

## THE PRO

The clay kicked up as she ran, first left, then right. It clung to the bottom half of her calves, giving them a gray, speckled look. The July heat was softening as the day dipped toward evening, and this encouraged her to play on, even though the blister on her right thumb had popped, leaving a red, watery wound. She stooped to swing at a low forehand, but fatigue took the topspin out of her stroke, and the ball sailed over the backboard. Irritated, she watched to see where it would land. Only then did she feel how tight her face was after a full day of sun.

She rested her racket against the fence and walked on rubbery legs toward the gate. A tall, thin man was watching her. Amanda shrank in on herself, like an inflatable doll that puckers into a pea when the air is let out. She didn't recognize him, not only because her family was new to this club, but also because Amanda couldn't see very well without her glasses, which she refused to wear outside of the classroom. Something in the relaxed shape of his body told her that he was good-looking. She slowed her walk to stop her breasts from moving beneath her T-shirt.

"Hello," the man called.

"Hi?" Amanda smiled. His tennis whites shimmered in the glare of the sun. Amanda thought of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee.

"Have you been playing long?"

She stopped. New sweat seeped through her pores. The rules in Connecticut could be so

bewildering. “I don’t know. Sorry. This court was empty, so I just came on.”

“No, you’re okay,” he answered. “I meant, have you been playing on a team?”

They’d been in this town for a year, and nobody had ever asked her about herself. She doubted if anyone in her seventh-grade class knew that she’d come from Virginia, that she had two older sisters in college. Or rather, one sister. Her eldest sister, Deborah, had left CalArts in the middle of the semester, and nobody was entirely sure where she was, except for a postcard she’d sent Amanda from a bluegrass festival in Clearwater, Florida. “Jimmy and I hitchhiked here. It’s beautiful. We’re making good money picking grapefruit. Don’t tell them,” she’d written, which was dumb because their mother collected the mail every day. Even though it was the eighties now, Deborah was still living the Janis Joplin dream. This had always been highly successful in driving their parents around the bend. But this time the postcard hadn’t raised any alarms that Amanda could see.

She moved closer to the man and was surprised to see that he wasn’t good-looking, at least not in the way that Warren Beatty was obviously good-looking. This man’s face was too long and narrow, like a fox’s. But his wavy dark hair dipped across his forehead in a boyish bang and his eyes were kind. In fact, everything about him reassured her that he had all day to listen to whatever it was she needed to tell him.

“No!” She gushed. “My dad and I just go out and hit sometimes. I’ve never played on a team,” she laughed.

The man grinned with only half of his mouth, his gaze steady on her. Amanda scraped some of the clay off of her left calf with the heel of her right Tretorn.

“Well, I’m Tim and I’m the head pro here. We need to get you on our juniors. Who’re

your parents?”

Elation, strong as a geyser, leaped through Amanda. “The Lovetts.”

Tim’s eyebrows arched, really arched, like a pumpkin carving. “Spitzzy Lovett?”

Her mother was a personality wherever she went. In their small town in Virginia, she’d been PTA board president and had gotten a small mention in *The Washington Post*’s “Lifestyle” section as the Congressman’s wife who was championing a return to corporeal punishment in the public schools.

In Connecticut, the women loved to hear her talk. “Bless his pointy little head,” she’d sigh over liberals like Christopher Dodd. “It looked like she’d been rode hard and put up wet,” she’d gossip out of the side of her mouth. And “Oo-o-h, honey, you got your fuck-me-quick shoes on!” she’d squeal about any heel higher than two inches.

Spitzzy was also a terrific athlete. She let it be known that she couldn’t play tennis with Amanda because she only knew how to play at one level, meaning not down.

Amanda watched to see which side Spitzzy fell on for this pro. Not everybody thought her mother was funny.

“Okay,” he said, without smiling. “Tell your mom to give me a call.” He strolled to where her ball lay in the grass and tossed it to her high over the fence.

“Thank you!” Amanda shouted, scrambling after it. When she turned back around, he was gone.

Minutes later, she slinked her way toward the parking lot, afraid to see anyone she knew. Only losers hung out by themselves on perfect summer days. Her mother’s two-door, twenty-year-old BMW was there, idling in the roundabout. She jumped into the passenger seat, and they

took off at a roar. Spitzzy believed the vintage car made her look sporty and disguised the fact that they could never afford a new four-door model. “Thank God these Yankees never want to throw anything away,” she often said.

