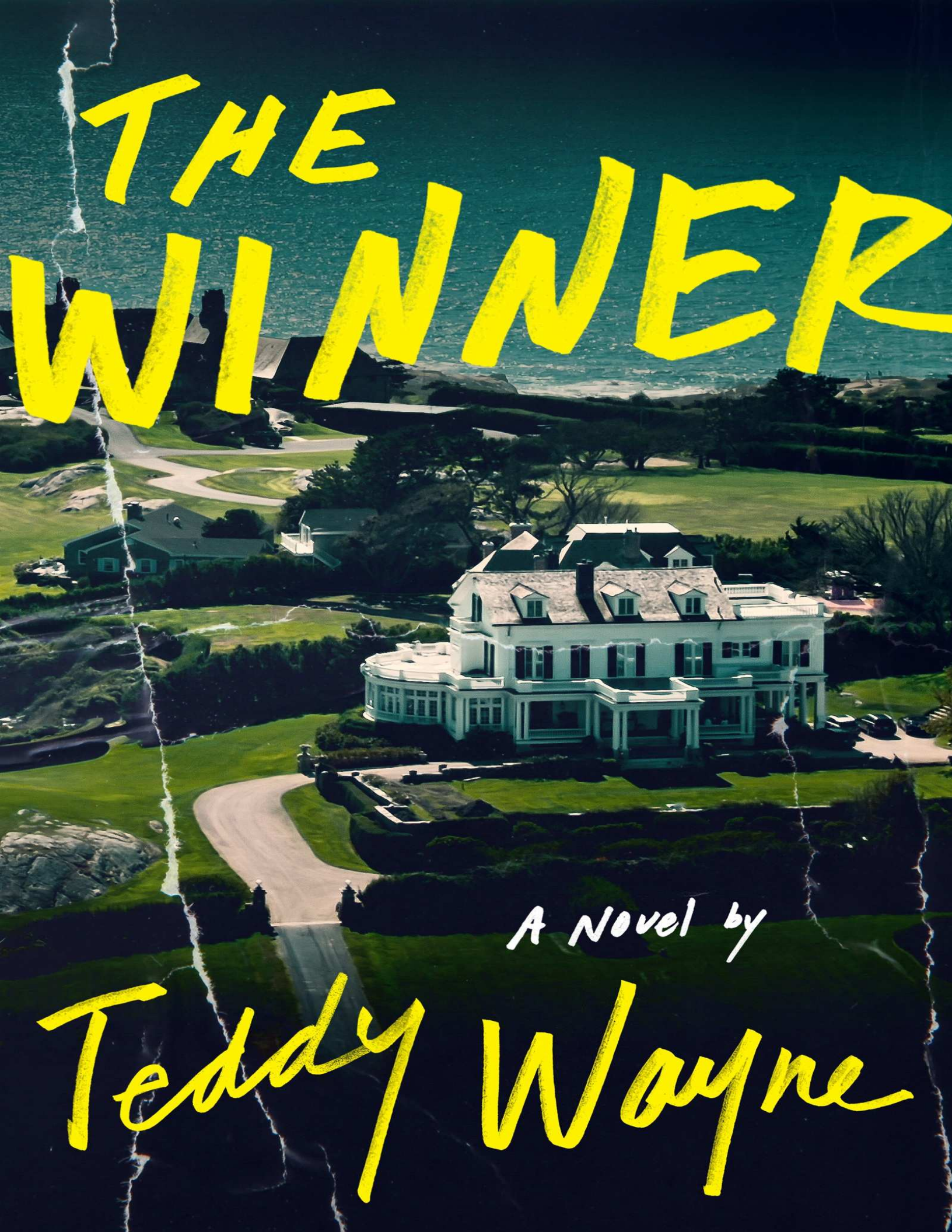
THE WINNER
A Novel by
Teddy Wayne

THE WINNER

A NOVEL

TEDDY WAYNE

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Dedication

For Phoebe, Angus, and Kate

Epigraph

A little water clears us of this deed.

