



Code of
Conduct

C h e y e n n e B l u e

Chapter 1

VIVA'S HEART POUNDED IN DOUBLE time as she waited at the service line for the crowd to calm. If anything, the cacophony of applause and shouts grew louder.

“Quiet, please.” The umpire’s even tones cut through the din. “Tie breaker, 6-5, Jones. Genevieve Jones to serve.”

Viva drew a deep breath and let the tension drain from her shoulders. She twitched her toe into position a centimetre behind the service line. The crowd’s noise faded; there was nothing in her mind except the next point. She rocked back on her heel and flung the ball skywards.

“C’mon, Paige! Show us what you’ve got!”

The shouted encouragement for her opponent cut through Viva’s concentration. Laughter rippled around centre court. Abort. She lowered her racquet, caught the ball, and fought down her flash of anger as she waited once again for the crowd to settle.

“Please do not call out when play is in progress.” The umpire made a mark on the tablet in front of him.

Viva spun away from the service line and nodded to the ballkid for a towel. New York’s humidity made the racquet slip in her hand like butter on a hot pan. She wiped her face, hands, and the racquet handle. Staring down at the strings, she refocussed her concentration and willed away the butterflies cartwheeling in her stomach. This moment, this point. *Set point.* Nothing else mattered right now. Not her grand slam title defence, not the number one ranking she stood to gain if she succeeded. *This point matters.*

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Only this one. If she won this point, the match would go to three sets. She paced back to the service line, collecting and discarding balls from the ballkid.

She bounced the ball once, twice. A third time. Her grip tightened on the racquet. *This point matters. Only this one.* A fourth bounce and she prepared to swing.

“Time violation. Warning, Miss Jones.”

She dropped the racquet and swung around to face the umpire.

He stared back impassively, as if daring her to react.

She closed her eyes for a second, biting back the hot words she wanted to say. She was maybe a few seconds over time. To call a violation was massively unfair. With a deep breath, she bent and picked up her racquet.

A quick glance at her peppy blonde opponent, now taking pretend swings with the racquet. Paige had a poor three-set record, especially when she lost the second set. Viva knew she could win the match—if it went to a third set. And it was still set point to her. Viva wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her wristband.

Two bounces, the ball toss, the swing. *Ace!* Viva whirled around with a jubilant fist pump.

“Second serve.”

What? Her eyes widened, and she turned to the umpire.

“Foot-fault.” The umpire leant forward and spoke into the microphone. “Miss Jones, a foot-fault was called.”

The buzz of white noise in her head built to a crescendo. Viva pressed her lips together tightly and swallowed hard. She jerked around to face the lineswoman, who stared straight ahead, no expression on her face.

Viva nodded, a jerky up-and-down, and walked back to the service line. Two bounces of the ball, the toss, the swing. The softer serve kicked wide, and Paige returned it hard down the centre. For a minute, they duelled back and forth before Paige sent a backhand winner down the line.

6-6. Viva now needed two straight points to win. She stalked back to her chair for the short break at the change of ends. A mouthful of sports drink, another of water. She wiped the handle of her racquet and tested the string tension. The little routines calmed her momentarily, stilled her jiggling knee. She focussed deep inside, trying in vain to block out the pounding music that played during the two-minute breaks.

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Viva returned to the service line. Someone coughed in the crowd as she prepared to serve, and she paused, then bounced the ball one more time. A clean serve down the centre line. Paige pushed it back short. Viva raced in and scooped the ball. It hit the net cord and for an agonising moment seemed to hang there before it fell back on Viva's side of the net. *Damn. That was the worst luck. That was—No!* She slammed a wall up against the negative thoughts.

“7-6, Westermeier.”

If Paige won this point, she would win the match. And she now had two serves.

Viva focussed on her feet as she returned to the baseline, this time to receive.

Paige took her time to serve, bouncing the ball many times, then a bad ball toss, which she caught and regrouped.

Viva bit her lip. The umpire should call a time violation. He should— She tamped that line of thought. *Focus.*

Paige's serve was soft, almost tentative.

Viva was already in position, and her driving return clipped the baseline. 7-7. *Yes!* She jogged back to the baseline to receive and sent a cool glance at her opponent. *Do your worst, Paige.*

Paige's next serve thundered down hard and fast and unexpected.

