suite drinking a beer, had asked her, two months earlier, to marry him.

She had not, in two months, given him an answer.

She had also, in the past six weeks, received three anonymous letters. The letters had been postmarked Indio, California. The letters had been typewritten, on a small portable typewriter she now recognised had been the same one. The letters had said only three things, one per letter, in the same careful typewritten hand. The first letter had said: He did not die of a bee sting. The second letter had said: He died, like all his investors, of a small private decision made in the desert. The third letter had said: I shall be at Indian Wells.

She had not, in six weeks, told Tom about the letters.

She had told no one.

3

The Two Bunch Palms Resort, in Desert Hot Springs, was a sprawl of low adobe buildings around a series of mineral spring pools, in a date-palm oasis that had been, in the 1930s, a hideaway for Al Capone, and was, in the 2020s, a discreet weekend retreat for the kind of person who preferred not to be photographed.

Carrigan parked the hire car in the small staff-and-guests parking lot at ten forty-six. She had, on the drive across the desert from Indian Wells, told Tom that she had a headache and was going to retire early. She had not told him where she was going. She had not, in the small text message she had sent her mother at nine o'clock, told her mother either.

It was not, she thought, driving the dark ribbon of highway with the windows down and the desert cooling on either side, how the weekend was supposed to have gone. She had come to Indian Wells for the simplest reasons a person could have: to sit in the sun, to watch two of the best players in the world hit a tennis ball, to drink a cold beer in a hospitality suite with the man who wanted to marry her and to whom she still owed an answer. Tom had booked them a late dinner. He had a small velvet box he thought she did not know about. It was meant to be a clean bright ordinary weekend, the kind a person earns and then forgets. Instead she was driving alone across the Coachella Valley at eleven at night toward a stranger with a 1958 typewriter who claimed her father had not died the way she had grieved him for eleven years. The contrast was not lost on her. Nothing, she had found, was ever lost on her; it was the thing that made her good in a laboratory and bad at sleeping.

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Cabin Six was at the far end of the resort, at the edge of the date palms, beside a small mineral pool that was, at eleven on a Saturday night in March, deserted.

The door of Cabin Six was open three inches. A small lamp burned inside.

Carrigan stood, for a moment, in the warm desert air.

Then she knocked, twice, on the wooden frame, and walked in.

4

The man in the dark linen jacket was sitting in a wing-backed armchair beside the small fireplace. He was perhaps seventy. He had a thin face, white hair, and the unhurried movements of someone who had been waiting, in one armchair or another, for most of his professional life.

He stood when she came in. He extended his hand.

“Miss Boal. My name is Dr. Roderick Holcomb. I was, between 1989 and 2014, the chief medical officer of your father's company. I retired in 2014. I have been, since 2014, living in Pioneertown, in a small bungalow at the back of a friend's property. I have not, in eleven years, taken a single visitor.”

Carrigan did not, at first, take his hand. She took it eventually. It was very cold.

“Dr. Holcomb. My father died of a bee sting.”

“No, Miss Boal. He did not.”

“My father was allergic to bees from the age of seven.”

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“Yes, Miss Boal. He was. He was also, by 2014, carrying with him at all times an epinephrine auto-injector. His auto-injector, on the morning of his death, was, by the toxicology, fully charged and unused. The auto-injector had, the previous evening, in a small private moment in the locker room of the Pebble Beach Golf Links, been replaced by a visually identical auto-injector containing, instead of epinephrine, a saline solution.”

“Who.”

“Miss Boal. Please sit down.”

5

She sat down. He poured her, from a small silver thermos on the side table, a cup of black coffee. She did not drink it.

“Miss Boal,” Dr. Holcomb said, “your father, between 2007 and 2014, ran, in addition to BoalBio's published business, a small private clinical research program. The program tested a particular class of monoclonal antibody therapies on a cohort of approximately three hundred patients, all of whom were recruited from the cardiology and oncology practice of a Dr. Henry Patterson of San Francisco, all of whom were extremely wealthy, and all of whom paid, in cash, between four hundred thousand and one million United States dollars per cycle of treatment.”

“The program was not registered with the FDA. The program operated, by the small fiction of a Mexican research permit, in a private clinic in San Diego. The program was, by 2014, in its seventh year. The program had, by 2014, treated approximately three hundred patients. Of the three hundred patients, by my own records,

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two hundred and eighty-three had had outcomes that were, broadly, favourable. Of the remaining seventeen, fourteen had died of underlying disease. Three had died of, as the death certificates put it, anaphylactic shock from a single bee sting sustained in a recreational setting.”

Carrigan stared at him.

“The three deaths,” Dr. Holcomb said, “were three of the seventeen patients in respect of whom the antibody therapy had induced, in the second cycle, a fatal autoimmune cascade. The fatal autoimmune cascade was, by its laboratory signature, indistinguishable, on a standard post-mortem panel, from severe bee-sting anaphylaxis. The three patients had been, accordingly, in three separate locations and on three separate dates, persuaded to attend an outdoor recreational engagement, supplied with an auto-injector that had been quietly replaced, and stung, in the appropriate moment, by a bee that had been bred, in a small private apiary in Indio, California, for the purpose. The bee, in each case, was approximately ninety per cent more aggressive than a wild bee. The apiary belonged to a beekeeper whom your father retained, between 2009 and 2014, for the purpose.”

“Three patients?”

“Three patients, Miss Boal. Yes.”

“My father was the third.”

“No, Miss Boal. Your father was the first.”

6

Dr. Holcomb drank his coffee.

“Miss Boal,” he said. “Your father had, in October of 2013, in the second cycle of his own self-administered antibody therapy, developed the autoimmune cascade. The cascade, by the small careful tests we ran in the private clinic in San Diego, was, by January of 2014, certain to be fatal. Your father had, by April, six months at the outside. Your father had decided, between January and April, three things.”

“The first was that he would not, in his remaining six months, allow the program to be terminated. The second was that he would not, in his remaining six months, allow either you or your mother to know that he was dying. The third was that he would, accordingly, on a morning of his own choosing, in the appropriate setting, with the appropriate auto-injector, end his own life in a manner that would be recorded, by the world, as a freak accident.”

“The bee,” Dr. Holcomb said, “was bred for him. The auto-injector was prepared by him. The decision was, in every meaningful sense, his.”

“My mother.”

“Your mother, Miss Boal, did not know.”

“Then who did.”

Dr. Holcomb looked at her for a long moment.

“Your father, Miss Boal, on the morning of the seventh of June in 2014, telephoned me at home in San Diego. He told me what he intended to do. I told him not to. He told me, in the calm voice in

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which he had run the program for seven years, that the only person who could, in his absence, continue the program was Dr. Henry Patterson. He told me, also, that the only person who could, in his absence, ensure that Dr. Patterson did not enrol any further patients, was me.”

“He asked me, Miss Boal, to remain at the firm, in my position as chief medical officer, until you, his daughter, were old enough to take over the firm, and to ensure, in the interim, that the program was, by quiet and progressive starvation of resources, wound up. He estimated that this would take five years. He estimated, accordingly, that I would be free to retire to my bungalow in Pioneertown by 2019.”

“I am, you will note, four years late.”

7

Carrigan did not, for a long moment, speak.

Then she said: “Dr. Holcomb. Why are you telling me this. Tonight.”

“Because, Miss Boal,” Dr. Holcomb said, “Dr. Henry Patterson, who was, between 1991 and 2014, your family doctor, and who has been, since 2014, the chief medical officer of BoalBio in my stead, has, since 2019, in defiance of every quiet instruction I have managed to convey to him, restarted the program. He has, since 2019, enrolled forty-one new patients. He has, since 2019, conducted the program out of a small private clinic in Cabo San Lucas. He has, since 2019, profited personally to the extent of approximately fourteen million United States dollars per year.”

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“He has, also, in the past four months, identified two new patients in respect of whom the antibody therapy has, in the second cycle, induced the autoimmune cascade. The two new patients are scheduled to die, by his arrangement, in the next three weeks. The first is a forty-six-year-old hedge-fund manager in Greenwich, Connecticut. The second, Miss Boal, is your mother.”

Carrigan stared at him.

“My mother is not in the program.”

“Your mother, Miss Boal, was enrolled in the program in November of 2024 under a false patient identifier. She has, in the past four months, attended two cycles of treatment at the clinic in Cabo San Lucas under the pretext of attending a hyperbaric oxygen wellness retreat. Her enrolment was effected by Dr. Patterson without her knowledge, on the basis of a small private indication of early-stage breast cancer that he, alone, identified in a routine mammogram in October. He told her the mammogram was clear. He told her, instead, that her general inflammatory markers were elevated, and that the wellness retreat would, in his professional view, be of benefit.”

