

and

she

was

JESSICA VERDI

Point

Copyright © 2018 by Jessica Verdi
All rights reserved. Published by Point, an imprint of Scholastic Inc.,
Publishers since 1920. SCHOLASTIC, POINT, and associated logos are trademarks and/or
registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for
author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to
Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product
of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-15053-7

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, April 2018

Book design by Nina Goffi

CHAPTER ONE

Time slows. I sense everything. My breath is fast but steady, my callused palm in its familiar curve around the racquet's handle. I stare the ball down—unblinking, undeterred—and count the nanoseconds. Ready. Eager. Calculating. Finally, with a ferocious forehand stroke, I let out a grunt and connect strings to ball. I can almost hear the poor thing wailing in frustration as it sails away from me. Mary Shea, my training partner across the net, darts into position to volley it back.

In moments like these, when I'm in the zone, my hair slick with sweat and my muscles thrumming, the only things that exist are the ball, the net, and the court, and the symbiotic relationship my body has with each. It doesn't matter if I'm playing against Mary, or our coach, Bob, or no one at all except a steadfast, bruised wall. The rest of the planet tunes out to a distant static; my own thoughts dim to the lowest volume on the dial. On the court, there is no problem that isn't solved by hard work and determination.

Mary and I keep the volley going. It's our third set, match point; advantage, me. If I score the next point, I win. I imagine I'm on the hard court at Arthur Ashe Stadium, going head-to-head with Serena Williams in the finals of the US Open, the audience half cheering, half holding their breaths in suspense.

Someday, I vow, I'll be there.

Mary returns the ball close to the net, but I meet it easily and smash it—hard—back to her side. She shrieks as she dives for it, but she’s too far away. The little yellow sphere bounces to the ground, unobstructed.

“Yes!” I shout on the last of my air, lifting my racquet high in triumph.

“Very nice, both of you,” Bob calls from his trusty portable camping chair by the net post, where he’s jotting in his notebook.

“Damn, girl,” Mary says, holding her hand out to me. Even though it’s just a practice match, we always shake before and after.

“You too,” I say, gripping her sweaty palm across the net. “That might have been one of our best matches ever.”

She shrugs. “Would’ve been better if I’d won.”

I roll my eyes, out of routine more than irritation. Typical Mary. She likes to work hard and stretch her limits, which you’d think would mean she accepts that losing sometimes is part of the game. No point in practicing with an evenly matched opponent if you care only about winning. But no. She wants it all, every time.

It can be hard watching Mary, the girl who has all the money and resources and support in the world, go off and play in pro tournaments, earning ranking points and making a name for herself on the circuit. Meanwhile, most days, I’m at the local rec center in my middle-of-nowhere town in western New York State, hitting balls against a racquetball wall, my shoes squeaking against the wood floor, my teeth clenched in determination.

Mary and I head over to the bench where our stuff is. Her chestnut hair is still pinned into its usual severe bun on the top of her

head, with only the tiniest flyaways at her temples to hint at physical exertion. I don't know how she does it. By the end of a killer match, my wavy, shoulder-length blond hair is always spilling out of its ponytail—more a stinky, tangled rat's nest than anything else. My pale skin is blotchy and absolutely dripping with sweat; Mary's tan skin is smooth and glistening like a lake on a sunny morning.

I wipe my forehead and neck with my towel and take a long chug of water. I'm packing up my gear when Bob comes over. His apple cheeks are red and shiny, matching his bald head. Everything about Bob Nelson is round and glowing. He was a pro player from 1979 to 1985 and doesn't let me get away with not giving my best every single day.

“For the winner.” He holds out a small, individually wrapped square of dark chocolate. I laugh and pop it in my mouth. Food is fuel and strength and brainpower, so I try to be very careful about what I put in my body. I actually prefer lean proteins, dark, leafy greens, and whole grains to junk food—one reason of many why the kids at school and I seem to be from different planets. But I can never pass up one of Bob's little prizes. I figure if I bust my butt for a couple hours first, the few extra grams of refined sugar are acceptable. “You've made quite a bit of progress on your two-handed backhand, Dara. I'm impressed.”

“Thanks!” I say, relieved. I've been working on that stroke a lot lately on the racquetball court.