Viva lunged for it, and the ball glanced off the tip of her racquet. A streak of pain shot into her wrist from the force, and she gasped as the joint was forced back. The racquet fell to the ground. She bent to pick it up, gritting her teeth against her disappointment. Her wrist throbbed. It was now 8-7 and a second match point to Paige. But it was not over yet. After accepting a ball, she spun around to the service line and stared down the court as she drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

She twitched her foot into position, the toe of her fluoro shoe behind the line. Two bounces. A third for luck. Throw. Swing. And the serve was good; she was sure it was and—

“Foot-fault.”

“No!” The shout erupted from her tight throat. “Not again! No way!”

The racquet trembled in her hand, and she clenched her fingers on the handle. A glance at the umpire's implacable face. No chance of an overrule. She swung to face the lineswoman, who sat stony-faced on the chair, her

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neat, brown hair as short and tightly controlled as the rest of her. She stared straight ahead, as if she were waiting for a bus.

Viva glared up at the umpire. “She’s wrong! You can’t let her get away with this. It’s match point!” A red haze built in her mind. She tightened her grip on the racquet, consumed by the urge to smash it onto the court until it was broken beyond repair.

“Second serve.”

Viva tightened her lips so much that her teeth ground together. She nodded once, tightly, to the umpire and stalked back to the service line. As she drew level with the lineswoman, she flicked her a contemptuous look. “I will not forget this.”

The woman didn’t flinch. Her sweat-damp hair clung limply to her forehead in the heat, but she stared straight ahead without reaction.

With a final venomous glare in her direction, Viva took her place at the service line. She heaved a breath, trying to compose herself. *This point matters. Only this one.* The hyped-up crowd, now all cheering for the American, the heat and humidity of the afternoon, Paige bouncing lightly on her toes—they all receded, pushed back into a place where they were unimportant. The lineswoman’s stony face intruded, and she, too, was dismissed from her mind. *Focus.*

She accepted three balls, rejected one. To lose the match on a penalty would be an unbearable indignity. Viva closed her eyes for a second, banishing the negative thoughts. Lose? *No.* She would win this. Her grip was firm on her racquet, and conviction surged in her mind. She rocked back on her heel. The silence of the crowd was absolute. The ballkids as still as lamp posts, the umpire poised in his chair. The lineswoman leant forward, hands on her knees, gaze locked on the service line.

Second service. Last chance.

Viva tossed, swung, and smashed the ball true in the centre of her racquet. It shot like a rocket, over the net.

“Out!” The call was loud and sure from the linesman at the far end of the court.

“No!” She couldn’t suppress the cry, not the victory shout she had imagined, more a forlorn little sob of shattered dreams. She had lost. Lost in the quarterfinals, in the defence of her US Open title. Her legs were suddenly as weak as jelly, and she sank to her haunches on court, her head bowed over the handle of her racquet. Soon she would have to face her

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coach Deepak and the press, but for one private moment she let the misery consume her. Only for a second. Arranging her face into a wry smile of congratulation, she sprang to her feet and walked to the net.

Paige bounded up, elation scrawled over her face. Around them the crowd surged to their feet, and the stadium rang with their cheers and applause.

For Paige. Not for her.

“Well done, Paige. Very well-deserved.” She hugged her opponent around her sweaty shoulders before walking to her chair. A quick shake of the umpire’s hand, and she swiftly gathered her things and stuffed them into her bag. *Get off court.* The urge to flee was overwhelming. A long shower, that was what she wanted so that the streaming water would hide her tears.

She raised a hand to the crowd and trudged to the exit. The cacophony of cheers for the winner followed her out.

* * *

Later, much later, after she’d showered, talked with Deepak, and faced a barrage of questions from the press about her shock loss, Viva returned to her hotel room. She lay on the bed, phone clenched in her hand, staring at the ceiling. The things she needed to do marched through her head, but she ignored them. She blinked away the moisture in her eyes and focussed on the white ceiling, replaying the final tie breaker in her head. She had had the momentum, the edge. She was the better player, higher ranked than Paige, better able to deal with the pressure. Except she hadn’t. The final point rolled through her head like a horror movie. Her position behind the line, the toss, the serve. *The foot-fault call.* The mental playback stuttered and halted. That call had lost her the match.