—*Macbeth*

The true defensive player (or “dinker,” as he is unaffectionately called in recreational circles) is prepared to hit ten, twenty, or more balls in the court per point. . . . Dinkers understand the facts of life at the recreational level of tennis.

—Allen Fox, *Think to Win: The Strategic Dimension of Tennis*

Contents

I

Chapter 1

The road beyond the white security gate, fringed by the rich green foliage of June, curved gently out of sight.

"The code?" Conor couldn't remember anything from John Price about a gate code. "That's not an intercom?"

The cabdriver shook his head. "You need a code to get in," he said.

Conor tried calling John, but the connection immediately failed—just a lonely bar of finicky service. The driver's phone wasn't picking up a signal, either.

"Maybe you can walk," the man suggested as his flimsy mask slipped down his nose, as it had many times throughout the ride. Conor was glad his mother was safely cocooned in their apartment back in Yonkers, where nearly everyone was still covering up in public spaces.

The map on his phone wasn't loading, so he didn't know where exactly to find John's house on this two-mile pinkie of land jutting from the southern shores of Massachusetts. He had to transport an overstuffed backpack, a rolling suitcase with one wonky wheel, his three-racquet tennis bag, and, most cumbersome of all, his twenty-five-pound tabletop stringing machine in another bag. Each leg of the journey he'd taken on foot since that morning—from his mother's apartment to her Mitsubishi, the car to the Metro-North train, out of Grand Central to hail a taxi to Port Authority, boarding the bus to Providence, Rhode Island, exiting the station to this cab—had required him to shuffle along like a caterpillar.

But it was either walk or wait, with the meter running, for another car to open the gate. Conor paid, collected his bags from the trunk, and passed through an opening for pedestrians. A wooden sign nailed to a tree greeted him in cursive:

Private Property
No Trespassing, Please
CUTTERS NECK ASSOCIATION

Single-lane Cutters Neck Road, bisecting and snaking down the peninsula, was quiet except for birdsong and the metallic chirr of insects. Roadside honeysuckle sweetened the tangy ocean air. To his left, a sailboat drowsed in the calm bay. The Atlantic was visible on the other side of the stiletto-shaped neck, too.

Conor had seen aerial photography of the place from real estate sites, but he hadn't been quite prepared for the essentially unspoiled beauty of what he was now walking through—for what, incredibly, he was about to live in (on?) for the summer. He snapped a picture of the ocean to send to his mother once he had service.

He passed the first driveway, a gravel arc before a house studded with porthole windows, its slate-gray shingles blackened in spots like overripe bananas. The porch reassuringly featured a BLACK LIVES MATTER sign; he'd had no idea what to expect politically from a gated community in deep-blue New England.

The next few houses shared the same architectural style, though there were no more adornments except for one porch flying a massive American flag that twitched in the breeze.

Conor set down the stringing machine and rubbed his sore arm. He regretted bringing it; he might not even have any use for it over the summer. A sporting goods store in town was still restringing racquets, but he couldn't tolerate paying for anything he could do himself.

The first sign of human life in this idyllic landscape came from a golf cart whizzing by, captained by a preteen blond girl, with two younger and even more towheaded children next to her. Conor smiled and waved in neighborly fashion, hoping they might offer him a lift on the back, but the trio only stared at him as they passed, deadpan as child actors in a horror movie.

He finally reached the mailbox for John's address, whose number he'd fortunately remembered. Midway up the grassy driveway through a stand of trees was a short perpendicular path into more woods. There, tucked away in a clearing within sight of John's house, hid a squat cabin, Conor's free living quarters until Labor Day.

Or not quite free, but paid in kind. Having no luck on the job market and panicked about repaying his $144,000 in law school loans once the pandemic-triggered federal freeze was lifted, Conor had reached out in May to the Upper East Side tennis club where he'd worked summers in college. The lockdown had forced the place to close, but his old boss passed along an

opportunity that had just come in: a member would put someone up in his waterfront guesthouse over the summer in exchange for lessons six days a week, and the instructor could turn a profit by charging other willing residents in the area.