Amanda held her racket to her chest and braced her feet against the floorboard. Her mother’s face was shiny from several face creams and heavily painted. They must be going somewhere tonight.

“I met the pro today,” she shouted over one of the Three Tenors from her mother’s *Opera Lover’s Delight* tape.

“Oh?” Her mother turned a vermillion cheek toward Amanda and then back to the road. “Isn’t he a long, cool drink of water.”

Amanda swallowed. “He told me I should play on some team. You’re supposed to call him.”

“Did he?” her mother asked, startled. They watched the curves around the Old Post Road. There was a real danger here in smacking into the root of some ancient beech tree that bulged over the curb. In Virginia, everything was flattened into four-lane highways that snaked around, over, and through the capital.

“Well, alrighty then,” her mother said. “I’ll do that.”

They pulled into the driveway and saw her father up on a ladder with his shirt off and a Budweiser in his left hand.

Spitzzy jammed the stick shift into park and leaped out of the car. “Thurston Lovett, what in the hell are you doing?” The veins in her neck strained with the effort of screaming in a whisper.

Her father balanced the beer inside the gutter he was cleaning and twisted around to face them. “What’s the matter?” He winked at Amanda, who smiled and shook her head.

“Do you see anybody around here doing like you do? Get down from there right now. We are not in your mother’s—”

“Oh, hell, Cassandra.” Her father threw down a handful of dirt and leaves.

“Appalachian junkyard dog is what you are,” Spitzzy railed on.

“Hello, Congressman.”

The pretty voice made them all jump. Out of a long-ingrained habit, the tension between her parents instantly vaporized. They turned to smile at the young mother who lived on the other side of the hedge that divided their driveways. Amanda’s father took his right foot off the rung it was on to look at her more directly. “Hey, now, Miss Jennifer. How you?”

Jennifer’s light-brown hair was held back by her Ray-Ban sunglasses. The look softened her square jaw and made her clear green eyes even more startling. Fortunately for Spitzzy, she also had the baby with her.

“Well, now, lookee here,” Spitzzy said, moving to block the view between Jennifer and her husband. “Who’s up from his nap? Is that a cookie? Are you just lovin’ on that cookie? Mmm-m-m, mmm-m-m. He looks flushed, Jennifer. Is he feverish? Are his teeth coming in?”

In this way, Spitzzy effectively swallowed other women.

Amanda walked past her father toward the back porch.

“Where you goin’?” he called after her.

“Shower,” Amanda answered, letting the screen door bang behind her.

“Hey, girl, you’d be all right if you’d lay off those Cokes. Or start drinking Diet.”

Amanda stopped next to the wicker rocker, unable to move. The cool shade did nothing to calm the rash that flamed over her body. She thought of the worst thing she could call him.

“Okay, *Congressman*,” she called. None of them heard her over their own chatter.

It didn’t matter anyway. Her parents had long stopped wincing at the title. A year ago, it was a painful reminder that the House was as far as Thurston Lovett was ever going to get. 1980 had been hailed as the return of the Republican Party, but this eight-term Republican congressman had gotten trounced by his Democratic rival for the Senate. Campaign-ad ideas that were funny at the Lovett’s kitchen table in Falls Church drew gasps or groans from television viewers back in the 6th District in Tennessee: mechanical toys that flip-flopped under his opponent’s grinning photo; a shadowy figure dressed in a turban, thanking the Democrat for being soft on defense, only highlighted Thurston’s own “lightweight” reputation. “Tasteless,” “maladroit,” “sadly lacking in substance” were just a few of the things said about his run on the Sunday-morning talk shows—by other Republicans.

Fortunately, there were banks in New York ready to scoop up someone like Thurston Lovett. They needed a broker to help them buy up savings and loans in Texas and throughout the Southwest. Thurston knew all the players. He’d been fighting for deregulation of the industry for years. Now the Lovetts had a place to salve their wounds and shore up their finances, which had also been lost with the Senate seat. The club membership had been Congressman Lovett’s end-of-the-fiscal-year bonus.