Viva picked up the TV remote and flicked through the channels until she found a replay of the match. She skipped ahead to the final point. There she was, tension shimmering in her body, her face closed-in and intent. She replayed the foot-fault call again and again. Had her toe moved over the line before or after she hit the ball? She studied the footage. It was a bad call; she was sure of it.

Her phone rang, and a glance at the display showed it was her mum calling from Australia. She ignored it. Later, she would talk to her family, cry a little, wallow in the love and comfort offered, but not yet.

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She let the replay move on. The camera cut to the lineswoman who'd made the call. Olive skin, chiselled cheekbones, aloof expression. Her name flashed along the bottom of the screen: Gabriela Mendaro. Viva paused the frame, committing her face and name to memory. Her lips twisted. This woman was responsible for bundling her out of the US Open. Now she was no longer Genevieve Jones, defending US Open champion, the number one ranking within reach; now she was just another player scrambling to remain in the top ten.

Her phone rang again, and she glanced at the caller ID. Her lips twitched into the ghost of a smile. If anyone could raise her spirits, Michi could.

"Hey, partner," she said.

"Hey yourself. How are you?" Her doubles partner was usually the most ebullient of people, but her voice now held a soft, cautious quality.

"I've had better days," Viva said wryly. "Like pretty much every day this year."

Michi was silent for a moment. "It's not the end. It's just a match that you lost. You know that."

"Yeah." Viva gusted a sigh. "You're right, of course, but at this moment, it's the end of life as I know it." In front of her, the TV screen was still frozen on Gabriela Mendaro's face. She'd seen her before—players and officials were on nodding terms. "It was a bad call." She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

"Maybe. It was certainly close."

"The lineswoman should've let it go. It was match point. *Match point!*"

"That doesn't make it different. If anything, on match point the calls should be tighter."

"Any call should be accurate. And that one wasn't."

"Have you talked to Deepak?" Michi's tone still had the wary hesitation of someone who wasn't sure what to say.

"Yeah. And he said I should move on."

"Of course he did. Brett tells me the same when I have a bad call. 'Don't dwell on anything,' he always says."

"I know. Deepak's right. Brett's right."

"Am I right too?" Humour laced Michi's voice. "Because if I am, that's a first."

Viva snorted. "You're *always* right, partner. It's what you do best."

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“I thought my sizzling forehands down the line were what I do best.”

“Those too.” Viva heaved a sigh. “You’re right, Michi. Of course you are. My head knows that even if my heart is yet to catch up.” She moved to sit cross-legged on the bed so that she could see out of the window. “What are you doing tonight? The whole of New York is out there. Want to have dinner? It’s either that or spend a dismal hour on the internet finding the cheapest flight to Montreal for the next tournament.”

“The United Airlines commuter flight. Always the cheapest because it leaves when most normal people are still in bed. But I’ve got a better idea. Instead of flying to Montreal, let’s hire a car and drive. Just you and me and the open road. Brett wants a couple of days to see his family, so now’s his chance. We’ve got four days to get to Montreal. We can take a tour of upstate New York, visit towns with weird names, see some fall leaves, eat way too much, drink weak beer, and share a room. It’ll be like old times.”

A smile tugged at Viva’s lips. It would be good, the two of them having fun, with no thought of tennis. Michi was a great friend. No doubt she was gesticulating at Brett right now that he needed to visit his family in Colorado.

“As long as you don’t stay up until two in the morning watching horror movies, as you did the last time we shared a room.”

“Promise. No horror. Well, except for my hair in the mornings.”

Viva chuckled. “It’s a deal. You book a car—something roomy—and we’ll plan our route over dinner tonight.”

“High five, partner! This’ll be awesome. The terrible two on the road again.”

“No Thelma and Louise jokes.”

“Not even a little one.” Michi’s enthusiasm bubbled down the line. “Brett and I will come by your room at six, and we’ll go eat.”

Viva ended the call and threw the phone on the bed. The paused TV screen was still frozen on the lineswoman, Gabriela Mendaro. For a last moment, she studied the woman’s impassive face, the smooth skin, the arched brows, and the keen gaze.

Michi’s words came back to her: *Don’t dwell*. She clicked off the TV and rose from the bed.