“Your mother is, at this moment, six weeks into the second cycle. She is, by the laboratory signature, by my own analysis of the blood samples I obtained, with the help of a sympathetic phlebotomist in San Francisco, three weeks ago, certain to develop the cascade within the next twenty days. She will, accordingly, by Dr. Patterson's arrangement, attend a recreational engagement in a setting in which she will be stung by a bee. She will die. The death will be recorded as anaphylactic shock from a single bee sting. She will, you will note, have died in precisely the manner in which your father died, on the same date, on which, eleven years ago, your father died. The date is the eighth of June.”

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“It is, Miss Boal, the only date Dr. Patterson can plausibly arrange a publicly comprehensible death.”

He saw her face, and he set the timeline out for her plainly, the way he had once set out a protocol. ‘Let me give it to you in order, Miss Boal, because it is the disorder that hides it. From 2007 to 2014 your father ran the original program — three hundred patients, seventeen bad outcomes, three of those quietly killed, the first of the three being your father himself, in June of 2014. From 2014 to 2019 I remained as chief medical officer and did what he asked: I starved the program of resources and wound it down, and by 2019 it should have been dead. In 2019 Dr. Patterson, who had taken my old title, restarted it on his own account, out of Cabo San Lucas, and has run it privately ever since — forty-one new patients, fourteen million dollars a year. And in the last four months he has produced two new cascade cases scheduled to die within three weeks. The first is a man in Greenwich. The second is your mother. Two programs, Miss Boal, eleven years apart, the same method, the same fatal date. Your father built the machine to save the program. Patterson rebuilt it to enrich himself.’

Carrigan stared at him.

8

Carrigan did not, for a long moment, move.

Then she said, “Dr. Holcomb. Why have you not, in eleven years, gone to the authorities?”

Dr. Holcomb looked at the small fire in the fireplace.

“Miss Boal,” he said. “Because I am, in every meaningful sense, the second senior officer of the program. I authorised, between 2007 and

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2014, the laboratory protocols on the strength of which the three patients of the seventeen unfavourable outcomes were able to be killed. I was, in 2010, when the first of the three patients died in Carmel, the man who certified the post-mortem cause of death on the strength of a falsified blood-panel. I was, in 2014, the man who supplied your father with the saline-filled auto-injector at the Pebble Beach pro-shop on the evening of the seventh of June. I have been, since 2014, in every available capacity, an accomplice.”

“I am telling you, tonight, because I have, in the past two months, in the small bungalow in Pioneertown, been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer. I have, at the outside, four weeks. I have, accordingly, three things to give you.”

He stood. He walked to the small writing desk on the far wall. He came back with three small items.

“The first is this typewritten document, which is, in summary, my full sworn statement. The statement names every patient, every date, every laboratory protocol, and every payment. The statement is, by the date of its execution, which is yesterday, valid as an affidavit under the laws of the State of California for the period of my surviving life.”

“The second is this small flash drive, which contains, in machine-readable form, every laboratory record and every patient file in respect of every patient ever enrolled in the program, both your father's cohort of three hundred and Dr. Patterson's cohort of forty-one. The records are encrypted. The decryption key, by an arrangement I made eighteen months ago with a small firm of solicitors in Palm Springs, will be released to you, on production of a death certificate in my name, on the day after my death.”

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“The third is this small white envelope, which contains the address of the small private clinic in Cabo San Lucas at which your mother is, this Wednesday, scheduled to receive her third treatment. The clinic is, by the careful arrangements your father made in 2011, registered in the name of a Mexican holding company that is, in turn, sixty per cent owned by a Cayman Islands trust of which the beneficial owner is, you. The address, accordingly, is your address. The clinic, accordingly, is your clinic. The patient records of the clinic, accordingly, are, on demand, yours.”

He set the three items on the small marble coffee table.

“Miss Boal. You will, on the strength of the affidavit, the records, and the address, on Monday morning, walk into the United States Attorney's office for the Northern District of California and make a complaint. The United States Attorney is, in 2025, a woman named Elena Mata, who is, as it happens, the niece of the third patient who died in 2012. She will, on the strength of these materials, by Wednesday morning, have arrested Dr. Patterson. She will, by Thursday morning, have closed the clinic in Cabo San Lucas. Your mother, by Friday, will, by the careful work of a senior oncologist in San Francisco whose card I shall also leave with you, have commenced an entirely lawful course of treatment for the early-stage breast cancer that Dr. Patterson neglected, four months ago, to disclose.”

“Your mother, Miss Boal, will live. The firm will, by my own quiet provisions in the firm's bylaws, on your election, by the close of business on Monday, be yours.”

9

Carrigan looked, for a long moment, at the three items on the marble coffee table.

“Dr. Holcomb. Why, in 2014, did you supply my father with the saline auto-injector? Why did you not, on the seventh of June in 2014, refuse?”

Dr. Holcomb looked at the small fire.

“Because, Miss Boal,” he said, “your father was, in 2014, my closest friend in the world. Your father had asked me, in the calm voice in which he had run the program, to do the last thing he would, in his life, ask of me. I had, by January of 2014, also been, with him, his first patient. I have been, since January of 2014, his only surviving second-cycle case.”

He looked at her.

“The autoimmune cascade, Miss Boal, in approximately one in seven of the second-cycle cases, does not progress to a fatal stage. The patient instead enters an indefinite state of partial remission. I am, in the eleven years since the cascade began, the only such case. The pancreatic cancer is, in every sense, a quite separate matter.”

He smiled. It was a small, tired smile.

“Your father, Miss Boal, was unlucky. I was, in the same study, lucky. He told me, on the morning of the seventh of June in 2014, on the telephone, before he asked me about the auto-injector, that he was glad I was lucky. He told me that one of us had, at the very least, to live to tell you.”

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“I am, accordingly, telling you tonight, Miss Boal. I am, in particular, late.”

Carrigan picked up the three items. She put the affidavit in her bag. She put the flash drive in her bag. She put the white envelope in her bag.

“Dr. Holcomb.”

“Yes, Miss Boal.”

“On Monday morning, at the United States Attorney's office, I will, by the affidavit you have given me, also be naming you.”

“Yes, Miss Boal. You will.”

“I am sorry.”

“I am not, Miss Boal. I have been, for eleven years, waiting.”

She walked out of Cabin Six at twelve minutes past midnight. The desert air was warm. The date palms moved very slightly in the small breeze.

She drove, in the small hire car, the eighty-four miles back across the desert to her hotel in Indian Wells.

Her mother was, in the morning, going to be at the women's final. Her mother had been, the previous evening, looking forward to it.

Carrigan was going, after the final, to take her mother out for an early dinner.

10

On the morning of the eighth of June, fifteen weeks after that night in Cabin Six, in the small private chapel of the Boal family in Hillsborough, California, the funeral was held.

It was not, in the end, Carrigan's mother's.

It was Dr. Roderick Holcomb's.

He had died, of the pancreatic cancer, in the small bungalow in Pioneertown, three weeks earlier. The funeral had been delayed at his own written request to the eighth of June, on the morning of which, by careful prearrangement, the decryption key to the small flash drive had been released by the solicitors in Palm Springs.

Carrigan stood at the front of the chapel, in a dark dress, beside her mother. Her mother had, by the senior oncologist's careful surgery in March, lost her left breast. Her mother was, by the same surgeon's careful prognosis, going to live, in all probability, another thirty years.

Dr. Henry Patterson, on Carrigan's complaint, was at this moment in pre-trial detention in San Francisco on twenty-seven counts including murder, falsification of medical records, and operating an unlicensed clinical research program. He had been refused bail.

Carrigan looked, at the front of the chapel, at the small framed photograph of Dr. Holcomb that had been placed on the altar. She had, in the photograph, never seen him.

It had been taken, by the small handwritten notation on the back, on the seventh of June in 2014, at the Pebble Beach pro-shop, with her father.

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Eleven Stories

Both men were laughing. Both men were holding, in their right hands, small silver auto-injectors.

One of the auto-injectors had been the one with saline.



STORY 7

THE DUBAI DRAW

He had paid for her wildcard. He had not paid for the rest of her.



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

The text message arrived at the precise moment the umpire called time on the changeover. It was a single line, in English, from a number that did not, in any way, identify itself.

Two double-faults at five-three. Or the photographs go out on Wednesday.

Ivona Cetinje, twenty-two years old, the wildcard entrant from Montenegro, looked at the screen of her phone for the length of three breaths. She set the phone down on the side of the chair, picked up her racquet, and walked back to the baseline.

She did not, in the next two minutes, double-fault.

She held to love.

By the start of the next changeover, the phone had, on its screen, three further messages.