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It was the pro who called Spitzzy. Amanda was shaving her legs, standing up in the tub, when her mother’s voice spiraled up the stairs from the kitchen below.

“Don’t you know they got started with a borrowed pencil,” she was saying with a laugh. Amanda returned to the long white strip she was clearing from her shinbone.

“She did tell me... Well, you’re sweet to say so. I mean, what do I know? Her tennis has just been something I let Thurston handle.” Amanda froze. A smile of blood appeared where the razor had been. She was supposed to be doing this sitting down.

“Oh, Lord! Are you kidding? If he was going to spend any time with his children at all, it had to be an organized activity, so I said ‘Take her to the courts! Bat the ball around with her.’”

Amanda whipped on the faucets to drown out the rest. The water made her cut sting and her eyes went blurry. Why did she have to make everything sound so pathetic?

A moment later, there was a knock and then Spitzzy was standing in the doorway. Her expression did a quick change from mild wonderment to grim satisfaction. “Honestly, child! What did I tell you? Did I tell you that would happen?”

“Okay!”

Spitzzy reached for a washcloth hanging on the towel rack behind her. “Sit down!” she commanded.

Amanda sat on the edge of the tub and Spitzzy sat next to her. She pressed the washcloth firmly against the gash in Amanda’s leg. “Your boyfriend called.”

“God! He’s not my boyfriend.”

Spitzzy checked the blood flow. “Well, you certainly made an impression,” she said, pressing again. “We need to run down to the Sports Shop and get you some tennis clothes. Your team starts practice Wednesday morning at nine.”

A fillip of excitement and terror ran up Amanda’s spine. He had called. She was getting

new clothes. She didn't know how to play tennis. Not really.

“Sit still, Amanda!”

“I am!”

At the Sports Shop, Amanda first tried on the tennis shorts she saw everybody at the club wearing. Androgyny was key. The trick was to be a cool girl in boys' clothing, to stand out by perfectly blending in. But Amanda had hips. If the shorts fit around her thighs, they gaped open at the waist.

“Honestly, what is wrong with these skirts?” Spitzzy asked.

They were pleated all around and the panties were frilly. She would die.

It was awful the way her body felt puffy and out of control and then, inexplicably, could sink back to a kind of even level, as if the tide had gone out of her. She kept checking herself in mirrors to see if such drastic changes were visible. On another day, she was sure the shorts would fit.

They settled on four dresses that looked like long polo shirts: white, straight, and plain. Amanda was uneasy about the tiny breast pocket each one had on the left side, a useless detail that could bring on merciless teasing. How, she didn't know, but the danger was there. Spitzzy, on the other hand, had had enough. She threw the dresses over her forearm and marched down the wide, carpeted staircase to the cashiers below.

On Wednesday, they pulled into the roundabout under the club's portico. Amanda hesitated, her fingers on the door handle. Two girls her age she didn't know were locking up their ten-speeds. If she got out now, she'd be stuck walking with them all the way to the tennis house. “Sweetie, I do have phone calls to make,” her mother pushed.



Amanda opened the door just in time to let out Pavarotti's dying aria. The girls turned at the crescendo and started to laugh. "Be yourself and have fun!" Spitzzy called.

Amanda slammed the door. She looked quickly at the girls, then away. She noticed that one of them was a redhead, which made her feel a little better. She always felt sorry for redheads.

"Oh my God," said the redhead. "Nice ride."

Amanda stepped closer and saw that the girl was extremely pretty and that her hair was not frizzy.

"What can I say?" replied Amanda, looking straight ahead. "She likes hearing people get stabbed first thing in the morning."

They cracked up. Amanda fell into step alongside them. "Mine is listening to the Eurythmics, and she's so proud of herself for even knowing who they are. It's so sad," said the redhead. Tim was watching them from the porch of the tennis shack. She put her head down, pretending to watch the steps as she hopped up to meet him.

"Good morning, ladies," he said.

"Hi, Tim," the girls answered in a singsong way. Everything sounded like an inside joke to Amanda. When he saw her, a boy from her class missed the Hacky Sack someone kicked to him.

"You belong here?" he called out. His surprise was so genuine Amanda decided not to be offended. Plus, she could feel Tim standing behind her. "Yeah," she shrugged.

"Volley to volley, people. Let's go." His voice was so close it made her eardrum quiver.