Enough.

Chapter 2

Fifteen months later

THE ENGINE OF THE SPORTY hatchback roared as Viva changed down to third gear for the tight bend. The tyres shivered on the gravel road, found grip, and the little car accelerated again. Outside, the air was hot and still, the gum trees drooping in the heat of early summer.

As soon as she had a clear view of the single-lane road ahead, she pushed the car even faster. There wasn't another vehicle in sight. The narrow road was a shortcut, generally overlooked in favour of the highway.

Viva turned the radio louder, singing along to the catchy tune. She had travelled this road thousands of times over the years, first as a kid, when one of her parents drove her to the nearest tennis courts an hour away to practice, then as a teenager, when she returned from the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. But for all the hard work and her frantic life as a professional tennis player since, the swoops and curves of the gravel road home still had the power to excite her.

She slowed for a washout, then accelerated again, leaving a choking cloud of dust. It hung in the air, a comet trail to mark her path.

Going home. Her heart sang in anticipation. She pushed aside the underlying reason; like Scarlett O'Hara she would think about that tomorrow. Right now, she was looking forward to seeing her family again and to having a cold beer. Not necessarily in that order.

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The road erupted out of the forest onto the scrubby slope that descended the valley to Waggs Pocket. The sun blazed low, reflecting on the windscreen as she headed west. Viva fumbled for her water bottle and took a long draught.

Focussed as she was on a drink, she only saw the sedan at the last second. It was parked haphazardly, blocking half of the single lane, its bonnet propped open. The driver stood further out, arms waving.

Viva's hands clenched on the steering wheel, and she braked hard. The hatchback fishtailed. She double-declutched into second and wrenched the steering wheel to the right, aiming the car at the long grass on the opposite side of the road. The hatchback bounced as the suspension bottomed out. Viva swerved back onto the road and came to a halt.

Her breath hissed between her teeth in a long exhale. *Bloody idiot.* Obviously a townie. No bush person would park like that and then stand in the middle of the road to flag someone down. She would have stopped anyway to check all was okay; it was what one did in the bush.

She reversed back through the dust cloud to where the driver waited—this time by the side of the road.

Viva opened her window. “You okay?” She couldn't see the driver clearly, but it seemed to be a woman, short and slightly built.

“Thank you for stopping.” The woman stepped over and bent to peer inside the car. “I did not think you were going to.” With the sun behind her, she was a silhouette. Her English was fluent but heavily accented.

“No worries.” Viva squinted through the dust and glare. “What's wrong with your car?”

The woman shrugged. “I do not know. It ran rough, then stalled and would not restart. It's a rental.”

Viva unbuckled her seatbelt and exited. Outside, she dwarfed the other woman by a head. She stepped aside so she could see her more clearly.

The stranger moved too, and the sunlight fell clearly on her face.

Viva froze. *No.* What were the odds of that? Of meeting her here? In Australia, in Queensland, in the middle of bloody nowhere? She gritted her teeth, and for a second the uncharitable urge to stomp back to the VW and speed away consumed her. It would, after all, be fair payback. Almost.

The other woman frowned. “Is something wrong?”

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Viva paced around to the other side of the stranded vehicle. She wouldn't leave even her worst enemy stranded on a remote road. "No. Let's take a look at your car."

A crease formed between her eyes. "Do I know you?"

Viva lifted the sunnies shading her face.

"Oh." Various expressions flashed over the other woman's face, like a deck of cards shuffled fast. "Genevieve Jones." Her tone exuded polite wariness.

"In person, Gabriela Mendaro. I didn't expect to see you until the Brisbane International next month. I imagine you'll be umpiring there?"

"Yes, as always. I take December away from the tour, and I usually spend it in Australia."

Viva swept a hand around the parched and withered landscape. "But here? In the arse-end of nowhere?" *Almost on my doorstep.*

Gabriela's smile flickered like fireflies. "I like the heat. It's not so different to Spain."

Viva swallowed a retort and moved around to the front of the rental car. "Is it out of fuel?" Her fingers twitched with the need to fix the ridiculously unsuitable car and get the hell out. Gabriela Mendaro was the last person she wanted to see.

And now, in light of what she'd just learnt from her surgeon, it was doubly bitter.

