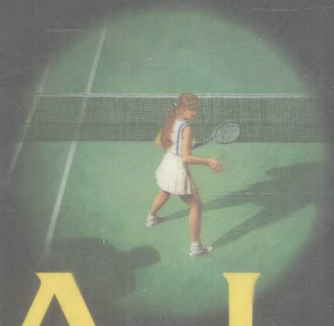
THE TOTAL ZONE



A MYSTERY

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA AND LIZ NICKLES

THE

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AND

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VILLARD BOOKS • NEW YORK • 1994

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Navratilova, Martina.
The total zone / Martina Navratilova and Liz Nickles.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-679-43390-2
1. Women tennis players—Fiction. I. Nickles, Elizabeth.
II. Title.
PS3564.A892T68 1994
813'.54—dc20 94-10182

Manufactured in the United States of America on acid-free paper
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
First Edition
Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

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O N E

The last time I was in front of the TV cameras, millions of people saw me get annihilated by a sixteen-year-old girl with her hair in pigtails and braces on her teeth. I never went back to Wimbledon, or any other tennis tournament for that matter, although not entirely as a personal choice. Now I was in front of the cameras again, and it all came back in the blitz of flashes—the headiness of the attention, the cheers of the crowd, the adrenaline that raced through my body as I braced to run the gauntlet. Except this time I wasn't playing for the crowd; I was in it. I wasn't out to win; I was out of the game. And I wasn't getting an award; my former opponent—now my client—was. I walked purposefully ahead on the red carpet, joining the crush of celebrities, entourage members, and wannabes, simultaneously hoping that somebody would recognize me

and dreading the prospect. Suddenly I felt a hand wrench my shoulder and reach past my neck with a sharp chop to my throat. Something shoved the small of my back. A metal object grazed my skull, and a heavy combat boot smashed down on my instep, tripping me to my knees. A blinding light flashed before my eyes.

Paparazzi.

An exclusive shot of a major star was worth thousands of dollars, and these guys would probably kill for it. The legitimate press was one thing. The tabloid guys, however, were a whole other breed. If they didn't get a shot, they'd create it by stripping one star's head onto another's body, or whatever it took. Nothing personal. I was irritated, and a little shaken, but I knew I was not the intended prey—a shot of me was worth about five cents, if my mother had change in her purse. I was just blocking somebody's viewfinder.

I was rescued by a Garden security officer, who grabbed the photographer and yanked him unceremoniously off me. "Where's your pass, mister?" he grilled the man, as another guard raced to offer me a hand and two or three more men in uniform materialized.

"Media," the photographer mumbled.

"You don't have a pass. Get over here," commanded the guard, as he and his uniformed friends formed a wedge, lifted the photographer up by the elbows, and deposited him back behind the velvet rope.

"Are you all right, miss?" asked the guard who'd helped me up. He held his walkie-talkie at the ready.

"I'm fine. It was an accident. I think." I'd escaped pretty much unscathed, except that I'd ripped my stockings when I fell and a huge run was making its jagged way down the length of my left leg. And, of course, I'd skinned my knee. But then, that was in character.

There are some people, like Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, fash-

ion models, and society-page habitués, who can wear formal gowns and tuxedos as comfortably as a T-shirt and jeans. I, Jordan Myles, am not one of them. I blame this on the fact that, until a few years ago—five years ago, to be exact—I spent most of my life at a dead run across a tennis court in Nikes, ankle socks, shorts, and a T-shirt, clutching a racket, not an evening bag. Even when I was the number three player on the women's tour, where events like awards dinners, fund-raisers, charity benefits, and testimonials were part of the schedule, for the most part my focus was on my training. When I had to show up at an event, I fell back on my uniform—biannual variations on a black synthetic dress that packed well, could be de-wrinkled in shower steam, rinsed out in a bathroom sink, hung up to drip-dry, and worn that night, if necessary. As any woman who's ever played on the tour can attest, it's not your opponent that's your worst nightmare—it's your laundry.