And now he was here. The door was ajar; when he'd asked about getting the keys, John had told him no one locked their doors on the neck, unnerving the native New Yorker used to the nightly ritual of deadbolts and chains. Inside the one-room cabin were a twin bed and a desk, a kitchenette, and a small bathroom with a shower. John had stocked the fridge and cupboards and provided a bicycle with a basket for the twenty-minute ride to the village market.

Few frills, but also few distractions: an ideal headquarters for hunkering down for eight-hour days of studying for the bar exam in between tennis lessons.

Conor's phone was picking up service now, though still just one bar, and its seven-year-old battery was nearly dead. He sent the ocean picture to his mother and texted John that he'd arrived.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. When he opened it, a lean man in his sixties was standing a dozen feet back. He wore a dark jacket and tie paired with salmon-colored shorts and sockless loafers.

"Welcome to Cutters," John said.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Price." Though they were at a safe distance, Conor fished his mask out of his pocket and strapped it on as a show of respect.

"It's John, please. And no need for the mask if we're outside."

"Of course," Conor said. "My mom has diabetes, so I wear a mask everywhere."

His eyes drifted down again to John's lower body. He'd never seen a man in pink shorts before.

John evidently noticed. "I've been in Zoom meetings all day, hence the Bermuda businessman look. I suppose the pandemic is the new casual Fridays."

"I've been on a bus from Port Authority all day. Hence . . ." Conor gestured at his wrinkled attire.

"That Providence station isn't much better," John said with a chuckle. "Someone here once parked his car around there, broad daylight—stolen in fifteen minutes. Did I not recommend you take Amtrak?"

He had, but the cheapest train ticket was one hundred and nineteen dollars versus thirty-four for the bus.

"I've always been a bus guy," Conor said.

John ran through the cabin's quirks and said he'd walk over with him to the tennis court in the morning.

"Oh," he said after taking two steps. "There's a party on the neck tonight. Outdoors, obviously. Please consider yourself my guest for any social events here."

"Thank you very much," Conor said. "I'm pretty beat, so I'll probably stay in."

"You sure? I know standing around with a bunch of stiff Wasps may not be the most exciting night, but you might meet some new clients. Assuming you don't mind mixing business and pleasure."

Conor had only three tennis lessons lined up in addition to John's unpaid sessions. Even if all of them turned into weekly appointments, he'd need to make much more money this summer.

"As long as the Wasps don't sting," he said.

After a harrowing couple of seconds in which Conor worried he'd offended him with his bad joke, John smiled.

"If we do, we're numb to it ourselves," he said. "God's frozen people."

JOHN HAD TOLD HIM THE CABIN ALSO HAD AN OUTDOOR SHOWER IN THE back, so Conor decided to try it out. He'd never taken a real shower outside before. Wind channeled through the wooden stall's eye-level window, which showed the blue-green water in the distance. His mom's windowless bathroom in Yonkers was cramped to begin with, and they'd been too afraid of Covid to have someone come in and repair the exhaust fan that had malfunctioned in April; every shower now produced a claustrophobic sauna.

He couldn't believe his good fortune—not only to have a desperately needed job but for it to include an open-air shower with an ocean view.

A few minutes before six, he tucked a button-down into his lone pair of khakis and headed over to the party. He felt himself growing nervous as he approached, uncertain if he was dressed appropriately. (Should he have packed his blazer? Where did you even buy pink shorts?) His work as a tennis pro had thrown him together with plenty of well-off older people in his life, and he knew how to act around them: be exceedingly polite, good humored, and deferential, like a waiter at a high-end restaurant. Cutters Neck,

however, was the most rarefied stratum he'd encountered, and more to the point, he'd never lived among them on their home turf.

A few dozen guests milled about behind the party house by an infinity pool that appeared superfluous, surrounded as they were by near-infinite ocean. The crowd was composed predominantly of boomers who, like John, had sought refuge from the virus here, along with a clique of college-aged or high-school kids and several gaggles of frolicking children and their parents.

Conor immediately noticed that there wasn't a mask in sight. Even if the recent George Floyd protests had suggested that outdoor gatherings might be safe, a crowded party was risky enough to make him consider turning around. If he contracted Covid, no one would take a lesson from him for two weeks, minimum.