Gabriela blinked, as if the question was beneath her dignity. "It has half a tank."

Viva checked the dirt road, hoping some station hand would appear in a ute to save her from this discomfort. Of course, the road remained silent and empty. She peered into the engine compartment. What little she knew about fixing cars had been learnt by listening to her younger brother and his friends discussing their latest jalopy and how they might best get it on the road. But maybe this was something simple. She poked the mass of dusty wires with a finger. They remained attached, nothing hanging loose. She found the air filter and tapped it. A puff of dust dislodged. Maybe it was chockers with dust, but really, she hadn't a clue.

Gabriela moved to stand next to her. "It might be the fuel lines. Clogged."

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“Possibly. That’s not something we can fix here, though. The rental company probably offers breakdown service. Did you call them?”

Gabriela raised her mobile phone. “No signal.”

Of course there wouldn’t be.

“Where are you heading?” This wasn’t the first stranded tourist she’d rescued, although none had been on this dirt track that wound through trees and grassland.

“I think I am maybe one hundred and twenty kilometres from Merringul. I thought I would stay the night there and return to Brisbane tomorrow via Toowoomba.”

“More like one hundred and fifty kilometres.” Around them, the day was seeping into dusk. Already, the sun touched the top of the range and a lilac haze crept over the landscape. A flock of cockatoos settled into the tree above them, and their raucous cries bombarded Viva’s ears. Kangaroos would soon be grazing in the relative cool of evening, leaping across the road with nary a warning. It was not a good time to be driving.

Viva slammed the bonnet shut. “Sorry, I don’t have a clue about fixing it. Your best bet is for me to give you a lift to the nearest place where you can call the rental company.”

“I don’t want to take you out of your way.” The words were stilted, but the mellow tones were like warmth and sunshine.

“You’re not. The next settlement—indeed the only settlement—along this road is Waggs Pocket, and that’s where I’m going.”

“What is there?”

“Not much. Couple of dozen houses, general store, fuel if Candace can be bothered opening, and a pub. My parents run the pub,” she added.

The puzzled expression on Gabriela’s face lifted. “Oh. I didn’t realise you were from here.”

“Not many people do. Even if you’ve read my player bio, it just mentions Queensland, no more information than that. You can call the breakdown service from the pub. You won’t get a mobile signal before then anyway, and even in town it depends on which way the wind is blowing. Better to use the landline.”

“Thank you.” Gabriela moved to the boot of the rental car, pulled out a small case, and carried it over to Viva’s hatchback.

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Boxes filled the boot and most of the back seat of the vehicle. “Guess I’m getting my weight training in early,” Viva muttered, as she dragged cartons of bottles and foodstuffs to one side to make room for Gabriela’s case. She ignored the twinge in her right wrist, the bite of pain as she stretched the joint backwards.

Gabriela moved closer. “Let me help.”

“I can do this.” Viva’s words were curt. “These are heavy.”

“I’m stronger than I look.” Gabriela pulled on one of the boxes. The flap opened, revealing the dozen bottles of rum inside. “I’m surprised you can play as well as you do if you drink this much.”

“I told you; my parents run the pub. I was in Brisbane, so I said I’d pick up their order.” Too late the crinkling of Gabriela’s eyes gave away the joke.

By moving a few cartons, they were able to jam the case into the corner amongst the paraphernalia for the pub.

Viva lowered herself into the driver’s seat. “Got everything? Car locked?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The hatchback was not a big car, but Gabriela was not a big woman. Even so, the car seemed cramped with her in the passenger seat. It wasn’t that she sprawled. Indeed, she sat neatly, as if she was lineswoman at the Open. Knees together, feet flat on the floor, her elbows tucked in by her sides. It was as if she had been packed up for shipment.

Viva started the engine and pulled away. The hatch rattled over the dirt road, and she turned the radio up to drown out the noise. The road was fading into the darkness, and a mob of kangaroos raised their heads as she passed.

Gabriela gripped the door handle. “Can you slow down a little? You have to watch for wildlife on these roads.”

Viva’s foot twitched on the accelerator. “I’ve lived here most of my life. I think I know that.”

Something moved in the long grass beside the road, and Gabriela’s grip tightened. “Please?”