But tonight was different. Everyone in the world of sports, which meant a major percentage of my old friends, not to mention my current and potential clients, was going to be at the Sports Network Awards, an event they accurately refer to in the press as "star-studded" and "glittering," so I did make a particular and extensive effort—well, extensive for me, anyway. Before I flew to New York from Palm Springs for the awards, I bought a simple navy blue cocktail dress with an interesting backless look, and tonight I spent some time attacking my short, curly black hair with its natural enemy, the blow-dryer. I never use much makeup, because frankly I do look better without it. My eyes are dark hazel, my color naturally high, my nose, which was once broken in a midcourt collision, beyond the ministrations of any over-the-counter beauty products. Things had looked promising until I had to deal with one critical issue women's evening wear has yet to address, which is where to put your beeper.

I'm a physical therapist at the Desert Springs Sports Science

Clinic, and it's part of my job never to be unreachable. It's important to our clients that we are available at all times—many of them are high-profile celebrities who call in questions or problems from a mixed bag of time zones. In a crowd you can't hear a beeper in your purse, so I compromised by putting on a jacket and clipping the beeper to the pocket. The jacket covered up 90 percent of the dress, but what are you going to do?

Actually, who was going to care? Certainly not my escort—he had the proper perspective, having first met me in a hospital gown in traction, with pins and staples piecing my leg together after the mountain-climbing mishap that didn't kill me but managed to abruptly end my career in professional tennis when I was twenty-two. Officially, Gus is Dr. Augustus Laidlaw, director and co-founder of the Springs, my associate on the staff and one of the most brilliant, if controversial, sports psychologists in the world. Unofficially—very unofficially—he's a friend I'm involved with, and have been in varying degrees since he helped me get back on my feet, in more ways than one, after the accident. It's a complicated relationship, something you can't really label. Occasionally, when she thinks enough time has elapsed since the last time she shook the trees in hopes that some information would fall out, my mother will ask the usual discreet questions all mothers of single daughters ask. I never have the answers. What is Gus to me? A friend, a mentor, an associate, a lover, a role model, a doctor, a teacher, a conscience, a nemesis, a jerk. At any given moment, one or more of the above may apply.

I always tell myself things are as good as they were when I was playing tennis—in some ways, better. I have a stable life, a predictable if not astronomical income, a home of my own, friends, a profession I believe in that helps others. I'm a founding staff member of the Springs, an exciting new sports medicine clinic that helps athletes from every sport make the best of their minds and bodies. My failed marriage is in the past, if you can call

something that only lasted six months, and which was therefore history almost the minute it began, a marriage. And there's Gus. In other words, I've gotten on with my life.

Which brought me to the Paramount Theater at Madison Square Garden for this convergence of the best and brightest in sports. It's sort of ironic, because, for so many years, the Garden was a regular part of my life—an every-November stopover for the Virginia Slims Championships, the punctuation at the year's end of the women's tour. I don't know if I will ever get over feeling disconnected about being in New York and putting on a fancy outfit instead of baggy sweats and a T-shirt. Or drop the habit of feeling guilty when I eat a giant slice of tiramisù at Contrapunto. Or stop feeling strange about pulling out a business card that says *Jordan Myles, Physical Therapist*—or about having a business card, period. I have to keep reminding myself that things are different now.

All the big names were slated to be here tonight. I scanned the crowd milling through the vast entrance to Madison Square Garden, up the escalators and into the Paramount Theater, for Gus, who was flying in from a corporate speech in Detroit. At the top of the escalators, there is an Art Deco–ish lobby; here the entering crowd merged with the people spilling out from the glass-enclosed Play-by-Play Lounge, where a VIP dinner had been held for tonight's honorees and their guests. Through the glass, I could see the flicker of candles and white tablecloths and garlands of balloons and ribbons hanging from the ceiling. I spotted Ollie Cedars, the heavyweight title contender, his huge bulk and orbiting entourage parting the crowd. Ollie waved, revealing a massive diamond-studded watch. Behind us, cries of "Mi-chael! Michael!" signaled that Michael Jordan had arrived. Smiling to the bank of photographers, who obliged with a blinding flash of lights, was Linsey Marks, blond, in a white beaded gown, living up to her reputation as the glamour girl of golf. Billie Jean King

walked in, and just behind her were country-music star Allie Trask and rapper Mr. Huge. A famous football star rode up the escalator with a gorgeous woman clinging to each arm. His public appearances and macho press coverage are always designed to mask the fact that he's known in sports circles to be gay.