But he also needed to rustle up more work. Not wanting to draw attention as either a hypochondriac or as someone who might have symptoms himself, he kept his mask pocketed and beelined for the hors d'oeuvres, as he hadn't eaten anything substantial since breakfast. When the two people before him plucked deviled eggs from a tray with their bare hands, though, he pivoted away from the food and fixed a gin and tonic.

John found him and led him into the fray. The men, a couple of whom also wore pink shorts, with one in tomato-red pants, all gave their first and last names as they shook hands, so Conor adopted the custom. He met John's friendly wife—who said she got her exercise in not by playing tennis but by cutting invasive plants on the neck—and the three people who had already signed up for lessons. To everyone else John introduced him as the exceptional tennis pro from Westchester (not Yonkers, Conor noted) whose slots were filling up rapidly. Most of them commented, discouragingly, that they didn't play or hadn't in years. Many residents bore a family resemblance to one another, save for one rumpled, wild-haired eccentric who spoke at length about the dangers of toxins in water.

Other than him, the Cutters residents were gregarious and welcoming, and Conor began to relax. Very rich people were still people.

"Good God, you're handsome!" gushed their hostess, the gray streaks in her hair betraying a recent disruption of regular salon appointments. "Are you sure you're a tennis pro and not a movie star?"

"My last acting role was in second grade," he said with a self-conscious lowering of his head. The embarrassment was real, even if the abashed smile and deflective modesty were effectively habit by now. He knew, from

experience, this was the only acceptable response, because to dismiss the compliment altogether was almost more egotistical than embracing it.

His effect on women was the one area of life where he'd never had to put in much effort. It was pure genetic luck, absolutely a perk, but, on occasion, it gave him a partial understanding of the drawbacks that he imagined beautiful women felt more often: being desired and objectified at once, ogled yet not seen at all. Some people—his professors, especially—assumed he was an idiot until he disproved them.

He certainly wasn't complaining, but if he could have chosen a natural-born advantage, he would have taken money. So many things, from his mother's health to his career prospects to the basic convenience of not having to haul his luggage across four states by bus, would have been much easier.

"Then how about politics?" the woman, whose name Conor didn't catch, was saying. "You look like you could be the president. Doesn't he look like a president, John?"

"He does have a certain Kennedy-esque air," John said. "Before I give you my vote, you got any skeletons in your closet? Drive anyone off a bridge?"

"No one they've found yet," Conor said, even more uncomfortable now under John's scrutiny. "You have a beautiful pool, by the way," he added, hoping to change the topic.

"Thank you," she said. "You know, Suzanne Estabrook actually *stayed* at the same hotel with Teddy Kennedy on Martha's Vineyard the weekend of Chappaquiddick?"

The conversation naturally swung around to the presidential election. "Tom Becker's voting for him," she confided.

"You're kidding me—*again*?" John asked. "He hasn't learned his lesson?"

"He wouldn't admit it at first. Sally had to practically pry it out of him."

"Don't worry," John told Conor. "There are only five or six Trump voters on the entire neck. We'd love to get rid of them, if you have any ideas."

After some discussion of Covid (the hostess: "I hate to say it, but it's a class thing more than anything else. I'd be absolutely shocked if anyone on Cutters dies from it. I don't even think anyone here will *get* it"; John: "Oh, we'll all get it. Eventually we'll all get it. The only question is when") and gossip about a postponed wedding on the neck and the couple's extravagant registry (a Tiffany fork—a single fork, the hostess clarified, not a set—cost

three hundred and sixty dollars), John left to say hello to someone. The hostess peeled off, telling Conor that she and her husband were going out of town on Monday for two weeks but that he was welcome to use the pool in their absence.

“Thank you,” he said. “Though I’m not much of a swimmer.”

The young girl he’d seen driving the golf cart skipped by in a floral dress and joined a group of similarly attired children. Amid the snowy tundra of white skin at the party was a single Black family, the popular-looking father and son in near-matching polo shirts.