There was no mercy in the ninety-degree heat. They ran laps; they sprinted backward

over the lines of the court; they bunny-hopped through ladders on the ground; they made a human figure eight, hitting first a forehand and then running in a wide arc to hit a backhand. They played *aces high, running doubles, pursuit, cyclone, fence drill, and conquering the court*. After fifteen minutes, there was a spider web of fire spreading between Amanda's ribs. The little yellow ball was the only thing she could see. The court became a chessboard of fast-moving pieces and split-second strategy. She found an ecstasy of breath, timing, and movement. Moreover, she had never heard people in Connecticut make so much noise before. It was as rowdy as a Commodore's football game. People shouted, laughed, screamed commentary from the sidelines, grunted, yelped, giggled. No one kept their composure except Tim, who fed them ball after ball without ever breaking a sweat.

After the first break, he set out a boom box and put in a tape of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. The boys groaned. "Disco?!" Some of them started rolling around on the grass, pretending to retch. "Tim, man, put on *Houses of the Holy!*" called out Leif Patterson, the tallest boy in the group. Amanda knew him as someone in the class ahead of her. He had a girlfriend in her grade who everyone said was the prettiest girl in the school. Amanda didn't agree. In her opinion, the girl was just a checklist of all the right assets: tall, thin, long blond hair, and gold bangles on her wrist.

Tim seemed not to have heard the chorus of misery he had unleashed. He turned the volume up and announced, "Overheads!" It made Amanda laugh.

At noon, they were done. Some of the boys collapsed into chairs around the deck; some kids grabbed their duffel bags and headed for the pool; some walked over the greens to their houses at the edge of the club. Eating a peach, Tim approached Amanda. He handed her one.

“We’re going to work on your serve.”

The redhead, whose name was Christina, and her friend Carol Ann turned to stare. Amanda was so shocked she would have choked on her own saliva if her mouth had been able to produce any. The truth was, she didn’t have a serve. Tim had had to show her what a “continental grip” was. All day, he’d been giving her special instructions on the side, in a low, calm voice, and then she had jumped back into the action. She’d never felt self-conscious, because he taught everybody this way.

But now, everybody was looking at her. Tim had already walked back onto the court with a basket of balls. Amanda stood up to follow him.

“Hey, Manders,” Christina called. At some point during the day, Amanda had acquired a nickname. “Come to the pool after.” She and Carol Ann trotted off. They looked very grown-up with their bright straw bags slung over their shoulders.

“So Amanda,” Tim began when she joined him. “The first thing about tennis is, when a ball lands outside the white lines, it’s generally considered ‘out.’”

Amanda giggled. “I know!”

“Okay, I just mention it because, according to you, nothing was out today, especially if it was hit by Christina.” Amanda shifted her weight from one hip to the other. In the silence, she felt another giggle coming on. “You’re a good player. Some day you might even beat someone, possibly a friend. And so I just want to warn you that if that happens the sky very probably will fall, and then no one will ever talk to you again, unless you agree to cut off a limb to make amends. So, I’m just saying, you know, don’t ever call anything ‘out’.”

Amanda laughed but she wanted to cry. She wished it were okay to hug Tim, but he was

already stuffing his pockets with balls, ready to explain about the toss.

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Amanda became a club kid. As the delicious weeks wore on, she parked her bike with the others as the sprinklers were coming on in the morning, and pedaled for home just as the barbecues were being lit at night. She argued successfully for a striped woven bag with leather handles to carry all of her gear in: tennis racket; swimsuit; the barrettes with ribbons she was weaving for Christina; a Walkman with Cat Stevens' *Tea for the Tillerman*, the Grateful Dead's *Skeletons From the Closet*, and James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* tapes; her Bain de Soleil sunscreen; a copy of *A Separate Peace*, which was required reading for the summer; *Seventeen* magazine; and cheap drugstore sunglasses in plastic tortoiseshell frames.

The smell of frying meat, chlorine, and humidity was forever stamped in her mind as the perfume of summer. She learned how to do a flip and a back dive off the low board, but she never did make it off the high dive. On her third attempt, she spent so long deliberating up on the concrete platform that the guard blew his whistle at her and waved her down. Amanda was too relieved to be humiliated.