Barricaded behind another storm of camera flashes, her back pressed to the wall, was Mariska Storrs, her hair slicked back and sleek as her tuxedo. I wondered if I should rescue her, but if there's anybody who knows how to handle the press it's Mariska. Mariska, who has won more Grand Slam titles than any woman in history, is one of those people who has achieved a pinnacle so rarefied that her last name is an unnecessary appendage. She has true charisma, but has sustained the public's interest for this long because of sheer talent and ability; if you have charisma without ability, nobody cares. Since her highly publicized escape from behind the Iron Curtain almost twenty years ago, she's probably racked up more sports coverage—and gossip items—than all her rivals combined. Her unbroken string of seven consecutive Wimbledon singles wins is countered by overblown reports of her affairs with, variously, a British rock star, a top fashion model, and a housewife. Every year for fifteen years she's re-earned her spot in the standings by winning at least one Grand Slam tournament, and last year *Sports Illustrated* named her "Athlete of the Nineties." She's known for being an aggressive, tough—even brutal—player, and her media personality somewhat reflects this. In interviews she can come across like a sharp stick in the eye, but the upside is, she's always been uncondescendingly honest. Needless to say, some of the players are intimidated by her. Tonight, typically, Mariska moved through the crowd, acknowledging the rest of the world with an unapproachable, practiced smile, an expression engineered to get her through the evening and disguise the fact that her mind is somewhere else entirely. On the court she is laserlike in her intensity, but off the court she tends

to be unfocused, with a short attention span, almost like a child. She wants what she wants when she wants it. Period. You can find yourself talking to Mariska one minute, then conversing with thin air the next, because when she's had enough of listening to what you have to say, she's finished—even if you're not. Many people here tonight had been the victims of her legendary temper, or cut off by her abruptness. There were probably a couple dozen others who had phone calls in to her that would never be returned. Then there were those who are just plain scared of her, petrified in her presence—not just fans, but players, press, and even officials. Of course, whether they like her or not, virtually everyone is in awe of Mariska's achievements, a fact that only magnifies her flaws, real or perceived. She is very much aware of this. "Everybody always complains that I make all the decisions," Mariska once said to me, "but the fact is that everybody defers to me because they want to make sure I approve of what's happening, or they want to make sure that I'm having a good time. So it just ends up that way."

But of all the women in tennis, Mariska is the one who helped me the most. When I was playing, she took the time to give me tips on rackets and grips—attention many top players won't give to a lesser player on the tour. After my accident, she visited the hospital, sat by the bed, and talked me back from the despair that can only come from losing a career you can't imagine not having. Not that she was Florence Nightingale—she wasn't. Mariska's bedside manner consisted of about twenty sympathetic seconds followed by a barrage of orders: "Get moving—oh, you can't move? Well, wiggle! Get off your butt! Stop feeling sorry for yourself! Stop whining! Grow up!" I was trapped in a bed with bars—I had to listen.

Then two years ago when Gus opened the Springs, Mariska became his charter client, thereby triggering an avalanche of business and landing us a feature story in *Time* magazine. To-

night, Mariska was being honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award, and there's no one who deserved it more. "I've been in the twilight of my career for longer than most people have careers," she often joked, and with no sign of retirement on the horizon, it's the truth. All comers continue to find themselves staring uncomfortably across the net at a demolition machine. If I'd gone to a Gypsy fortune-teller ten years ago, I'd have laughed her out of business if she'd peered into her crystal ball and predicted that I would leave tennis long before Mariska, who was even then, in her mid-twenties, the grand old lady.