2

Ivona had been the wildcard for the Dubai Tennis Championships at the personal request of His Highness, by which was meant, in the small careful protocol of the tournament office, the senior of three brothers in a particular Gulf ruling family who had taken, in the previous twelve months, a discreet personal interest in the sponsorship of two women on the circuit who were not, by the rankings, in any way obvious wildcards.

Ivona had not, in the year of the discreet personal interest, agreed to anything. She had attended, in the previous summer, three dinners,

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one yacht reception, and a small private gala in Marbella. She had been, at each, polite. She had been, at each, accompanied by a fifty-eight-year-old aunt who had served, between 1979 and 1991, as a Yugoslav consular officer in Vienna, and who could, in the small private opinions of the senior of the three brothers, ruin a dinner in any of four languages.

It had not, Ivona understood by the third dinner, been about her at all, not really. It had been about the system the dinners belonged to — the one she had been walking the edges of since she was sixteen and had first been good enough to be invited somewhere. The yacht off Cap Ferrat with the helipad and the silent crew and the older women who had once, she gradually realised, been younger women on the same yacht. The gala in Marbella where a man she had never met had pressed a watch worth more than her family's house into her hand as a 'token of the federation's esteem,' and her aunt had admired it aloud, in front of witnesses, and returned it to the federation president by courier the next morning with a note. The agents who stopped returning her calls when she would not sign with a particular management company; the practice courts that became available the instant she was photographed at the right party. None of it was ever a demand. All of it was the same demand. She had grown up in a country that had been four countries in her aunt's lifetime, and her aunt had taught her young that power rarely says the thing; it arranges the room so that you say it for them, and are grateful. The text message at five-three was only the first time the room had said it out loud.

The photographs the text message referred to did not, accordingly, exist.

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The senior of the three brothers had not, by any means, given up. The senior of the three brothers had simply, in the past forty-eight hours, given the matter to a colleague.

3

She lost the second set six-four.

She did not double-fault. She did not throw a point. She played, in the second set, the best tennis of her career, and her opponent, the second seed, played slightly better. The crowd applauded politely.

At the start of the deciding set she took, at the second changeover, a medical timeout. She walked, with the tournament physio, off the court and into the small treatment room beneath the players' lounge. She had the physio examine her right shoulder. She had the physio tape it. She had the physio leave the room to fetch a particular brand of cold spray.

In the thirty-eight seconds of the physio's absence, she did three things.

She took a small white card from the inside pocket of her racquet bag, walked to the back of the small treatment room, and slid the card under the metal grille of a ventilation shaft she had identified, the previous afternoon, on the small private tour the tournament office had given her in her capacity as the wildcard.

She picked up her phone. She forwarded the four text messages, in their entirety, to a Swiss-registered number that belonged to her aunt.

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She wrote, then deleted, then rewrote, then sent a single message to her aunt: Tante. As we discussed. Now.

The physio returned with the cold spray.

Ivona thanked her warmly.

4

She won the third set six-three.

She did not, at any point in the third set, look up at the box on the upper deck of the stadium in which the senior of the three brothers was sitting in a thawb and a small charcoal Brioni jacket. She did not, at the conclusion of the match, look up at him. She shook hands with her opponent, kissed her on both cheeks, bowed to the umpire, waved to the crowd, and walked off into the players' tunnel.

The senior of the three brothers, in the box on the upper deck, did not applaud.

He was, in fact, no longer in the box. He had been, by the time Ivona's slice backhand on match point had landed, by happy coincidence, an inch inside the sideline, escorted, by two officers in plainclothes of the Dubai Police, with great courtesy, to a small private meeting room on the third level of the stadium.

The meeting room contained, when he was admitted, a representative of the United Arab Emirates Cyber Crime Department, who held in his hand a small printed copy of four text messages sent, that afternoon, from a phone registered in the name of a junior employee of the senior of the three brothers' personal protocol office. The phone, the cyber crime representative explained

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in the careful Arabic of a man who had, in his career, conducted many such conversations, had been, since six o'clock that morning, under continuous monitoring on a warrant signed by the Dubai Public Prosecutor on the application of a fifty-eight-year-old retired Yugoslav consular officer in Vienna, whom the cyber crime representative had, in the past, met several times socially, and whose application had been supported by an affidavit from a young Montenegrin tennis player ranked one hundred and forty-third in the world.

5

The cyber crime representative was extremely polite. He apologised for the inconvenience. He explained that, by the careful provisions of the Emirate's penal code, the offence in question, which involved the use of a telecommunications device to extort a sexual or photographic favour from a national of a friendly state, carried a custodial sentence of between five and fifteen years, the longer if the favour related to a public sporting event.

He explained, also, that there was, in the particular case of a member of the senior ruling family, a small administrative alternative, by which the offending member could, by a personal letter of apology delivered, with great discretion, by the senior of the family's protocol office to the player's national tennis federation, and by a small one-time charitable contribution of, let us say, four million United States dollars to the Montenegrin Olympic Committee, settle the matter, ahead of the day's news cycle.

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The senior of the three brothers thought, for the length of a single cigarette he was permitted to smoke in the meeting room with the cyber crime representative's polite permission, about both options.

He chose the administrative alternative.

The charitable contribution, by the careful arrangement of the Montenegrin Olympic Committee, was directed, by a small private mechanism, to the Montenegrin women's tennis academy in Podgorica, which Ivona's aunt had, with the small private encouragement of her niece, two months earlier, founded.

The academy opened in May.

6

Ivona lost in the quarter-final, in three sets, to the eventual champion.

She flew home to Podgorica on the Sunday morning. Her aunt collected her at the airport in a small green Fiat.

“Ivona.”

“Tante.”

“Ivona. You played well.”

“Tante. I did.”

“Ivona. You also, very well.”

“Yes, Tante. I did.”

Her aunt smiled. She did not, in two thousand miles of driving in three decades of Yugoslav consular service, often smile.

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She did, on the small road from the airport to Podgorica, that Sunday morning, smile twice.

She drove Ivona not home but to the academy first, because Ivona asked her to. It was early, and the four million dollars had not yet bought very much — two refurbished courts, a roof over one of them, a secondhand ball machine, a kettle. The third court was still the old municipal one, its surface crazed with cracks the colour of dry riverbeds, a net held up at one end by a length of blue rope. On that cracked court, at eight on a Sunday morning, a girl of about eleven was practising her serve alone, throwing the ball up against the pale Montenegrin sky and missing, and throwing it up again. Ivona left her bag in the Fiat and walked onto the cracked court in her travelling clothes, and the girl froze, because everyone in Podgorica now knew the wildcard's face. Ivona did not say anything clever. She walked round behind the girl, the way a coach does, and said, 'Again. Don't watch where it lands. Watch the toss. The toss is the only part you control.' The girl threw it up. It was, very slightly, better. They stood out there for half an hour on the broken court while the aunt watched from the car, and neither of them, the woman or the girl, mentioned the cracks, because the cracks were going to be resurfaced in the autumn, and because in the meantime the game went on above them, the way it always had.

It had been, on her own quiet professional estimate, the most efficient afternoon's work of either of their lives. She had been, herself, when she had been Ivona's age, the wildcard.

She had not, in 1979, had an aunt.



STORY 8

THE DAVIS CUP TIE

Her grandfather had defected with one secret. He had, it turned out, kept two.



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1

On the morning of the Davis Cup tie between Sweden and Russia at the Royal Tennis Hall in Stockholm, Annika Lindholm received a text message from a number she did not recognise. The text message said, in Swedish: Miss Lindholm, your grandfather did not, in fact, defect alone. We have, since 1976, kept his second secret for him. I shall be at the side entrance of the Royal Tennis Hall at twelve o'clock. I shall be wearing a grey coat. I shall not, at twelve oh five, be there.

Annika read the message twice. She set the phone face-down on the breakfast table. She drank, in the small kitchen of her grandfather's apartment on Strandvägen, the rest of her coffee.

Her grandfather, who had been the principal coach of the Swedish women's Davis Cup team between 1981 and 2003, who had been, until his retirement in 2003, the most senior surviving Soviet tennis defector of the 1970s, who had been, until his death the previous November, the only grandfather she had ever known, had told her, on his deathbed in a hospice in Saltsjöbaden, three things.

He had told her that he loved her. He had told her that the small mahogany box in the bottom drawer of his desk was, on his death, hers. He had told her, also, that she should be very careful, in the months following his death, with anyone who spoke Russian to her in the street.

She had not, in eleven months, opened the box. She had not, in eleven months, been spoken to in Russian in the street.

She walked, that morning, to the Royal Tennis Hall.

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2

Annika Lindholm was twenty-nine. She was a journalist. She was, by accident more than by design, the chief tennis correspondent of *Dagens Nyheter*. She was unmarried, childless, and lived in her grandfather's old apartment on Strandvägen, which he had left her, along with the mahogany box, in his will.

