

Chan vs. Cortez

US Open

September 1994

My entire life's work rests on the outcome of this match.

My father, Javier, and I sit front row center at Flushing Meadows, the sidelines just out of reach. The linesmen stand with their arms behind their backs on either side of the court. Straight in front of us, the umpire presides over the crowd high in his chair. The ball girls crouch low, ready to sprint at a moment's notice.

This is the third set. Nicki Chan took the first and Ingrid Cortez squeaked out the second. This last one will determine the winner.

My father and I watch — along with the twenty thousand others in the stadium — as Nicki Chan approaches the baseline. She bends her knees and steadies herself. Then she raises onto her toes, tosses the ball in the air, and with a snap of her wrist, sends a blistering serve 126 miles per hour toward Ingrid Cortez's backhand.

Cortez returns it with startling power. It falls just inside the line. Nicki isn't able to get to it. Point Cortez.

I let my eyes close and exhale.

"*Cuidado*. The cameras are watching our reactions," my father says through gritted teeth. He's wearing one of his many Panama hats, his curly silver hair creeping out the back.

"Dad, *everyone's* watching our reactions."

Nicki Chan has won two Slam titles this year already — the Australian Open and the French

Open. If she wins this match, she'll tie my lifetime record of 20 Grand Slam singles titles. I set that record back in 1987, when I won Wimbledon for the ninth time and established myself as the greatest tennis player of all time.

Nicki's particular style of play — brash and loud, played almost exclusively from the baseline with incredible violence to her serves and groundstrokes — has enabled her to dominate women's tennis over the past five years. But when she was starting out on the WTA tour back in the late 80s, I found her to be an unremarkable opponent. Good on a clay court, perhaps, but I could beat her handily on her home turf of London.

Things changed after I retired in 1989. Nicki began racking up Slams at an alarming rate. Now she's at my heels.

My jaw tenses as I watch her.

My father looks at me, his face placid. "I'm saying that the photographers are trying to get a shot of you looking angry, or rooting against her."

I am wearing a black sleeveless shirt and jeans. A pair of tortoiseshell Oliver Peoples sunglasses. My hair is down. At almost thirty-seven, I look as good as I've ever looked, in my opinion. So let them take as many pictures as they want.

"What did I always tell you in junior championships?"

"Don't let it show on your face."

"Exactamente, querida."

Ingrid Cortez is a seventeen-year-old Spanish player who has surprised almost everyone with her quick ascent up the rankings. Her style is a bit like Nicki's — powerful, loud — but she plays her angles more. She's surprisingly emotional on the court. She hits a scorcher of an ace past Nicki and hollers with glee.

“You know, maybe it’s Cortez who’s going to stop her,” I say.

My father shakes his head. “*Dudo.*” He barely moves his lips when he talks, his eye consciously avoiding the camera. I have no doubt that tomorrow morning, my father will open the paper and scan the sports pages looking for his photo. He will smile to himself when he sees that he looks nothing short of handsome. Although he lost weight earlier this year from the rounds of chemo he endured, he is cancer-free now. His body has bounced back. His color looks good.

As the sun beats down on his face, I hand him a tube of sunscreen. He squints and shakes his head, as if it is an insult to us both.

“Cortez got one good one in,” my father says. “But Nicki saves her power for the third set.”

My pulse quickens. Nicki hits three winners in a row, takes the game. It’s now 3-3 in the third set.

My father looks at me, lowering his glasses so I can see his eyes. “*Entonces*, what are you going to do, Carolina?” he asks.

I look away. “I don’t know.”

He puts his glasses back on and looks at the court, giving me a small nod. “Well, if you do nothing, that is what you are doing. Nothing.”

“*Si, papa*, I got it.”

Nicki serves wide. Cortez runs and scrambles to catch it on the rise but it flies into the net.

I look at my father. He wears a slight frown.

In the player’s box, Cortez’s coach is hunched over in his seat, his hands cupping his face.

Nicki doesn’t have a coach. She left her last one almost three years ago and has taken six Slams since then without anyone’s guidance.

My dad makes a lot of cracks about players who don't have coaches. But with Nicki, he seems to withhold judgement.

Cortez is bent over, holding her hand down on her hips and trying to catch her breath. Nicki doesn't let up. She fires off another serve across the court. Cortez takes off running but misses it.

Nicki smiles.

I know that smile. I've been here before.

On the next point, Nicki takes the game.

"Dammit," I say at the changeover.

My father raises his eyebrows. "Cortez crumbles as soon as she doesn't control the court. And Nicki knows it."

"Nicki's powerful," I say. "But she's also hugely adaptable. When you play her, you're playing somebody who is adjusting on the fly, tailoring their game to your specific weakness."

My father nods.

"Every player has a weak spot," I say. "And Nicki is great at finding it."

"Right."