The event had been a bust for drumming up business. He should slip out now, while John was occupied, but the cocktail he’d been nursing had only emphasized how empty his stomach was. He returned to the hors d’oeuvres when no one was around and, prudence chipped away by his gin and tonic, gobbled four of the creamy halved eggs in succession. Then he picked up the bottle of top-shelf gin to wash it down but, before tilting it into his glass, held it deliberatively with both hands. He had to make up for the day of exam prep lost to the bus ride, and one drink was his limit for retention of his books.

The college kids chatted in a circle by the pool. Though few of them looked old enough to drink legally, they all held tumblers or wineglasses with body language that suggested a lifelong familiarity with seaside cocktail parties. They laughed the carefree laughter of young people who don’t have to study for anything, who don’t have jobs they have to wake up for in the morning, who can drink as much as they want without consequence. Conor couldn’t imagine ever feeling the way they did. There had always been a morning tennis practice or a workplace to punch into, money to earn to help with rent, a looming test or paper or thick book. Although that was mostly all right by him. He felt best when he was working hard. Downtime made him restless.

But his alienation from his peers wasn’t just from the gap in responsibilities. Nor was it the fact that he was always a little lost when they gossiped, in slang he was behind the curve on, about a new TV show or song or celebrity or something trending on the internet. It was how they spoke about themselves, what they freely divulged to anyone who would listen, flaunting frailty as a show of strength, taking pride in wounds and weaknesses that had once been shameful. Good for them, Conor supposed, but broadcasting one’s vulnerability to the world was unfathomable to him. In a tennis match, you never revealed an injury to your opponent if you could

help it.

An unsettling image flashed into his head of himself barreling into the group, like a bowling ball into a cluster of blond wood pins, and knocking the rich kids into the pool.

As he was about to set down the gin in favor of sparkling water, a voice behind him, low but distinctly feminine, asked, “Are you going to pour that bottle or cradle it to sleep?”

The woman was tall, close to Conor’s height. Oversize sunglasses reflected the setting sun, and the wide brim of a straw hat shaded a bloodlessly pale face whose pointed features carved the air before her like the prow of a ship. Her medium-length hair was almost as yellow as that of the ubiquitous children. A network of blue veins peeked through the nearly translucent skin of her sinewy arms.

“Sorry,” he said. “Did you want—May I pour you some?”

She held out her quarter-full glass as if he were a caterer. “Don’t be shy,” she said, crooking her finger after he made a modest pour. “I’m not driving.”

He obliged and topped her off with a splash of tonic, then, when she nodded at the ice bucket, plunked in two cubes with a pair of tongs.

“So,” she said. “I don’t recognize you. Are you a bastard?”

“Excuse me?” He was thrown off enough by the obscenity that he wasn’t sure if he’d misheard her.

“A bastard is someone’s illegitimate son. I’m asking if that’s the reason I don’t recognize you.”

Her odd question, delivered without the inflection of a joke, made him momentarily forget why he was there. “No, I . . . I’m the tennis . . . pro.” Technically, he was certified only as a recreational coach, not a pro, but his former boss had recommended he stretch the truth to get this job.

“The tennis . . . pro,” she repeated robotically. “Do you go by your vocation, or do you also have a name?”

“Conor. O’Toole.”

“Oh, yes. There was an email about lessons.” She cocked her chin up; behind her sunglasses she was probably squinting with suspicion. “You’re not trying to con us all, are you, Conor O’Toole? You’re not a con man impersonating a tennis pro for some nefarious purpose?”

The woman said this without a smile and took a drink, training her sunglasses on him the whole time. Women rarely made Conor self-conscious, but within a minute of talking to her he felt fidgety and diffident, as though a

clutch of pedestrians were watching him parallel park.

“Just here to give lessons,” he said.

“Quite utilitarian. Well, then, how does one receive a lesson from the very serious Conor O’Toole?”