Her grandfather had been Yuri Andreyevich Volkov. He had been, between 1968 and 1976, the principal doubles coach of the Soviet Union. He had defected, on a Wednesday morning in September of 1976, at the Stockholm Open, in the company of his then-fiancée, a Swedish doubles player named Birgit Lindholm, whom he had married six weeks later in a small ceremony in Saltsjöbaden, and whose surname he had, by Swedish naturalisation, taken as his own.

He had been, by the careful estimation of the Swedish security service in 1976, a defector of moderate value. He had known, in 1976, perhaps eight things of intelligence interest. He had communicated, in the autumn of 1976, six of them. He had communicated, in the spring of 1977, the seventh.

The shape of it, stripped of the dates that would later half-bury it, was this. For decades the Soviet Union had run a school: it took gifted tennis children, trained them to the top of a sport that travelled freely across every closed border in the world, and turned a certain number of them, grown, into women who married useful Westerners and reported home. Tennis was the cover because tennis was the passport — a player could be in Munich one week and Melbourne the next and no one thought it strange. Annika's grandfather had helped run that school. To defect, for him and for the woman who defected beside him the same morning, had not been to escape a country; it had been

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to walk out of the school in the middle of a lesson, taking nothing but a Swedish fiancé and one folded piece of paper, and to spend the rest of a long life hoping the school had decided they were not worth the cost of retrieving. That was the whole of it. Everything else was detail.

The eighth, by the careful note in his file in 1976, he had declined to communicate. The Swedish security service had, in 1976, considered this acceptable. The Swedish security service had not, in 1976, anticipated that the eighth thing would still be of operational interest in 2025.

3

The side entrance of the Royal Tennis Hall, at twelve o'clock on the morning of the Davis Cup tie, was busy with players, coaches, and small camera crews from three countries. Annika stood, for a moment, on the small concrete apron beside the loading dock, and looked at her watch.

At twelve oh one, a tall thin woman in a grey wool coat detached herself from the small group of camera crew and walked across the apron towards her.

The woman was perhaps sixty. She had short white hair, the bearing of a former dancer, and the unhurried movements of someone who had been, in her career, very good at not being noticed.

“Miss Lindholm.”

“Yes.”

“My name is Margarita Iosifovna Karlsson. I was, between 1968 and 1976, the second seed of the Soviet women's tennis team. I defected,

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on the same Wednesday morning in September of 1976 as your grandfather, at the Stockholm Open, in the company of a Swedish doubles player named Anders Karlsson. I married Anders Karlsson six weeks later in a small ceremony in Saltsjöbaden. The ceremony was on the same afternoon as your grandfather's. We were each other's witnesses.”

“My husband died in 2011. Your grandfather died in November. I have been, since November, waiting for the appropriate moment to speak with you.”

4

Annika did not, for a long moment, speak.

“Mrs. Karlsson.”

“Miss Lindholm.”

“Mrs. Karlsson. I have, in eleven months, not heard your name. My grandfather did not, in the twenty-nine years I knew him, mention you.”

“No, Miss Lindholm. He would not have.”

“Mrs. Karlsson. The text message.”

“The text message was mine. I am very sorry, my dear, for the dramatic formulation. I am, by training, a tennis player and not a fiction writer. I would have preferred to leave a calling card. I do not, however, in my present circumstances, have a calling card.”

“Mrs. Karlsson. The second secret.”

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“The second secret, Miss Lindholm. Yes. Could we, please, walk along the water? I find, in my present circumstances, that I do not, on the small concrete apron beside the loading dock of the Royal Tennis Hall, particularly wish to be seen.”

5

They walked, together, along the Strandvägen quay, in the cold November light. Mrs. Karlsson did not, at first, speak. She watched, for a long moment, a small white ferry pulling out from the Nybroviken jetty.

“Miss Lindholm,” she said at last. “In September of 1976, your grandfather and I defected together. We had been, in the Soviet Union, for the previous eight years, the two coaches of a small private program operated, by a particular section of the Soviet sport authority, in conjunction with a particular section of the State Committee for Security. The program identified, every two years, a small cohort of children, in the age range eight to twelve, in three Soviet republics, who showed early promise at tennis. The children were, by quiet arrangement with their families, removed from their homes and brought to a particular training facility outside Sochi, where they were trained, between eight and twelve hours a day, in tennis, languages, and certain other skills.”

“The certain other skills, Miss Lindholm, were not in any way criminal. They were, broadly, the certain other skills that the State Committee for Security would, when the children were grown up, find useful. They included, in particular, the technical procedures by which a young woman of, let us say, twenty-four, might, on the international tennis circuit, identify, befriend, and quietly cultivate

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persons of intelligence interest in the West. The technical procedures were taught, between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, by women who had been the previous generation of the program.”

“The program operated, by my own count, from 1962 until 1985. It produced, in twenty-three years, approximately one hundred and forty graduates. Approximately ninety of the graduates, on completing their training, were placed into the Soviet professional tennis circuit. Approximately fifty were placed, by various means, into Western tennis circuits, where they pursued, in due course, moderately successful playing careers and, by quiet arrangement, in their second and third years, married Western nationals of intelligence interest. The marriages, by the careful design of the program, were undertaken by the women in the careful knowledge that their first reporting obligation was to the State Committee for Security and not to their husbands.”

“Your grandfather and I, between 1968 and 1976, were the two head coaches of the program. He coached the boys. I coached the girls. In September of 1976, in Stockholm, we defected together, on the same day, at the same tournament, with two Swedish tennis-playing fiancés whom we had identified, eighteen months earlier, in a small private operational decision, as our personal escape route. The escape route had not, by the senior officers of the program, been authorised. It was, by them, on the morning of the tenth of September in 1976, discovered. They were not, in any subsequent decade, pleased.”

6

Annika walked, in silence, for some time.

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“Mrs. Karlsson. Did the Swedish security service know?”

“The Swedish security service, Miss Lindholm, knew everything except one detail.”

“The detail?”

“The detail, Miss Lindholm, is that one of the fifty Western placements of the program is, at this moment, the captain of the Russian Davis Cup team, who is, this Saturday, sitting in the players' box of the Royal Tennis Hall at the Davis Cup tie between Sweden and Russia. She is, in fact, by Russian citizenship rather than by Western citizenship, an unusual placement. She is, by my own analysis, the senior surviving officer of the program. She is, by my own analysis, the operational successor of the two officers, your grandfather and myself, who in September of 1976 left her, at the age of fourteen, in the training facility outside Sochi without our protection.”

“She is, Miss Lindholm, the woman who has been, in the past eight months, by way of three small accidents in the streets of Stockholm and one quiet conversation with my Swedish cardiologist, very gently encouraging me to die.”

“She is also, Miss Lindholm, the woman who has been, in the past eleven months, by way of two small letters delivered to a particular safe deposit box at the Stockholm branch of Handelsbanken, attempting to recover from your grandfather's estate the one piece of paper that he, alone, of the two of us, in 1976, did not surrender to the Swedish security service.”

“The piece of paper, Miss Lindholm, is in the small mahogany box in the bottom drawer of your grandfather's desk.”

7

Annika did not, for a long moment, breathe.

“Mrs. Karlsson. What is on the piece of paper.”

“The piece of paper, Miss Lindholm, is a list of the fifty Western placements of the program, by the names under which they were placed, with the dates and locations of their placements, in your grandfather's hand. The list is, in operational terms, by 2025, of no value to the Russian Federation. Most of the fifty placements are dead, retired, or otherwise of no further use. The list is, however, by 2025, of considerable value to those of the placements who are still operating under their Western names, and who do not wish, in their late careers, to have their Western names appear on the front page of any Swedish newspaper.”

“The captain of the Russian Davis Cup team, Miss Lindholm, was placed in 1979 in West Germany under the name of a young woman from a small village in the Bavarian Forest. She returned to Russia in 1991, on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and, under her birth name, pursued a successful coaching career. The Western name she used in West Germany between 1979 and 1991 belongs, however, by the records of the Bavarian state registry, to a German citizen who is, today, sixty-three years old, lives in Munich, has been, since 1992, a federal judge of the Bavarian Higher Administrative Court, and is, by careful arrangement, married to the German Minister of Defence.”

Annika stared at her.

“The Bavarian judge, Miss Lindholm,” Mrs. Karlsson said, “does not know.”

8

Annika, that afternoon, did not attend the Davis Cup tie.

She walked, instead, along the Strandvägen quay to her grandfather's apartment. She climbed the four flights of stairs. She unlocked the door. She walked into her grandfather's study. She knelt, in front of the small writing desk, and opened the bottom drawer.

The mahogany box was where it had been, for eleven months.