"Jordan!" That voice. Smooth as café au lait and equally capable of scalding you to death. It is a deep, professionally honed voice I'd heard say my name many times, with many emotions, starting with a fascination that led to the altar and ending when he said goodbye and walked out on me once and for all. Yes, lunging through the sea of sequins, trailed by a videocam crew and a big-haired ex–Miss America with a microphone, was its possessor, Tim Tulley, cable network sportscaster, commentator, and my ex-husband. He still looked the same—better, actually. Wavy blond hair, green eyes, cleft chin like the kind usually reserved for statues, body only slightly less perfect than his tan. I almost felt sorry for Miss America. It must be devastating to win the pageant and then a few scant years later end up working with a man who was better-looking than you.

I certainly could see what I saw in Tim, but in retrospect I had been insane to marry him. Being competitive myself, I had liked his ambition, his aggressiveness. But there was a downside I hadn't counted on. A man like Tim is perpetually on the StairMaster of Life—always stepping up to the next, better thing in any category, including job, home, apparel, and women. When I was a rising player, we shared a reasonable number of interests. We were both on the way up, we both liked sports obsessively, we both tended to travel a lot, although usually in different

directions. There was also a certain element of opposites attracting, because in many ways we had absolutely nothing in common. For instance, for all his chiseled muscles and sports mania, Tim was totally uncoordinated. In the gym, his trainer had to hand him his weights or he would have dropped them on his foot. Still, things worked out fine for a while. But when I had some really big decisions to make, like would I stay on the tour and go for it or give it up and have another kind of career and possibly think about a family, I had to discuss it with Tim by fax. He'd gotten a promotion, he was unreachable on the road, and he just wasn't there for me. And in fairness, I suppose he could say the same about me. We probably should have had a date, not a marriage. Tim told me he wanted a divorce when I was in the hospital. Bad timing, he said, but he'd wanted to tell me about Ashley for some time. Ashley was his co-reporter at the station at the time. Apparently she was a co–many things at the time. Well, at least he didn't fax me the news.

I wondered whatever had happened to Ashley. Now it appeared that Tim had moved on to beauty queens, climbing to the top of the hairspray hierarchy. God, I hoped he wasn't involved with this one. I couldn't imagine having been married to a man who went on to date a woman who wore a crown and a sash.

They were coming closer. I found myself raising my eyebrows and waving my fingertips, as if to a cocktail-party acquaintance. Like such acquaintances, we are always cordial. But Tim was in a hurry. The crowd was no match for his flying wedge of equipment, and mouthing "Catch you later," his hand cupping Miss America's elbow as if she were a vessel that required steering, Tim passed me in the tidal wave of media racing to catch up with Shaquille O'Neal.

A sudden surge propelled me into the theater lobby, where I found myself standing next to XuXu Martin Lopez, who is ranked number four in women's tennis, and her mother. Maria

Lopez straightened the shoulders of her daughter's dress as if she were preparing her gown for her wedding procession. The Lopezes, mother and daughter, always travel together.

"Hi, Jordan," XuXu beamed at me. Her English is heavily accented but fluent. "You are looking very good. Strong! Soon maybe you play again?"

We both laughed, knowing that wasn't going to happen, but I appreciated the encouragement. In a match she could be a pit bull. She had a typical clay-courter style. Small and pugilistic, she was a retriever and a counterpuncher rather than a creator, covering the court on bandy legs so tenacious you had to pry the points from her. XuXu would have made a wonderful heat-seeking missile. If she had an opportunity, she'd try to smash the ball right in your face, or go for your body instead of the open court. This would cost her points when you ducked and the ball went long, but she didn't seem to care. Next time you played XuXu you'd look across the net and she'd be gunning for you again. Privately, however, XuXu was always warm and friendly. I thought that had a lot to do with her stable home life. Tennis was a family tradition—her father had been one of the top players on the men's tour—but Mrs. Lopez, or Mama, as everyone calls her, was just that: a mother-in-residence. Somehow, without ever speaking a word of English, Mama Lopez always made her point unmistakably clear, which was that she was there to aid and protect her daughter, and she did that job very well. As a teenager on the tour, I'd envied girls like XuXu, whose parents traveled with them. Sometimes my mother made it to the big matches, but after my father died when I was fifteen, more often than not she stayed home in Pasadena with my sister, and except for my coach I was pretty much on my own.