She *was* going too fast. Viva eased the throttle, using a bend in the road as an excuse. Her gaze swept the road for bounding kangaroos or other wildlife, but she remained acutely aware of the woman in the passenger seat. Gabriela’s denim shorts came to mid-thigh, revealing a sweep of olive

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skin. When her lips tightened and her stare locked fixedly on the road ahead, Viva slowed even more. She wasn't out to terrify her.

Once the road straightened and entered the final steep descent to Waggs Pocket, Viva increased speed again.

Beside her, Gabriela's throat worked as she swallowed hard.

Viva flashed her a glance. "Look, over there are the Bunya Mountains. It's a national park now."

A jerky movement of Gabriela's head, but she didn't glance at the scenery.

"You're not interested?"

Beads of sweat formed on Gabriela's forehead. "It's not that. I get car sick on twisty roads if I'm not the driver."

"Do you want me to stop?"

A quick shake of her head. "No. It's okay." She swallowed again.

"Sorry. You should have said. We're nearly there."

"I'll be okay if I look straight ahead and don't talk."

The temptation to increase speed or throw the little car into the corners was strong, but Viva wasn't that vindictive. She slowed to a sedate pace, turned up the air con, and directed an extra vent in Gabriela's direction.

"Thank you."

The purple light deepened as they descended into Waggs Pocket. *Town* was too kind a word for the scattered houses that spread out around the single crossroads. Viva raised a hand at Tilly, walking her three rescue greyhounds, and again at the Bartlett twins, no doubt up to mischief judging by their sudden guilty expressions. She swung around the rest area by the creek, where the grey nomads pulled up in their motorhomes, and around the back of the pub.

It was good to be home.

Viva jammed on the brakes. The rear car park was full, packed solid with veteran cars, their shiny sides gleaming with the deep rich colours of a bygone era. Jaguars, MGs, and Minis were parked neatly in rows, bonnets all facing out. Her usual spot, at the back of the car park beside the mango tree, was inaccessible. She reversed out and parked on the grass on the other side of the road. Even here, there were a few scattered latecomers.

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The minute the car drew to a halt, Gabriela exited. Stretching, she drew deep belly breaths, her gaze on the line of the creek as it wound through the park.

Viva opened the boot. “Grab your case. I’m not going to unload the supplies until I can park closer.” Excitement leapt in her stomach. No matter how many times she returned to Waggs Pocket, the pull of home never lessened. She didn’t look back as she led the way to the pub, but she heard the snap of a twig and the crunch of gravel behind her.

Chapter 3

EVERY TABLE IN THE BAR was occupied, and the locals at the counter were squashed tight like cockatoos on a railing. Laughter and chatter rose up to the pressed-tin ceiling. Viva squeezed past the mainly grey-haired bunch of people until she could duck under the serving hatch leading behind the bar.

“Darl, I’m so happy to see you.” Her mum bustled up and stretched up to press a kiss to Viva’s cheek. “I know you’ve had a long drive and you’re tired, but the British Car Club are here. There’s only your dad in the kitchen—and you know what *that* means. Would you mind working the bar with Jack so I can do the meals before your father burns the place down?”

“Of course not.” She pushed down the longing for a quiet night on the balcony. The British Car Club was a good-natured, enthusiastic mob who came four times each year, pattering along the highway from Brisbane, holding up the traffic for kilometres.

She whirled around to start serving and caught sight of Gabriela, who stood straight as a fencepost on the far side of the bar, taking in the crowd with a bemused expression.

Viva grabbed her mum’s arm before she could disappear. “Mum, this is Gabriela. Her car broke down, and I rescued her from the forest road. Can you let her use the phone so she can call breakdown?”

“No worries, darl.” Viva’s mum advanced on Gabriela. “Come with me, and I’ll show you the phone.” She paused. “I know you, don’t I? You’re a friend of Viva’s from the tour. I’m sure I’ve seen you playing.”

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“She’s not a friend,” Viva started, but then Jack bore down to sweep her into a hug.

“Sissy. About bloody time!” His grin took the sting from the words. “I hope your arm is strong for pouring beer.” His nod indicated the car club people lining the bar.

She followed Jack into the main bar area and looked around. “Who’s next?”