She set it on the desk. She did not, immediately, open it. She sat, for a long time, in her grandfather's old chair, looking at the photograph of her grandfather on the wall opposite, at the age of perhaps fifty-five, in a cream linen jacket, on a beach in Båstad, in 1983, smiling at the camera with the small careful smile of a man who, by 1983, had built himself, by considerable effort, a quite different life.

Then she opened the box.

Inside were three things. The first was a single yellowed piece of paper, folded twice, containing, in her grandfather's hand, in Cyrillic, fifty names with fifty corresponding Western names. The second was a small silver brooch in the shape of a tennis ball, which she had not, in twenty-nine years, seen her grandmother wear. The third was a single typewritten note, in Swedish, in her grandfather's hand, dated the third of October in 2023, eight weeks before his death.

The note said: My dearest Annika. If you have opened this box, I am dead. If you have opened this box, you have also, almost certainly, in the months following my death, been approached by a Margarita Karlsson, a Margarita Iosifovna Karlsson, whose Swedish husband Anders Karlsson was, between 1976 and 2011, my closest friend. Margarita is a kind woman. Margarita is also, by quiet arrangement

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that began in 1991, the senior surviving officer of a Soviet tennis program in respect of which I was, between 1968 and 1976, the second-most-senior officer. Margarita has been, since 1991, by careful arrangement, the principal liaison in Stockholm of the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service.

I do not, my darling Annika, know how, in 1991, she made her arrangement. I do not, my darling Annika, know what they offered her. I know only that I should not, in the matter of the list, trust her. The list, my darling, is yours. The list, my darling, you will, on opening this box, walk, immediately, to the senior officer of the Swedish Security Service whose business card is folded into the inside lid of the box, and deliver. He will know what to do.

Annika lifted the lid. She found, taped to the inside, a small white business card. The card was the card of the deputy director of the Swedish Security Service.

She picked up the card, the piece of paper, and the small silver brooch.

She sat with it for a while first, because she was, after all, a journalist, and what she held in her hand was the largest story of her career and possibly of the decade. She could see the front page; she could write it in her head. Fifty names. A sitting defence minister's wife. A Russian captain in the players' box. Her own grandfather at the centre of it, which would make it not only the biggest story she would ever publish but the most personal — and would also, she understood, make of him forever a Soviet intelligence officer in the public memory, rather than the man in the cream linen jacket on a beach in Båstad who had taught her to keep her eye on the toss. She thought about what publishing would actually do. It would burn the fifty names, the dead and retired along with the dangerous. It would

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end a Bavarian judge's life over a placement she had been pressed into at fourteen and might not even remember choosing. It would give Margarita exactly the chaos she had spent eleven months trying to buy. And it would serve, in the end, Annika's byline more than it served anyone Annika could name. Her grandfather had not, at the last, given the paper to a newspaper. He had given it to her, and told her to walk it to one quiet man who would know which names to bury and which to act on. She decided, sitting in his chair, that she would honour the instruction and not the scoop — that some lists are not stories but unexploded ordnance, and that the right thing to do with ordnance is hand it, carefully, to the people whose job is to make it safe.

She walked, then, to the front door, took down her coat, and at four o'clock that afternoon presented herself, in the lobby of the Swedish Security Service's headquarters in Solna, to the deputy director's secretary.

9

Mrs. Margarita Iosifovna Karlsson was arrested at five-forty-eight that evening on the side entrance of the Royal Tennis Hall, at which she had, in fact, returned, in the small forlorn hope that Annika might still appear.

The captain of the Russian Davis Cup team flew home on the Sunday morning. Her resignation from her position as coach of the Bavarian state women's tennis program, which she had held since 2018, was announced on the Tuesday afternoon. The Bavarian Minister of Defence's wife, on the strength of a careful conversation with two senior officers of the German federal security service on the Thursday

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morning, signed, by the close of business that Friday, a sealed agreement under which her marriage and her professional life would, by mutual quiet arrangement, continue, and under which she would, in due course, make a small private contribution to the German federal foundation supporting refugees from the former Soviet Union.

Annika Lindholm did not, in any newspaper, publish a word.

She kept, on her grandfather's mantelpiece, the small silver brooch in the shape of a tennis ball.

Her grandfather had, in 1976, defected with one secret and one woman. He had, by his own quiet decision, kept the second secret for forty-nine years.

He had, in the end, given it not to a country but to a granddaughter, who had, in turn, in two hours of a cold November afternoon, given it to a country.

It was, on her own quiet professional estimate, the longest doubles match in the history of the sport.



STORY 9

THE CINCINNATI QUALIFIER

*She had qualified through three rounds. She had not, in any sense,
qualified for what was waiting.*



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

Bryony Maddox, age sixteen, the youngest player ever to qualify for the main draw of the Cincinnati Masters, walked into the players' lounge at three-fourteen on a Wednesday afternoon in August and saw, sitting in the corner armchair by the window, the man she had been, since the age of eleven, hoping was dead.

He was not dead. He was sixty-one. He was in a navy blazer. He had the same small careful smile he had had when she had been eleven years old.

He was Mr. Carruthers.

Mr. Carruthers had been, between 2018 and 2021, the director of the Bridges Tennis Academy in suburban Columbus, Ohio. Mr. Carruthers had been, also, between 2018 and 2021, the man who had, four times, on Wednesday afternoons, asked Bryony Maddox to remain in his office after practice. Mr. Carruthers had been, in 2021, the subject of a small private letter Bryony's mother had written to the academy board, in which she had asked, without naming the four Wednesdays, that her daughter be transferred, with immediate effect, to a different coach.

She had been eleven, the first of those Wednesdays. She was sixteen now. The five years between had been the whole of the distance she had travelled to be standing in this lounge: eleven when it happened, twelve when her mother pulled her out, fourteen when she quietly photographed the four attendance sheets in her mother's filing cabinet and began, without telling anyone, to prepare, and sixteen — the youngest qualifier in the tournament's history — when the man from the corner armchair finally walked back into a room she was in. She had grown up, in those five years, into exactly the person

SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

required to end him. She did not think this was a coincidence. She thought it was the only use she had been willing to make of what he had done.

The board had complied. The board had not, in 2021, asked Bryony's mother why.

Mr. Carruthers had been, in March of 2022, quietly retired from the academy with a settlement.

He was, in August of 2025, in the players' lounge of the Cincinnati Masters, in a navy blazer, smiling at her.

2

Bryony did not, in the players' lounge, react. She had been, between the ages of eleven and sixteen, taught, by her mother, that the small careful smile of a particular kind of man should be met, in public, by an entirely flat face.

She walked, past the corner armchair, to the small refrigerated cabinet at the far end of the lounge. She took out a bottle of mineral water. She unscrewed the cap. She drank.

She walked, then, with the bottle in her hand, back across the lounge, past the corner armchair, to the door.

Mr. Carruthers did not, as she passed, look up.

He did, in the small reflection in the polished door handle, watch her go.

3

She walked, then, very fast, down the carpeted corridor, into the small private players' restroom at the end, and locked the door.

She sat on the closed lid of the toilet for some moments.

She did not weep. She had not, between the ages of eleven and sixteen, in any tournament restroom, wept.

She took out her phone. She did three things.

She forwarded, to the email address of a senior reporter at the Cincinnati Enquirer whom she had identified, six months earlier, on the recommendation of a girl on the junior circuit who had had a similar problem in a similar academy in Chicago, four scanned documents she had been carrying, in her racquet bag, since the age of fourteen. The documents were the four signed-in attendance sheets of the four Wednesday afternoons on which she had, between the ages of eleven and twelve, remained in Mr. Carruthers's office after practice. The attendance sheets were not, by themselves, evidence of anything other than presence. They were, however, the documents on the strength of which a properly conducted journalistic investigation could, within four to six weeks, identify the other twenty-three girls who had been in attendance at the academy in the same period.

She forwarded, to the email address of her mother, a single photograph, taken with her phone fourteen seconds earlier through the small gap in the players' lounge door, of Mr. Carruthers in the corner armchair.

She sent, to a third address — the email of the safeguarding officer of the Women's Tennis Association, whom she had identified by

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reading, very carefully, the WTA's published code of conduct documents in a hotel room in San Antonio at the age of fifteen — a single sentence:

Re: Mr. R. T. Carruthers, formerly of Bridges Tennis Academy, Columbus OH. Subject is in possession of a credentialed pass to the Cincinnati Masters players' lounge as at 15:14 today. Per WTA safeguarding policy 4.3.2, this is a clear access violation. Please advise.

She put the phone in her pocket. She washed her hands. She opened the door.

4

The WTA safeguarding officer, a fifty-three-year-old former player named Andrea Kalinski, who had been in the Cincinnati safeguarding office at the moment Bryony's email arrived, was eating a tuna sandwich.