"So what's hers?"

My father is now holding back a smile. He lifts his drink and takes a sip.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," my father says.

"I haven't made a decision."

"Alright."

Both players head back out onto the court.

"Nicki is just a tiny bit slow," I say, watching her walk to the baseline. "She has a lot of

power, but she's not fast — not in her footwork or her shot selection. She's not quite as quick as Cortez, even today. But especially not as quick as Moretti, Antonovich, even Perez."

"Or you," my father says. "There's nobody on the tour right now who is as fast as you were. Not just with your feet, but with your head, *también*."

I nod.

He continues. "I'm talking about getting into position, taking the ball out of the air early, taking the pace off so Nicki can't hit it back with that power. Nobody on the tour is doing that. Not like you did."

"I'd have to meet her power though," I tell him. "And somehow still maintain speed."

"Which will not be easy."

"Not at my age and not with my knee," I say. "I don't have the jumps I used to have."

"*Verdad*," my father says. "It will take everything you have to give."

"*If* I did it," I say.

My father rolls his eyes but then swiftly paints another false smile on his face.

I laugh. "Honestly, who cares if they get a picture of you frowning?"

"I'm staying off your back," my father says. "You stay off mine. *Comprende, querida?*"

I laugh again. "*Si, comprende, papa.*"

Nicki takes the next game, too. One more and it's over. She'll tie my record.

My temples begin to pound as I envision it all unfolding. Cortez is not going to stave off Nicki Chan, not today. And I'm stuck up here in the seats. I have to sit here and watch Nicki take away everything I've worked for.

"Who's going to coach me?" I say. "You?"

My father does not look at me but I can see his shoulders stiffen. He takes a breath, chooses

his words.

“That’s for you to answer,” he finally says. “It’s not my choice to make.”

“So, what? I’m gonna call up Lars?”

“You are going to do whatever you want to do, Carolina,” my father says. “That is how adulthood works.”

He is going to make me beg. And I deserve it.

Cortez is busting her ass to make the shots. But she’s tired. You can see it in the way her legs shake when she’s standing still. She nets a return. It’s now 30-Love.

Motherfucker.

I look around at the crowd. People are leaning forward, some are tapping their fingers. Every one of them seems to be breathing a little faster. I can only imagine what the sportscasters are saying.

The spectators sitting around us are looking at my father and me out of the corner of their eyes, watching my reaction. I’m starting to feel caged.

“If I do it…” I say softly. “I want you to coach me. That’s what I’m saying, Dad.”

He looks at me as Cortez scores a point off Nicki. The crowd holds their breath, eager to see history being made. I might be too if it wasn’t *my* history on the line.

“Are you sure, Carolina? I am not the man I once was. I don’t have the… stamina, I once did.”

“That makes two of us.” I say. “You’ll be coaching a has-been.”

Now, it’s 40-15. Nicki is at championship point.

“I’d be coaching the greatest tennis player of all time,” my father says. He turns to me and grabs my hand. I am staring down forty, but still, somehow, his hands dwarf mine. And just like

when I was child, they are warm and rough and strong. When he squeezes my palm, I feel so small — as if I am forever a child and he is this giant I will have to gaze up at to meet his eye.

Nicki serves the ball. I inhale sharply.

“So you’ll do it?” I ask.

Cortez sends it back.

“We might lose.... badly,” I say. “Prove to everyone The Battle Axe can’t hack it now. They’d love that. I’d tarnish not only my record but my legacy. It might... ruin everything.”

Nicki hits a groundstroke.

My father shakes his head. “We cannot ruin everything. Because tennis is not everything, Carolina.”

I am not sure I agree.

Cortez returns the shot.

“Still,” I say. “We’d have to work harder together than we ever have. Are you up for that?”

“It would be the honor of my lifetime,” my father says. I can tell there are tears forming in his eyes and I stop myself from looking away. He holds my hand tighter. “To coach you again, *querida*, I’d die happy.”

I try to move past the tender ache taking hold in my chest. “So I guess that decides it, then,” I say.

A smile takes over my father’s face.

Nicki lobs the ball. It arcs through the air, slowly. The stadium watches as it flies high then starts its descent.

“I guess I’m coming out of retirement,” I say.

The ball looks like it is going to be out. If so, Cortez will delay defeat for the moment.

My father puts his arm around me, hugging me tight. I can barely breathe. He whispers in my ear, "*Nunca he estate más orgullosa, mi amor.*" He lets go.

The ball falls, landing just inside the baseline. The crowd is silent as it bounces, high and fast. Cortez has already backed off, thinking it would be long, and it is too late now. It's impossible to return. She lunges forward and misses.

There is no sound for a split second and then the roar erupts.

Nicki Chan just won the US Open.

Cortez falls to the ground. Nicki throws her fists into the air.

My father and I smile. Ready.