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Gabriela waited by the bar, eyes straight ahead, resisting the urge to fidget. After the brief introduction, Viva’s mother had been interrupted by a customer and had yet to return. At least she appeared friendly, unlike her daughter. Viva’s antagonism crackled like sparks from a bushfire. Gabriela moved over into Mrs Jones’s line of sight, rested her case between her feet, and waited.

Mrs Jones put a hand on the customer’s arm. “I’ll see you later, Stan. Right now, I have to see to Viva’s friend.” She turned to Gabriela. “Come with me, darl.” She led the way down a hallway and through a door marked private.

“Come in.” She shuffled the papers on the desk into an overflowing pile and put a rock on top. The papers fluttered in the breeze from the overhead fan. “Sit. Do you have the number to call?”

“Yes, thank you.” The car rental paperwork was in the front pocket of the case, and she pulled it out.

“Of *course* you have it. You couldn’t travel around the world as you do if you weren’t organised with paperwork.” Viva’s mother tilted her head and stared at Gabriela. “I’m trying to place you. Please don’t think me rude... Viva doesn’t bring many friends home with her. Normally just Michi, her doubles partner. Lovely girl, Michi.”

Gabriela unfolded the paperwork and smoothed out the crease. “I’m sorry, I really don’t mean to be rude, but would you mind if I called the breakdown service? I don’t know how long it will take for them to arrive.” Part of her mind wondered when Viva’s mum would figure out she was neither a friend nor a player on the tour. She hoped the car would be fixed and she would be on her way before that happened.

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“I’m sorry, darl, I should’ve thought of that. Yes, you call right away, then go and find Viva when you’re done.”

“Thank you, Mrs Jones. You are too kind.”

“Lindy. There’s no formality around here. Even if it would be nice at times. I’ll leave you to it.” Lindy whirled around and was gone, closing the door behind her.

Gabriela glanced around the office. The high-ceilinged room was stifling hot, despite the fan. There were pictures of Viva on the wall: action shots, lifting trophies, one of her and Michi Cleaver during a doubles match, shoulders close together, hands lifted to their mouths to hide their whispered tactics from prying eyes. And, of course, in pride of place was a photo of Viva lifting the US Open trophy high. Gabriela remembered that photo; it had been in every paper. *Aussie girl wins the US Open*. Viva was popular with the press; her outgoing personality, striking good looks, and athletic figure saw to that.

Gabriela searched the desktop for a pen, eventually finding one under a pile of delivery docketts, and called the breakdown service number.

“No worries.” The laconic voice on the other end didn’t sound concerned. “We can come and get you at the Stockyard Hotel in Waggs Pocket and take you back to your vehicle. How far away is the car?”

“Maybe thirty kilometres. I’m not too sure.” The twisty dirt road that Viva had driven with such ferocity had passed in a blur of motion sickness.

“No worries,” the operator said again. “We’ll be with you before noon tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Worry gave her voice an edge, and she drummed the pen on the wooden desk. “The rental company said it was usually within the hour.”

“That’s within the city, mate. It’s different out bush. The driver has to come from Dalby, and that’s over an hour away.”

“He could still get here tonight. I have nowhere to stay.”

“Get the pub to put you up; hotels are obliged to offer rooms to stranded travellers. At least they used to in the good old days.”

“They’re fully booked.” She had no idea if they were or not, but she didn’t want to spend more time in Viva’s company than she had to. Viva seemed prickly. Gabriela was sure the reason was something past the usual

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reticence between players and officials. Something was bugging Viva, and Gabriela didn't want to be there when Viva let off steam.

"Sorry, mate, but I can't get the driver out any sooner. Look out for the truck late morning. Now, got a pen? I'll give you the job reference."

She wrote down the number, ended the call, and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. What if the hotel really was booked out? The cheery senior crowd occupying the bar didn't look as if they were going anywhere in a hurry, judging by the amount of alcohol they were putting away. Would Viva drive her back to her car and make her sleep in it tonight? Surely not.

Gabriela dropped the pen on the desk before she could snap it in two and left the office. She followed the clatter of pots and the hiss of a fryer to the kitchen and stopped in the doorway.

Dirty dishes stacked up on every surface, and three deep-fryers belched smoke. Lindy stood at a bench as she chopped vegetables with the same ferocity Gabriela had seen in Viva when she pummelled a backhand down the line.

