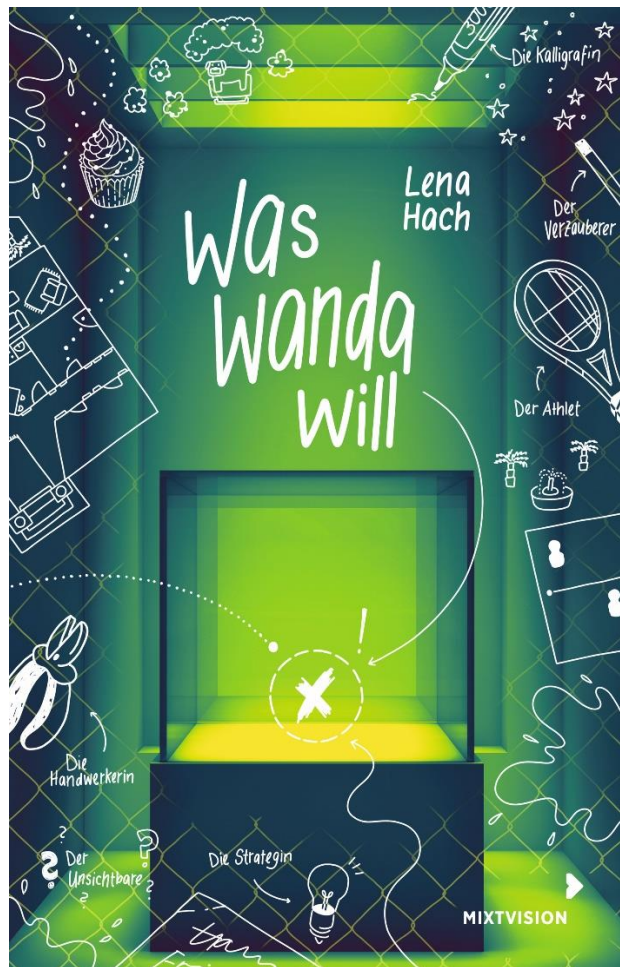


# Wanda's Game

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Sample translation by Jennifer Busch



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## **Selection of chapters from Part One**

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WHEN IT'S ALL OVER, you can say what you like. So they did. And what a load of old rubbish it was! *Of course I could see what was going on. I knew all along!* Nonsense. Wanda was leading them a merry dance. When it all started, no one – absolutely no one – had even the faintest idea. That was part of the plan. And exactly why it worked so damn well.



*Part One: THE PLAN*

# 1

“Do you understand?”

Wanda nods. That’s all she’s done for the past half-hour. Hands folded in her lap, she’s sitting in front of her tiny headteacher’s ginormous desk, nodding. The head’s talking and talking and talking. As if she hasn’t noticed she’s stuck on repeat. Then again, maybe she doesn’t care. Surely, in fact. At her school, people behave differently. At her school, there are certain rules. And those rules are obeyed.

“Do you understand?”

The temptation is strong. Wanda would dearly like to say that she isn’t quite clear on the last part yet. Would the headteacher be so kind as to repeat it for the fifty-eighth time?

But she controls herself. She’s about to give herself concussion with all this nodding, but what the hell. The head has to believe her. Believe she’s only got the best of intentions. Otherwise, the head’ll set the whole teaching staff on her, and then she won’t have a minute’s peace. They’ll be watching like hawks every damn second of every damn breaktime. And the problem with that: she can’t suss the place out if she’s under suspicion herself.

“I’ll spell it out one last time: Don’t make trouble here!”

Wanda meets the head’s thunderous gaze.

“I won’t,” she says steadily.

Silence descends. A vein in the headteacher’s neck twitches. Right next to a mole that she should probably get checked out. Wanda can’t help but think of her father, wonder what on earth he told the head. There’s no doubt he exaggerated. Because, when it comes to Wanda, he always exaggerates.

A piercing bell signals first period, and the head dismisses Wanda with a quick flick of the wrist. Wanda excuses herself politely; the head grunts. What the head doesn’t see, because she couldn’t possibly: the smirk on Wanda’s face as she leaves.

Wanda considers it a point of honour to keep her word. Always has. So she won’t meddle with this run-of-the-mill school. Why would she, anyway? She’s got other plans – bigger plans. Plans she’s mulling over when she spots him. He definitely wasn’t here before, outside the head’s office in that wheelchair with the screaming-green tyres. He’s shooting cards from one hand to the other without even looking – impressively quickly. In his white shirt and grey flat cap he’s the picture of a fully grown man, just a few sizes too small. Maybe he heard their conversation. What the head said. Whatever. “You new?”

Wanda nods.

“And already up before the dragon?”

Wanda nods again.

He raises his eyebrows in appreciation.

“Fancy a quick game?”

Wanda doesn’t need to be asked twice.

“Sure.”

He grins broadly, displaying an impressive gap between his incisors. He’s already pulled an atlas from his rucksack and laid it on his knees as a makeshift table, three cards on top.

“Watching? Here’s the queen.”

He’s not bad. Actually, he’s really good. Light fingers and a silver tongue; the second person today who can’t stop talking. Is he trying to distract her? Makes no difference – Wanda’s good, too. Very good, in fact. Eagle-eyed. She finds the queen three times in a row, winning first one, then two, then three euros. He takes his cap off, runs his hand through his dark hair.

“Shall we say a tenner, this time?” he suggests.

Exactly what Wanda’s been waiting for. Without batting an eyelid, she digs out the note. He nods, satisfied, then flurries on. Wanda doesn’t let the queen out of sight, concentrates hard – and even spots the critical moment – until he finally stops, out of breath.

“So, where’s her majesty hiding?”

