



Excerpted from *Griftopia* by Suzy Vitello

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Chance was stretching his hamstrings on a bench. Their opponents, a man and a woman wearing matching orange jerseys, were jogging around the reserved court in military fashion, as if mandated by an invisible coach. When Chance looked up as she clanged through the metal gate, relief spread across his mouth. “There she is,” he said.

He handed her a paddle. “So, you’ve never played?”

On their long ride up the interstate, she’d divulged her tennis history, leaving off the ranked ninth in the world as a junior part.

How hard can it be, she thought. “I’m a pickle virgin,” she said.

The orange couple came to a stop beside them and began a series of torso stretches. “We’re the Mitchells,” sing-songed the wife, side-bending into a C. “Glad you could stand in for Penny.”

“Penny?” said Helena. Who the fuck was Penny?

“She’s Greg’s—the guy I’m staying with—she’s his girlfriend,” said Chance.

“She has pickle elbow,” said the orange husband.

The wife laughed. “That sounds dirty, doesn’t it? Anyways, Penny’s a four-five, so, maybe this will work out well for us!”

The husband whacked her lightly on the shoulder. “Rude!”

“Oh,” Mrs. Mitchell said, covering her giggling mouth. “My bad. Plus, Chance is amazing, considering he’s unrated.”

Helena felt the red-hot urge to bury these orange Mitchells. She said, “I Googled the rules. There’s something called a kitchen?”

The husband and wife traded bug-eyed glances. They might as well have rubbed their hands in Snidely Whiplash glee, so unsubtle was their delight.

Chance, who was actually looking more fit than she remembered (though his choice of a Grateful Dead T-shirt riddled with moth holes countered the appeal), went over the basics, and then the foursome gathered at the net to engage in something called *dinking*.

The exercise felt like if ping-pong married Tai Chi. The object was to guide the plastic ball a few centimeters over the net so it fell softly in the forecourt. Helena was instructed to grip the paddle like a hammer. Team Orange were bent at the knees, their feet in a wide stance, moving side-to-side in synchronicity as though warming up for Wimbledon (or whatever the pickleball equivalent was).

“Ready?” said the husband, snatching the hole-infested ball midair.

Chance offered a quick side-glance, and Helena nodded.

Mitchell-the-dude flipped a coin, said, “Your call.”

“Heads,” said Chance.

It came up tails and the orange team elected to receive.

Gripping the featherweight paddle, connecting with the wiffle ball, watching it land with a click-clack—by the time they were halfway through the first game, adrenaline began its illustrious course through Helena’s nervous system. They were behind, until they weren’t. Once Helena got a handle on the heft (or lack thereof)

of the ball, and adjusted her cadence, the points began to add up.

At ten-nine, she slammed a no-hitter between the Mitchells, only to hear, “You stepped in the kitchen! Side out.”

Helena’s feet were at least half an inch from the kitchen line, and Chance began to argue, but Helena shushed him. If there was one thing she was good at, it was to seemingly suppress the competitive emotion that typically accompanied bad calls. Instead, she absorbed it. Willed the *fuck you* of it to course through her torso, her arms, her steady gaze.

Mitchell-the-wife served a low, hard one, then claimed Helena’s on-the-back-line return was out, and the orange team whooped and high-fived and paddle-tapped their cheating victory. Chance was fuming, shaking his head. He was about to call it quits, but Helena was just getting the hang of the game. She whispered in his ear, “Worry not, partner, we got the next one. Also, you’re not too bad, Mr. Accordion.”

He growled back, still annoyed. “Beg your pardon Ms. Tennis Phenom, did you think I would suck?”

They played six more games, and, despite Team Orange’s questionable calls, the Mitchells lost every one. The last game was a complete wipeout, with the wife landing on her ass trying to reach for a lob, and shouting, “Jesus Christ!” loud enough that the people one court over objected to the swearing. Also, Helena and Chance were attracting onlookers. A group of young adults had stopped their own game to ogle in wonder.

Helena, bathed in the afterglow of endorphin rush, hugged Chance a bit harder than she meant to. He stood frozen on the court, as if deciding whether or not to up the ante. Helena had the urge to flirt. But to what end? No, nope, she’d best not go there. She

pivoted and sashayed off the court as the Mitchells grumbled, packed up their duffle, and wrapped sweat towels around their necks, tucking the monogrammed terrycloth into their collars, reminiscent of Helena's preppy teen competitors after a hard loss. Clearly disgruntled, they waved without turning around, bickering and faulting each other as they strode off toward the parking lot.

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