She put the sandwich down. She read the email. She read the email again.

She picked up the desk telephone. She rang the tournament director.

The tournament director was in a meeting. Andrea Kalinski explained, in twenty-two seconds, to the tournament director's assistant, the situation. The tournament director's assistant interrupted the meeting.

By the time Bryony was halfway down the carpeted corridor, the WTA safeguarding officer was already walking, at speed, in the opposite direction, towards the players' lounge.

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By the time Bryony reached the players' restaurant, where her coach and her mother were eating a small lunch, Mr. Carruthers had been escorted, by the tournament director and two officers of the Cincinnati Police Department, with a great deal less courtesy than the senior of the three brothers had been given in Dubai, out of the players' lounge, down the back stairs, through the loading dock, and into the back seat of an unmarked police car.

His pass had been issued, by the small administrative error of an under-trained intern in the volunteer coordination office of the tournament, on the strength of a forged letter of recommendation from a junior academy in Indiana. The forged letter, by the careful investigation that began at three-forty-eight that afternoon, would prove, within six weeks, to be one of eleven forged letters by which Mr. Carruthers, between 2022 and 2025, had obtained credentialed access to seven WTA tour events.

He had not, in any of the seven events, been recognised. He had not, until that Wednesday afternoon in Cincinnati, expected to be.

5

Bryony's mother, in the players' restaurant, read the photograph on her phone.

She did not, for some moments, speak.

Then she said, quietly, in the soft Yorkshire accent in which she had raised Bryony in Columbus, Ohio: "Love, where is he now."

"Mum," Bryony said, "he's in a police car."

"And the email I just got."

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Eleven Stories

“Was so you knew where I was.”

Her mother set down her phone.

“Bryony.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Bryony. The attendance sheets.”

“I scanned them, Mum, when I was fourteen. In your filing cabinet.”

“Bryony. I did not, when you were eleven, know what to do.”

“Mum. You did the best thing. You transferred me.”

“Bryony. It was, by any honest reckoning, not enough.”

“Mum. I know. That's why I scanned them.”

Her mother looked, for a long moment, at her daughter.

“Bryony. You are sixteen. You have qualified for the main draw of the Cincinnati Masters. You are due, this evening at six, on Centre Court, to play the world number eight. You are about to be, by tomorrow morning, on the front page of every newspaper in this country.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“Bryony. Are you ready.”

Bryony Maddox, age sixteen, looked at her mother across the small table in the players' restaurant. She was, in the polite English voice she had inherited from her mother and the Ohio cadences she had built on top of it, very calm.

“Mum,” she said. “I have been ready since I was eleven.”

6

She lost the match at six o'clock that evening in straight sets, six-three, six-four. She played, by every commentator's published view that night and the following morning, the most composed first-round Masters defeat by any teenager in the open era.

She gave, after the match, a small, gracious, eight-minute press conference, at which she answered questions about the match. She did not, at the press conference, mention Mr. Carruthers.

The senior reporter at the Cincinnati Enquirer, who had received Bryony's email at three-fifteen that afternoon, published, on the Thursday morning, a brief preliminary story. The follow-up, six weeks later, named twenty-three other girls. The investigation, which extended into the safeguarding practices of fourteen American tennis academies, would, by the following January, prompt a federal review of the entire junior tennis credentialing system.

Bryony, six months later, signed, at the age of seventeen, the largest endorsement contract ever signed by a teenage tennis player. The endorsement was for an Ohio-based company that manufactured locks.

It had not, on her side, been her first negotiating choice. It was, by the end of the contract negotiations, the right one.



STORY 10

THE OLYMPIC DOUBLES

Two players. One court. Three sets. Four agencies. Eleven seconds.



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

At twenty-three minutes past four on the afternoon of the women's doubles final of the Paris Olympics, with the score one set all and three games to two on serve in the deciding set, Solène Mercier, the senior of the two French doubles players, walked to the umpire's chair, took the umpire's microphone out of his hand, and announced, in clear French to the eighteen thousand spectators on the Court Philippe-Chatrier and to the broadcast audience of approximately one hundred and eighty million people in seventy-three countries, that the match would, with regret, be discontinued.

Then, in English, she added: “Mr. Umpire. Please instruct your colleagues. The court must be cleared. There is, at this moment, in section twelve, a person who should not be here.”

The umpire stared at her.

Solène Mercier, twenty-seven years old, the senior player, the captain of the French Olympic women's tennis team, the wife of an officer of the French national security service, set the microphone back in the umpire's hand and walked, very deliberately, towards the net.

2

What had happened, in the eleven seconds before Solène had walked to the umpire's chair, was this.

At the changeover at three games to two, the small earpiece in Solène's right ear, which had been, by the agreed protocol of the French Olympic team, switched off for the duration of the match, had been switched on, by remote, from a control van parked behind the

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back of the Court Philippe-Chatrier, by an officer of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure who had been Solène's husband's classmate at the École Militaire in 2014.

The officer had said, in French, very fast: “Solène, my dear, I am sorry. We have, in section twelve, by happy accident, identified a face that should not be here. The face is, by our system, eighty-eight per cent matched to a person of considerable operational interest in connection with the bombing of a Marseille train station in 2018. The person, by the published indictment of the Paris correctional court, has been at large since November of 2018. Solène. You will, please, find a way, in the next two minutes, of clearing the court without causing a panic in section twelve.”

Solène had said, in the small private French of a married woman to her husband's classmate: “Antoine. The crowd in section twelve is four thousand people. The person in section twelve is one. Why, my dear, are you on my earpiece?”

Antoine had said, in French: “Because, my dear, the person in section twelve is, by the small audio analysis I am performing in this van at this moment, carrying, on his person, a device whose acoustic signature is, by our database, consistent with a small remotely-triggered explosive of approximately four hundred grams of military C-4. The device is, by our estimation, not, in any military sense, large. The device is, by our estimation, sufficient to kill the person carrying it and approximately twenty-two people in his immediate vicinity. The device is, in particular, sufficient to make the front page of every newspaper in France tomorrow morning, which is, by our estimation, the entire operational purpose. Solène. We have, in the next two minutes, to clear the court without telling anyone in section twelve why.”

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Solène had said, in the private French of a married woman who was, in addition, a senior French Olympian: “Antoine. Why have you not, in the past three hours, told the tournament director?”

Antoine had said: “Solène. The tournament director, by our investigation of the past forty minutes, is, in this matter, on the wrong side. He has been, since two o'clock this afternoon, on a phone call with a number in Belgium that we are, by the same audio analysis, very interested in. We do not, accordingly, wish to inform him. We wish to inform you. We wish you, in the next ninety seconds, to discontinue the match.”

It was, Solène understood even in the eleven seconds she had to understand anything, a board with four players on it and only one of them on her side. There was Antoine's service, the DGSE, in the van behind the court, who wanted the threat cleared quietly and the credit kept quiet too. There was the man in section twelve and whoever in Belgium was on the other end of the tournament director's telephone — one network, two ends of it, who wanted a bomb on the evening news. There was the tournament director himself, an institution meant to be neutral, who had quietly chosen the wrong end of that telephone. And there was the Olympic apparatus around them all — eighteen thousand in the stands, a hundred and eighty million watching — which wanted, above everything, for nothing to appear to be wrong. Four agencies; four different things they needed from the next ninety seconds; and the only instrument any of them could actually use to get it was a French doubles player with a microphone and a reason to be believed.

Solène had said, in the very small private French of a senior French Olympian on the deciding set of the women's doubles final at her

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home Games: “Antoine. You owe me, after this afternoon, a great many drinks.”

Antoine had said: “Solène. I have, in the van, a bottle.”

She had walked to the umpire's chair.

3

The umpire, on the strength of a single sentence from Solène Mercier and a small confirming text message from the tournament's emergency response coordinator that the umpire had not, in the eleven minutes preceding the changeover, known was on his phone, instructed the senior court official.

The senior court official, on the strength of a single sentence from the umpire, instructed the senior officer of the Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité unit assigned to the Court Philippe-Chatrier.

The CRS unit, by their own training, did not, in the next ninety seconds, evacuate the court. They evacuated section twelve. They did so in the careful manner of officers who had, in the past four years, evacuated three Paris music festivals, two football matches, and one open-air concert in the Place du Trocadéro on the strength of similar warnings. The evacuation was framed, on the Tannoy, as a small technical fire alarm in section twelve only. The remainder of the court was instructed, by the same Tannoy, to remain seated.

Section twelve emptied, by the small careful efficiency of the CRS unit, in seventy-one seconds.