Suddenly Mama Lopez waved excitedly and started chattering in Spanish, and I looked in the direction of her beckoning fingertips to see Marion Stryker, the venerable general manager of the

Women's Tennis Association, a fixture on the circuit. Elegant and serene, Marion glided through the crowd like a queen, trailed by the assistant manager, Kanga Cheyne. Marion nodded and smiled to the Lopezes, relegating me to a slight lift of an eyebrow, as though she couldn't quite place me, although of course she could. No one involved with tennis will ever forget the huge buildup she orchestrated for me as the next phenom, the girl who was supposed to follow in the footsteps of Kelly Kendall, America's sweetheart, and become the challenger to Mariska's throne. I was a major disappointment to Marion. I turned out to be neither cute nor all-American, and after a while I started losing my matches, and then I fell off a mountain and never played again. These events had their tragic aspects, but from Marion's point of view, I suppose, it was a lot of time and money invested in building a crowd draw and nothing to show for it. In retrospect, however, she should thank me. My abrupt departure from the scene, my literal fall from grace, left the door wide open for somebody not only more talented but more eminently promotable, somebody the media could latch on to and the crowds would clamor for—specifically, Audrey Armat, the dazzling sixteen-year-old who was currently the number four woman player in the world, and rising fast.

"There you are!" Mariska, having escaped the photographers, now made her way against the tide of the crush to give me a quick hug. "So how's it going out there in the desert?" Her Russian accent was faint, diluted by many years of Americanization.

"Our new golf course is great. Come out and we'll play," I said, grinning. "We'll play from the blue tees."

"The pro tees? When did you take up golf?"

"Just. But I'll still beat you." The competitive urge never dies. I would play tiddledywinks for blood. Of course, so would she.

"Please. You have more pins in that leg than there are in that fancy new course of yours."

"I'll limp through it." Actually, I was running a couple of miles a week and I felt amazingly good, better than I had ever imagined I could.

"You're on," said Mariska.

"Where's Audrey?" A young woman in a black minidress with a silver plastic Sports Network badge dangling from a chain around her neck appeared beside us. She wore a high-tech remote headset and a small black nylon fanny pack, carried a clipboard, and was accompanied by a distinguished-looking white-haired gentleman I recognized as Milton Bevins, a tour regular. Milt—Uncle Miltie, as the girls called him—had spent years rotating his attentions from player to player, playing fairy godfather and showering various ones in turn with expensive gifts. These days he was attached to Audrey's entourage. Mariska had told me that he once tried to give her a car, and one of the stars of the men's tour had reportedly framed an uncashed $100,000 gift check from Milt, which he swore the bank verified as good. It was rumored that Uncle Miltie had a multimillion-dollar trust fund and a $6 million-a-year annuity with which to facilitate his largesse.

"The producer is looking for Audrey. She missed the rehearsal," said the fanny-pack woman, clearly disgruntled.

"I haven't seen her tonight." Mariska shrugged. She didn't look around the room or devote a fragment of energy to wondering where anybody else might or might not be. Having burned the shoelaces off virtually every up-and-coming young woman player in the past decade, including myself, she seemed to view the never-ending roster of challengers as simply a passing parade. History had yet to prove her wrong, although to my mind her seeming disinterest signaled that, underneath the veneer, she was very aware of her vulnerability. How can you not be, I wondered, when there's no place to go but down?

The fanny-pack woman and Uncle Miltie took off in another direction in search of Audrey. When she made her appearance,