"Put the fish in the second fryer. Turn the oven down, or the beef will be tougher than Jack's hide. Get those chips out before they incinerate. Here." Lindy spun around and deftly did all of the tasks she'd just ordered, while an older man dithered. "Ethan, you chop the salad. I'll do this. I don't know why I keep you around." The wry affection in her voice was obvious.

"Because you love me. Although sometimes I don't know why you do." Ethan turned, and Gabriela caught a glimpse of the same small nose and oval face that Viva had, topped by the same widow's peak. Ethan's face was crinkled into a grin as he ribbed his wife.

He looked at Gabriela. "Can I help you? If you're waiting for your food, we won't be much longer."

Lindy turned too. "That's not a customer; that's Viva's friend." She smiled at Gabriela. "Did you get onto the breakdown people?"

Ethan wiped his hands on a grubby tea towel and shook Gabriela's hand, pumping with great enthusiasm. "Welcome. It's always nice to see Viva's friends. What's this about the car?"

"I did reach them." Gabriela addressed them both, trying to discreetly flex some life back into her fingers after Ethan's grip of steel. "But they cannot come until tomorrow."

Code of Conduct

“I’m not surprised. There’s only one bloke in Dalby to do all the calls. His foot is flat to the boards trying to keep up. Did they give you a time?” Ethan moved over to the chopping board.

“By noon.”

“Be surprised if he makes that. We can’t do it tonight—the car club has us busy—but maybe by late morning, we could get Jack out to have a look at it. He’s pretty handy with a spanner.”

“I don’t want to give you extra work—”

“Jack loves tinkering with cars. If it’s an old banger, there’s a good chance he’ll get it moving for you.”

“It’s a rental.”

“Then don’t let Jack near it.” Lindy swung around from the oven, where she was basting roast meat. “If it’s under warranty, his bush mechanics will make more trouble than good.”

“Mrs Jones—”

“Lindy, remember?”

“Lindy, I was wondering if you have a room for tonight? I can’t go anywhere until tomorrow and—”

Lindy was already shaking her head. “We’re booked solid. The car club has every room taken, and half of them are camping in the park as well.”

“Is there anywhere else here to stay?” Surely, even a tiny place like this would have a B&B. Even if it was a way out of town, maybe someone would give her a lift. Anxiety twisted through her mind at the thought of Viva’s face when she learnt Gabriela was still here.

“No. The only other place is Darlene’s, and that’s booked for the car club as well. I’ve got a foldaway bed; I’ll put it in Viva’s room for you.”

“Really, no. I don’t want to intrude on Viva’s space.” Worry made her voice sharp and high, curter than she would have liked. There was no way she could share a room with Viva. The antagonism rolled from her in palpable waves. The car ride had been awkward; sharing a room would be fraught with difficulty. For a moment she wished she had never left the ease and anonymity that Brisbane offered.

Lindy pushed the roast back into the oven and closed the door. “Don’t argue. Viva will be delighted. I’ll do it now.”

“Lindy, please, check with Viva first.”

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Something in Gabriela's tone seemed to make Lindy pause. Her gaze raked Gabriela from head to toe. "Have you had a fight?"

"No." Gabriela shifted her weight, resisting the impulse to stand on one leg, something she'd done as a child whenever anyone challenged her. "Not that. But we are not friends; we are just acquaintances on the tour. Your daughter will not be happy if she is forced to share her room with me. It's also highly inappropriate for me to do so. Can you put the foldaway bed in the lounge or somewhere?"

"There's no air con or fan. It'll be unbearably hot."

"I do not mind. I am used to the heat."

"Gabriela, don't argue. I'll do the bed now." And she was gone in a flurry of discarded apron and bustling figure.

Ethan regarded Gabriela with wry amusement. "Has my daughter done something to upset you?" He turned back to the bench and picked up the discarded chopping knife.

"No." Gabriela's sigh gusted into the room. "It's a little more complicated than that." She dreaded seeing Viva's face when Lindy told her where Gabriela was sleeping. And she couldn't—simply couldn't—stay in the same room, no matter what the extenuating circumstances. Even if she melted in the heat, she would have to find somewhere else. Somewhere away from Viva.

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CODE OF CONDUCT

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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