When she got back to her towel, Christina was cracking up. "Oh my God, you are such a dork. Your face!" Amanda smiled. She was enjoying being the clown in Christina's life. "You know who was watching you from the patio?" The patio under the awning, where the grown-ups had their crab salad and iced tea. "Tim."

The muscles in Amanda's face went slack. "Tim?"

"Yeah. He stood up from that table and was watching you. He looked worried." Christina started laughing again.

Amanda looked over to the tables, but even though her vision was fuzzy at that distance, she knew he wasn't there anymore. She had let him down, not being able to jump.

Amanda went home early that afternoon. She found Spitzzy upstairs in her bathroom, furious. She held out two pairs of Amanda's underwear crusted with blood. "You told me you had rinsed these out."

There never was anything to say when Spitzzy had her busted. Amanda kept her eyes locked on one gold button in her mother's blouse. Spitzzy stepped closer and brandished the underwear in Amanda's face. "Did you? Huh? Did you rinse these out?" Her voice had reached a dangerous treble.

Amanda teared up. "No," she whispered.

It always happened so fast: a flash of diamond, a flash of her brown skin, the rush of air, and then the sting of her slap. What immediately followed threatened to sink Amanda. Humiliation, shock, unbearable agony that pulled her sinews in opposite directions. She was always surprised to find herself standing when the first wave passed.

Today, she hadn't even dropped her bag. It held everything she needed. She turned and ran back down the stairs.

Outside, it was still beastly hot. The air was so heavy, even the cicadas' loud chorus sounded far away. She found herself at the club's bike rack, without remembering the ride. Christina's bike was still there, so Amanda avoided the pool. There was no way she could tell anyone about Spitzzy, and her mother's handprint might still be on her cheek. The tennis house was the only place to go. Even if Tim weren't there, she could practice her serve. Or hit against the backboard.

She walked slowly along the pebble walkway. Everything was so pretty in Connecticut. The trees with their fat leaves were like old grandmothers hovering over her. Up ahead, the tennis house stood proud with its perfectly white clapboard sides and tailored green roof. Handsome boys were leaning against the red railings. As she got closer, she could see that they weren't leaning, they were standing. In fact, there was a crowd of people standing, grown-ups and kids, many she didn't recognize because she was never at the courts at this time of day. They all seemed to be in some kind of circle, like they were watching the demonstration of a new gadget.

"Whoa!" the crowd said, and stepped back as one body. Amanda hurried to the steps. Looking up through the slats in the railing, she saw that it was Tim in the center of this group, and so was a man in a suit. A suit in this setting was so incongruous Amanda stopped where she was.

"I mean it!" the man screamed and lunged at Tim. He stopped, inches from the pro's chin. He was shorter than Tim and somewhat round. His red face seemed likely to explode out of the top of his pink dress shirt. For a second, the only thing that moved was the man's tie, tick-tocking across his chest. Then the man rediscovered his courage and swung upward at Tim's face. He connected but lost his balance, and both men fell into a set of chairs behind them.

The women in the crowd screamed. High school boys jumped in to separate them. The man ripped himself away from the boys who were holding him. "You stay the fuck away from my wife. You hear me? I'll fucking ruin you," he screamed again and ran down the steps past Amanda.

She had flattened herself against the railing to avoid him. Turning her head, she looked

up at Tim one last time. He was still sitting, staring at his shoes, before a hand reached out and he took it to lift himself up. The women crowded around him while he brushed himself off, even though there was nothing on him.

She'd seen that expression before. She thought of her father in the back of the limo on the way to the airport the morning after his defeat. He suddenly collapsed into her mother's shoulder. "Aw-w, Spitz," Amanda heard him whisper in her ear. His voice was so thick, he had to speak up to get any sound out. "Why can't they put me in a FedEx bag and ship me back up."

Her mother had put her hands on both sides of his ears and kissed him for a long time on the mouth. Then she had sat him back up and they'd ridden the rest of the way in silence, without touching.

These men were cracked. Amanda could see the hairline fractures, like porcelain dolls that had been dropped and then glued expertly together. The women in the crowd continued to gingerly press their hands against Tim, making sure he was all right, while others went around setting the chairs aright. Amanda watched for a while, and then she took a piece of him home with her.

THE END