“All my info’s in the email John sent around.” When she didn’t respond, he added, “It’s a hundred and fifty dollars for an hour-long lesson.” (Conor had initially proposed a hundred dollars per lesson, the going rate at his old tennis club, but John had said he would attract more takers if he charged a hundred and fifty, as “no one here will think you’re worth it if you don’t cost enough.”)

“It’s gauche to talk money,” said the woman.

This line was spoken more cuttingly than the rest of her teasing. He’d always believed transparency was for the benefit of the customer, but at the moment it was apparent that he’d grossly overstepped one of this world’s unspoken lines of conduct, exposing himself as every bit the impostor she’d labeled him.

“I’m so—rry,” he said.

A few weeks into eighth grade, Conor had developed a stammer, seemingly overnight. It began innocuously, a brief pause inserted into words here and there. But within a couple of months it invariably appeared if he spoke more than a few sentences, the delay extending tortuously; his mind would know what the next sound was, yet his tongue and lungs refused to cooperate.

His mother assured him that it would eventually go away on its own, but he was terrified it wouldn’t. He’d heard that Joe Biden, then soon to become vice president, had overcome a childhood stutter by reciting Irish poetry for hours in front of the mirror. Conor decided to do the same, but with the medical journals his mother brought home from the gastroenterologist’s office where she worked. He figured if he could negotiate the arcane jargon, then he could handle everyday speech.

It was almost comic in hindsight, a thirteen-year-old boy studiously enunciating until bedtime *upper endoscopy* and *management of anal fissures* from back issues of *Diseases of the Colon & Rectum*, but it had worked. By the time he entered high school, he’d conquered it—almost completely. The key was to stop thinking about it as soon as it happened, because if you didn’t, if you kept worrying it was coming back at full strength, it had a chance of taking root.

The woman’s sunglasses remained locked on him, as if privately documenting the existence of a defect, a marker of some innate inferiority. His body’s thermostat spiked, his hairline prickling with sweat.

“I’m available Tuesday at five o’clock.” It sounded like she was setting the time, not asking if he were free.

“Sure,” he said, keeping his syllables to a minimum.

“I’ll see you then, Conor O’Toole,” she said and walked away.

Only later, when he was brushing his teeth at home, did he realize he hadn’t gotten her name.

“Con man with some nefarious purpose,” he said to himself in the mirror.

He would be making six hundred dollars off these people his first week. If he was a con man, then he was a low-rent one.

Chapter 2

Conor began his first morning of employment on the Cutters tennis court under a cloudless sky. John was a good player and in superb condition for his age. If they ever played a real match, he might scratch out the occasional point against Conor. After hitting for an hour, they recuperated courtside in the shade by a one-room clubhouse with a battered Ping-Pong table inside. ("It's called 'the yacht club,'" John said. "No actual yachts.") Past that was a pier terminating in a wooden platform over the ocean, where, John told him, everyone went swimming.

Conor identified the areas of John's game he wanted to improve over the summer. Then they gulped water in silence.

"You've had a place here for a while?" Conor asked to make conversation.

John gave him an abbreviated history of the neck: three siblings, one his grandfather, had bought the land in the 1920s and built houses. Their families had multiplied and erected more properties over the years, and Cutters was now on its fourth generation, with over twenty homes.

"A few outsiders bought in over the years, but I'm pretty sure all their ancestors came over on the *Mayflower*, too," John said. "Not all, actually. I knew Wesley Patterson from the Harvard Club, and I was the one who told him when the Stillwells' house was up for sale. He's a terrific guy, more a golfer than a tennis player, but they're a wonderful family—you should meet them, if you haven't." From John's conspicuous pride and praise, Conor could guess which family he meant. "And then a few women from my generation married Jews. And the younger people now don't care about that sort of thing like they used to.

"Which is great," he quickly added. "With the name Conor O'Toole, you must have some Irish blood going back a ways."

"My dad was born in Ireland and immigrated here to work in construction."

John nodded. "I'm a lawyer, by the way. Can't remember if I told you."