He claps me on the shoulder. “Listen. You took lots of risks today, kept up great momentum. I've never seen you this confident on the court. It's time to get out there.”

“Really?” Suddenly, I seem to have gotten a second wind. I could dance around the court right now. I know what he means by “out there.” Bob wants me to go *pro*. And so do I. High school ended a week ago. It’s time to start making my dreams a reality.

Since the moment I could walk, maybe even before that, tennis has been my sole focus. I’ll never forget sitting in the little seat compartment of a shopping cart at Target, pointing to a child-sized red plastic racquet and wailing at the top of my lungs until my mom grudgingly agreed to buy it. Since then, everything else—schoolwork, social life, *everything*—has taken a back seat to my training. It’s part of me.

Because of tennis, I’ve never been to a pizza party or kissed a boy. Because of tennis, my relationship with my mother has been stretched, taxed, strained.

Because of tennis, I know what it feels like to be proud. Because of tennis, I have an answer when people ask me who I am, despite all the other blank spaces in my life.

It was all my choice, every time, the good and the bad. And now I can finally go after a professional tennis career.

Almost.

The one thing I don’t have is money. And this sport requires a lot of it. Tennis club memberships are expensive, and so are training sessions. As it is, I have to drive an hour and a half each way, every Tuesday and Friday, to Rochester, because that’s where the nearest tennis center is located—and where Bob and Mary live. I’ve won a little money in the few regional junior circuit tournaments I’ve been able to play in, and earned some more at my

part-time job at the juice stand at the mall. But I've spent every dime on coaching and equipment. Bob cuts me a break on his fee because I always double up my sessions with Mary. She trains with him six days a week—four one-on-one sessions, and two with me. This has been our system for the past few years, and I'm equal parts grateful and jealous.

Going pro is even pricier. When you're starting out, the tournaments don't pay much. The prize pools usually total around \$10,000—and that's split among the top few finishers. So even if you win, you're not earning a real living. Plus you have to pay for travel, accommodations, equipment, your trainer, and so on. It adds up fast. A lot of players, like Mary, are bankrolled by family money. That's not an option for me. My mom is a nurse. She works hard, taking overtime shifts at all hours of the day and night to ensure we make ends meet, but her paycheck isn't huge. And I have no dad to speak of, no extended family, no one else to ask.

"There's an upcoming ITF women's tournament in Toronto," Bob continues. "Mary's playing in it."

"I know," I say. The International Tennis Federation circuit is where a professional tennis career begins. Ideally, I'd travel to as many tournaments as possible—in the US and beyond—put my nose to the grindstone, and start earning ranking points. I'll work my way up to the Women's Tennis Association 125K Series, continue earning points, and then, if all goes according to plan, eventually advance to the WTA Tour. That's the big one, the one where I could someday see Serena's face staring back at me from across the net. "There's also one before that in Buffalo, a few in Florida,

and one in Charlottesville, Virginia.” I can recite the ITF schedule by heart. I should be signing up for as many as possible.

Bob nods. “I understand finances are a concern . . .” He lowers his voice. I don’t know why; Mary is perfectly aware of my situation. She’s even alluded to being happy about it, on occasion. Because she knows if she had to play me—really play me, in a real match—she’d lose there too. “But starting slow is better than not starting at all. If there’s any way you could make it happen, I think you should begin with the Toronto one in August. It’s got a bigger prize pool than the others, so if you did well—which I’m confident you would—it could get you off to a great start.”

“That would be amazing.”

He levels me with his gaze. “Otherwise, Dara, what’s the point of all this?” He waves a hand around us.

His words punch the air out of me far more effectively than two hours of running around the court did. It was easier to pretend I had plenty of time to figure things out when school was still in session. But I need to make a move. Now. Or the Marys of the world are going to pass me by and Bob will have to move on to more serious players.

Toronto, Canada. It’s only a three-hour drive from home, but it might as well be the moon. I’ve never been out of the country; I’ve barely even left this little pocket of upstate New York. Seeing what else is out there has always been on my to-do list, but so far it hasn’t been an option.

Mary’s dad arrives then, and Bob excuses himself to give Mr. Shea the rundown on today’s session.