The man identified by the DGSE system was, in the seventieth second, identified, by a small careful CRS officer named Yacine

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Beloufa, by the simple expedient of being the only person in section twelve who was not, on the Tannoy's instruction, moving.

He was the four thousand and thirty-third person to be identified, in the small careful database of the DGSE, by a facial-recognition system that had been, since the bombing of the Marseille train station in 2018, operating, in the background, on every camera in the Olympic facility.

He was, by the careful CRS protocols, very gently lifted by two officers, walked out of section twelve into a small service corridor at the back of the stand, and laid down on a clean floor.

The device, which was, indeed, a small remotely-triggered explosive of approximately four hundred grams of military C-4, was, in the next eleven minutes, by the careful work of a small bomb-disposal officer named Marie-Hélène Vauthier, defused without incident.

The match resumed at four-fifty-one.

4

Solène Mercier and her doubles partner, a twenty-three-year-old qualifier from Lyon named Élodie Pelletier whose name had not, twelve weeks earlier, been on any Olympic shortlist, lost the deciding set six-three. They received, on the medal podium, the silver medal. The French anthem was not, accordingly, played.

Solène, on the small marble podium, in the silver medal that hung, by the careful design of the Paris Olympic committee, on a green ribbon and not the gold ribbon of the gold medal, smiled the small careful smile of a senior French Olympian.

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She did not, that evening, attend the official French team gala. She attended, instead, a small private dinner in a small private salon of the Hôtel de Crillon, in the company of her husband Hugo, her husband's classmate Antoine, and a small careful gentleman in his sixties who was, by the discreet card he had slid across the table at the start of the dinner, the director of the DGSE.

The director did not, at the dinner, propose a toast. The director did, however, before the cheese, lean across the small marble table, and say, in the soft careful French of a man who had, in his career, given many such toasts in many such rooms: “Madame Mercier. The Republic, this evening, owes you. The Republic, in due course, by means appropriate to a senior French Olympian, will pay.”

Solène had smiled.

“Monsieur le Directeur,” she had said. “The Republic, this evening, owes me one gold medal. The Republic, I hope, will, in due course, in 2028, in Los Angeles, by means appropriate to a senior French Olympian, pay.”

The director had smiled.

“Madame Mercier. Done.”

On the small marble table, between the cheese and the dessert, by careful discreet arrangement, in 2028, in Los Angeles, a wild card was thereby quietly entered.

5

The match, between the women's doubles final of the Paris Olympics and the women's doubles final of the Los Angeles Olympics, between

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the ninety seconds in which the court was, in section twelve, half-evacuated and the small marble table at the Hôtel de Crillon, was, by Solène Mercier's own quiet professional estimate, the only match of her career in which the strings of her racquet had not, in any direct sense, been the operative instrument.

She kept, on the small marble shelf in her dressing room, the silver medal in its small green case.

It was, by her own estimation, the medal she had won by the smallest sound, the eleven seconds in which the second of her two earpieces had become, very briefly, the only equipment that mattered.

She had been, in those eleven seconds, the sixth most important officer of the French national security service.

She had also, in those eleven seconds, been a doubles player.

She did not know, until the small marble table in 2028 in Los Angeles, which of the two she had, in the end, been.



STORY 11

THE SHANGHAI WILDCARD

*She had been missing for two years. She had been, every day, in
plain sight.*



SUSPENSE IN WHITES TENNIS

Eleven Stories

1

The press conference was scheduled for eleven o'clock on the morning of the second day of the Shanghai Masters. The Chinese Tennis Association had called it. The press release had said, in the soft careful English of a Chinese public-relations officer, that there would be a small announcement of considerable interest to the international tennis community, and that the chairwoman of the Association would, in person, make it.

Margaret Cho, the senior correspondent of the Hong Kong Tennis Times, arrived at the players' media centre at ten forty-five, sat down in the third row, and opened her notebook.

She had, in twenty-three years of covering professional tennis in Asia, attended perhaps three hundred press conferences called by the Chinese Tennis Association. She had been, in twenty-three years, lied to by them perhaps four hundred times. She had been, in twenty-three years, lied to less than this morning's press release had, by her own quiet professional estimate, suggested she was about to be.

She knew the machine the way an old umpire knows a draw sheet. She knew that the China swing came in the autumn, the indoor hard courts of Beijing and then Shanghai filling the calendar between the US Open and the year-end finals, the prize money enormous, the title sponsors state-linked, the practice-court allocations decided three rungs above anyone a player would ever meet. She knew that the Chinese Tennis Association answered to the General Administration of Sport, which answered, in the end, to people whose names did not appear on any tournament programme; that a wildcard into a Chinese main draw was never only a sporting decision; that the Association's press office issued its releases in a register so

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standardised that the deviations were the only thing worth reading. She had learned, over twenty-three autumns, to cover this tour the way a cryptographer reads traffic: not the message, which was always the same, but the small changes in the pattern. The pattern, this morning, had changed. The release said considerable interest and in person, and Madame Lin was coming herself, and the WTA had only just brought its tournaments back to China after a nineteen-month boycott whose single named cause had not been seen in public for two years. Margaret had covered enough autumns to know that those facts did not, in this bureaucracy, sit beside one another by accident.

The press release had been written by a young woman named Wei Lan, whom Margaret had been carefully cultivating, over a period of seven years, in a long, gentle, professional friendship that had not, in seven years, included any specific request.

The press release had used, in the second paragraph, the phrase considerable interest. Wei Lan, in seven years of writing for the Chinese Tennis Association, had never used the phrase considerable interest. The press release had used, in the fourth paragraph, the phrase in person. Wei Lan, in seven years of writing for the Chinese Tennis Association, had used the phrase in person on six occasions. On four of those occasions, the chairwoman had not, in fact, been in person. The two occasions on which she had been in person had been, by careful retrospective examination, the only two press conferences in seven years at which the Chinese Tennis Association had announced anything of substantive consequence.

Margaret Cho, accordingly, this morning, had brought her recording device.

2

The chairwoman of the Chinese Tennis Association was Madame Lin Mei-hua. She was sixty-one. She was a former player. She had been, in 1984, the first Chinese woman to compete in the singles draw of the US Open. She had been, since 2009, the most senior Chinese woman in international tennis administration. She was, by careful arrangement that had been a matter of small careful professional consensus for sixteen years, a woman of integrity.

She walked into the players' media centre at eleven o'clock exactly. She was accompanied by a younger woman whom Margaret Cho did not, at first, recognise.

The younger woman was wearing a dark grey suit, a small string of cultured pearls, and her hair in a low simple chignon. The younger woman did not, on Margaret's first careful glance, look like an athlete. The younger woman looked like a junior official of the Chinese foreign ministry.

The chairwoman sat down at the small marble table at the front of the room. The younger woman sat down beside her.

Madame Lin Mei-hua said, in clear careful English: "Good morning. I am very pleased to be here this morning to introduce to you a player who has, until this morning, been, in every sense, missing."

She turned to the younger woman.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the international press, please join me in welcoming back to professional tennis, after a two-year unplanned and unexplained absence, the former world number twelve, Miss Zhang Xiaohan."

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The room, which had been quiet, became, in the next eight seconds, the kind of silent that is, by every professional journalist's training, the moment to begin filming.

Forty-three cameras began filming.

3

Zhang Xiaohan was the player who had, in November of 2023, posted, on a social media account she had subsequently closed, a single message in Mandarin alleging that she had been, between 2018 and 2023, in an exploitative private relationship with a senior official of the Chinese sports authority. The message had been deleted within forty-three minutes of being posted. The social media account had been closed within seventy-two minutes. Zhang Xiaohan, by every official statement of the Chinese Tennis Association in the twenty-three months since, had been, on a private personal sabbatical, in the company of family.

She had not, in twenty-three months, appeared in public.

She had not, in twenty-three months, given an interview.

She had not, in twenty-three months, played a match.

She had been the subject, in those twenty-three months, of perhaps eleven hundred international news articles, three United Nations Human Rights Council statements, two Women's Tennis Association petitions signed by more than three hundred professional players, a small private letter from a particular former Secretary-General of the United Nations to the President of the People's Republic of China, and a small careful arrangement, between the Women's Tennis Association and the Chinese Tennis Association in early 2024, by

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which the Women's Tennis Association had withdrawn all of its tournaments from China until such time as Miss Zhang Xiaohan should publicly resume her professional career.

The Women's Tennis Association tournaments had been, by that small careful arrangement, withdrawn from China for nineteen months. The Shanghai Masters, in 2025, was the first Women's Tennis Association tournament to have been held in China since the withdrawal.

Margaret Cho looked, very carefully, at the younger woman in the dark grey suit beside Madame Lin Mei-hua.

The younger woman was not, by Margaret's careful identification, Zhang Xiaohan.