He hadn’t, but Conor had done his due diligence. He’d been on the fence about abandoning his mother for the summer, but the decision was clinched when he’d learned that John was a partner at one of the city’s most reputable firms. When they’d spoken in May about this job, he hadn’t revealed that he was finishing law school, not wanting to scare his prospective employer with the idea that he might bail on the summer if he landed a real position. Now that they’d had a lesson together, Conor felt comfortable telling the truth.

“I actually just graduated law school myself,” he said.

“Really? Where from?”

“Um”—Conor swallowed the next words—“New York Law School?”

“NYU’s terrific. We have a lot of people from there.”

Conor hesitated, reluctant to correct him, but didn’t want to lie. “Actually, not NYU—New York Law School.”

“Oh, of course. That’s a fine school, too.” John did his best to conceal his dip in esteem. Conor had been accepted into a few higher-ranked schools, but none gave him the same funding, so he hadn’t had much choice in the matter. He’d ended up graduating near the top of his class, but that still hadn’t helped him attract any job offers, especially with the hiring freezes that had begun after the pandemic hit.

“I’m studying for the bar and applying to jobs,” Conor said. “I obviously wouldn’t start anything until after the summer.”

“What’re you interested in?”

“I’m open to a number of fields, but I’m focused on corporate law.”

“I’m in corporate litigation myself.” John cleared his throat, likely eager to move on from the topic; his firm would never consider hiring someone with Conor’s middling pedigree. “So, did your dad introduce you to tennis? I wouldn’t think it was very big in Ireland.”

Conor shook his head and took a long drink of water. “It was all luck,” he explained, relaying a truncated version of his origin story. One April afternoon in eighth grade, as he was walking home from school past a park with public courts, he came across a racquet with a broken frame sticking out of a garbage can. Staring down yet another dull, quiet afternoon in their empty apartment, he found a nearly dead ball and hit by himself against a handball wall. He liked the soothing repetition, the mindless sense of accomplishment every time the racquet made solid contact.

He began to stop by the wall every day, sometimes studying the strokes of the accomplished players on the courts, until an older man who played

there frequently invited him to rally. Richard Wotten ended up teaching Conor the game the rest of that spring and summer. None of the public schools in Yonkers even fielded a tennis team, but, thanks to Richard's interventions, Conor received special dispensation to try out for the one in nearby Hastings-on-Hudson, and he cracked second doubles on the JV roster in ninth grade.

The handball wall remained a fixture in Conor's life the rest of high school. Outside of tennis season and his after-school jobs (CVS cashier, Baskin-Robbins ice cream scooper, CTown supermarket bagger), when he couldn't find a partner or was simply feeling restless, he'd go and practice, sometimes until it was too dark to see, challenging himself to land twenty consecutive shots inside a small circle he chalked up, to sprint side to side hitting running forehands and backhands for a minute straight, to deflect reflex volleys from five feet away, all against a tireless, relentless, unbeatable opponent who only got better the harder he swung.

But he got better, too, and he'd found it exhilarating to chart his progress, to jump from a seemingly static plateau one day to a higher plane the next, to direct the ball with a level of control that was unavailable to him in the rest of his life. The drop shot that barely cleared the net and died the quietest of deaths on the bounce, a slice serve that tailed away into the doubles alley like a comet for an ace, a lob that arced just beyond your opponent's outstretched racquet before plummeting from heavy topspin—these were feats of beauty, geometry blended with fine art. And unlike the contact sports his friends were into whose outcomes were largely predicated on the sizes of the players, on the court, skillful and strategic Davids had a fighting chance against brute-force Goliaths. (Conor, topping out at five-ten-and-a-half in college, was in the underdog class among the throngs of power-serving six-footers.)

His solo training against the wall prepared him in ways beyond the physical for competition. Singles tennis was the biggest sport in which you competed fully alone, with coaching strictly prohibited during pro men's matches (golfers, at least, enjoyed the strategic and motivational company of a caddy). A solitary game, made for the lone wolves of the athletic world, lonely even when you won; there was no one else with whom to immediately celebrate.

"Sounds like some luck, but mostly hard work," John said. "I learned here from my dad, on this very court. Though it was grass back then. We got rid of it a while ago. Not the easiest thing to tend." He paused, perhaps noticing too