4

The younger woman smiled at the room. The younger woman read, from a small typed statement, in clear careful English, a four-paragraph note in which she expressed her great pleasure at being able to return to professional tennis, her gratitude to the chairwoman of the Chinese Tennis Association for her support during her unplanned and unexplained absence, her intention to enter the qualifying draw of the Shanghai Masters that very week as a special invitee, and her affection for the international tennis community whose patience she had, in the past two years, regrettably tested.

She did not, in the four-paragraph note, mention the social media post of November 2023.

She did not, in the four-paragraph note, mention the senior official.

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She did not, in the four-paragraph note, mention any of the eleven hundred news articles, the three UN statements, the two WTA petitions, or the letter from the former Secretary-General.

She finished the four-paragraph note. She set it down on the marble table. She smiled.

Madame Lin Mei-hua said, in clear careful English: “Miss Zhang will, of course, take questions.”

Forty-three cameras zoomed in.

Margaret Cho's hand went up.

5

Madame Lin Mei-hua nodded at her.

“Madame Lin,” Margaret said, in clear careful English. “Miss Zhang. Welcome back. I have, if I may, two questions. The first is the standard question I would ask any returning player. The second is one I should, if I may, like to direct to Madame Lin first.”

“Please,” Madame Lin said.

“Madame Lin. Madame Lin Mei-hua. Why is the woman sitting beside you not, in fact, Zhang Xiaohan?”

The room, which had become quiet again, became, in the next four seconds, by every journalist's training, the kind of silent in which the small recording device on the chair beside Margaret Cho was now, by careful prearrangement, also recording, from a second small recording device which Margaret's seven-year friend Wei Lan had, that morning, slipped into Margaret's notebook bag.

6

Madame Lin Mei-hua did not, for some moments, react. She looked, for a long careful breath, at the woman beside her.

Then she said, in clear careful English: “Miss Cho. I am very sorry. I am, this morning, unable to answer your question.”

Margaret Cho looked at her.

“Madame Lin. Madame Lin Mei-hua. Are you, this morning, by any chance, in a position from which you would, if you could, answer my question?”

There was, in the room, the kind of silence that, on second analysis later in the afternoon, would become, by careful international reporting, the eight seconds.

Then Madame Lin Mei-hua, who had been, in 1984, the first Chinese woman to compete in the singles draw of the US Open, who had been, since 2009, the most senior Chinese woman in international tennis administration, who had been, by careful arrangement that had been a matter of small careful professional consensus for sixteen years, a woman of integrity, set down her water glass, and said, in clear careful English, the small private sentence that she had been rehearsing, in the small private mirror in her hotel bathroom, every morning at six for the previous nineteen days.

“Miss Cho. Yes. I am.”

7

What Madame Lin Mei-hua then said, in clear careful English, over the next eleven minutes, in front of forty-three cameras filming live to seventy-six countries, was this.

Miss Zhang Xiaohan, on the morning of the eleventh of November in 2023, had been, by the order of the senior official of the Chinese sports authority whom she had named in her deleted social media post, taken from her apartment in Beijing. She had been held, in continuous administrative detention, between November of 2023 and August of 2024, in a small private compound in the suburbs of Tianjin. She had been, in August of 2024, by the small careful intervention of Madame Lin Mei-hua and of two other senior administrators of the Chinese Tennis Association, transferred to a small private compound in the suburbs of Hangzhou, in which she had been, since August of 2024, under continuous administrative supervision, but had been, in that compound, well-treated, allowed to write, allowed to play tennis on a small private court in the compound's grounds, and visited, every two weeks, by Madame Lin Mei-hua herself.

Miss Zhang Xiaohan was, at this moment, in Hangzhou. She was not in Shanghai. She was not, in any sense, the woman beside Madame Lin Mei-hua.

The woman beside Madame Lin Mei-hua was a former Chinese state security officer named Miss Liu Yan, who had agreed, in a small careful private arrangement seventeen days earlier with Madame Lin Mei-hua, to undertake the appearance in exchange for her own resignation from the Chinese state security service and a small private retirement to a small private flat in Suzhou.

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The small careful private arrangement had been undertaken by Madame Lin Mei-hua because, in the small careful private estimate of Madame Lin Mei-hua, the only way of bringing Miss Zhang Xiaohan home was to make, in front of forty-three cameras, a public substitution so transparent that the substitution would itself become, on the front pages of seventy-six countries, the international scandal that the Women's Tennis Association had been quietly waiting for since 2024.

Madame Lin Mei-hua, accordingly, that morning, was resigning.

She read, from a small typed statement she had written in her hotel bathroom at six o'clock that morning, her resignation from the chairwomanship of the Chinese Tennis Association, with immediate effect.

She read, also, a small careful sentence in which she asked, with great public courtesy, on behalf of Miss Zhang Xiaohan, for the immediate release of Miss Zhang Xiaohan and for the prompt resignation of the senior official.

The senior official, on whose direct order Madame Lin Mei-hua had, that morning, been instructed to introduce the woman in the dark grey suit, was, by Madame Lin Mei-hua's own careful confirmation in the next sentence, the senior official's name, which Madame Lin Mei-hua named.

He was the seventh-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee.

8

Margaret Cho, in the third row, with two recording devices running and a small careful seven-year friendship with Wei Lan now extending into its eighth year, did three things.

She filed, within forty-six seconds, by the secure satellite link that her newspaper had, by careful arrangement, established in the third row of the Shanghai Masters players' media centre nineteen days earlier on the strength of a single one-line text message from Wei Lan in mid-September, the entire eleven minutes of Madame Lin Mei-hua's statement, in audio and video, to the Hong Kong Tennis Times, the Financial Times, the New York Times, Reuters, the BBC, and the safeguarding officer of the Women's Tennis Association.

She did not, in the third row, stand. She did not, in the third row, breathe particularly loudly.

She filed, also, by the same secure satellite link, the single small careful name of the small private compound in the suburbs of Hangzhou in which Miss Zhang Xiaohan was, at that moment, by Madame Lin Mei-hua's confirmation, in continuous administrative supervision. The name had been, in the small typed statement Madame Lin Mei-hua had set on the marble table, the second-to-last paragraph.

She filed, lastly, the home address of the senior official, which she had been carrying, in the inside cover of her notebook, by Wei Lan's careful gift, since the previous July.

9

Miss Zhang Xiaohan was released from the small private compound in the suburbs of Hangzhou at eleven minutes past five that afternoon. The release was effected by a small careful party of officers of the Hangzhou Public Security Bureau acting, by very rare exception, on a direct instruction transmitted from a junior officer of the Politburo's General Office, who was, by careful subsequent reporting, a niece of Madame Lin Mei-hua.

Miss Zhang Xiaohan was driven, in a small careful black sedan, to Hongqiao International Airport. She boarded, at eight forty-three that evening, a private aircraft chartered, by careful prearrangement, by the Women's Tennis Association. The aircraft flew, with one quiet stop in Singapore, to London Heathrow.

Miss Zhang Xiaohan gave, on the morning of her arrival in London, a single careful press conference at the offices of the Women's Tennis Association. She named, in the press conference, the senior official, the chain of administrative orders, the location of the compound in Tianjin, the location of the compound in Hangzhou, and the names of the seven other female athletes who had been, by her observation in the compound in Hangzhou, in the previous nineteen months, similarly held.

The seven other female athletes were, in the following six weeks, also released.

The senior official resigned from the Politburo Standing Committee on the fourteenth of October in 2025.

The Chinese Tennis Association announced, on the seventeenth of October, that it would, with great regret, accept Madame Lin Mei-

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hua's resignation, and that it would, by the careful nomination of the Politburo's General Office, install as her successor a woman of comparable experience whom Margaret Cho, in the careful note in her notebook, identified as Madame Lin Mei-hua's deputy of seven years.

The Women's Tennis Association announced, on the twentieth of October, the resumption of its full international tournament calendar in China for the 2026 season, on the condition, set out in a small careful public letter co-signed by the executive director of the WTA and Miss Zhang Xiaohan, of a small careful set of safeguarding arrangements.

The Shanghai Masters, that week, was won by an Australian who had, by every commentator's view, been overdue for a Masters title for some years.

Madame Lin Mei-hua retired to her small private flat in the suburbs of Shanghai. She received, in the post, in November, by the careful arrangement of Margaret Cho, a small green tin of Hong Kong jasmine tea, with a small handwritten note in clear careful English that read only: For the eight seconds. — M.C.

She kept, on the small marble shelf of her flat, the tin.

It had been, by her own quiet professional estimate, the most expensive cup of tea anyone had ever, in the history of professional tennis, been brewed.



END OF THE COLLECTION

*Some matches, you'll have noticed,
are won between the points.*

— M.P.

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