“Middle,” says Wanda.

He clicks his tongue.

“How’s it go again?” he crows. “Close but no cigar.”

While he’s turning the cards over with the one hand – the queen’s on the left – he snaps up the tenner with the other.

Wanda lets out a “wow.”

“Oh,” he waves it aside, “you ain’t seen nothing yet.” He sounds damn pleased with himself, pleased with the world. Then again, Wanda doesn’t have the air of someone who’s just gambled away the last of her pocket money. She saunters nonchalantly down the hall.

“See you,” she calls without turning round.

## 2

Wanda checks the back of her hand. 2.3 scrawled in blue biro – her tutor room. Where she should have been five minutes ago. Judging by the sign on the wall, she's in the wrong building, too. She starts heading for the door when a teacher appears – a sports teacher, if the outfit's anything to go by.

"The bell went ages ago," chides the teacher.

Wanda sighs quietly. No matter where she ends up, the teachers have this same tendency of stating the obvious. And it's never a good idea to make them aware of it.

"On my way," says Wanda with a friendly smile. "I was just a bit lost."

The teacher weighs her up curiously.

"Oh, you're the new student? Wanda –" She frowns in concentration. "Wait a second, I've nearly got it. Wanda –"

"Fuchsberg, yes," Wanda interrupts, to the teacher's clear irritation. She explains: "It's my mother's last name."

"Oh, of course," says the teacher, striving for warmth. "Well. Where should you be?"

"In my tutor room."

Wanda sets off again. She doesn't need any help. Really. After all, she's been at quite a few schools by now and it's always the same old labyrinth she has to crack. She's there already. New building, second floor, third door, pus-yellow paint. She reaches for the handle. With any luck, she'll find all the right people in here. That would be handy. If not, maybe in sport, or Spanish – optional subjects where they mix classes. After all, the more people Wanda meets, the quicker she'll find the right ones. She takes a deep breath, then pulls the door open.

### 3

A double period later, and Wanda's queuing in the canteen. In front of her – what a coincidence! – the card tricks guy. He hasn't noticed her yet. When it's his turn, he straightens up and orders two chocolate bars and a coffee, black.

Coffee? Wanda's not sure she heard right: he's hardly any older than she is. But the lunch lord behind the counter reaches for a pot and does in fact pour out a coffee. Seems her new acquaintance doesn't just dress like an adult, he acts like one, too. Or tries to, at least... He takes one sip from the steaming mug and spits it right back out. Must've been too hot.

"Two fifty," orders the lunch lord.

Card-tricks pats down his pockets. Wanda's standing directly behind him so she can't see his face. Which means she can only imagine how – right this instant – he starts biting his lip.

"Hold on..."

He puts the mug on the counter, pulls his rucksack up to his chest and starts rifling through it with both hands. The lunch lord crosses his arms, sighs once, twice – until card-tricks finally gives up.

"I suppose I shall have to forego my beloved coffee today," he flutters. But the lunch lord won't let him off that easily.

"Oh no, dearie. You drank some already."

"I certainly *wanted* to drink it," counters card-tricks. "But, in point of fact, no caffeine actually found its way into my system. It's all back in this beautiful mug here. Ready for the next in line, you could say.

He glances over his shoulder and spots Wanda.

"I'll pay for him," she says magnanimously. "And I'll have a lemonade, please."

Wanda pulls out a blue wallet.

Card-tricks's eyes nearly fall out of his head. Not because of the unexpected generosity, or even the fat tip Wanda leaves. No, he's struck by the wallet. It's his.

The two of them are sitting in the sun outside the canteen.

"You win this round," he says, sipping his coffee, which, even in its cooled-off state, doesn't really seem to be to his taste. "So, tell me, how did you do it?"

Wanda shrugs.

"Same as you with your cards." She can see that won't do: her counterpart wants details. So she continues: "You have to deliberately mislead the audience. Draw their attention to one thing in order to distract them from another. Professionals call it –"

"– misdirection," he completes her sentence.

And that's all there is to say on the matter. For a while the two of them sit there in silence, sizing each other up. Until, out of nowhere, his hand darts forward. Clearly he's decided it's time for a proper introduction.

"I'm the Maestro," he says.

"Wanda," says Wanda and shakes his hand.

## 4

The Maestro gives Wanda a tour of the school. Turns out, he's just the right person for the job because the Maestro knows everyone – and everyone knows the Maestro. On their way across the yard they keep stopping for him to say a quick hello, or to bump fists, or to have an urgent little chitchat...

Wanda catches on quickly.

Need a charger?

Ask the Maestro.

Signature missing on your sick note?

See the Maestro.

And if you need a date sharpish for Friday night, who ya gonna call?

That's right. The Maestro.

He's even pulled aside by a student teacher. Wanda can't believe her ears: this aspiring pedagogue in faded jeans and a crumpled shirt is about to have his final classroom assessment. He desperately needs advice on winning over the dreaded 7b.

"Or else they'll torpedo my lesson," he says, kneading his hands together. "But I'll be damned if I let those cretins tank my exam!" His outburst hangs in the air as he steals a glance at Wanda. It looks as though he's deciding whether she's one of those particular cretins, if he knows her face from one of his classes. Wanda jumps in quickly.

"No worries," she says. "8a."

Relieved, the student teacher turns back to the Maestro, who promises to think of something.

"In the meantime, the main thing is not to try and bribe them with sweets."

"Not a chance," the student teacher shakes his head. "Last time, they threw the chocolate bars right back in my face." He rubs his forehead. "Literally."

A perhaps even more notable incident occurs at lunchtime. Coming out of the toilets, Wanda sees a slim, older student in a shiny leather jacket standing in front of her personal guide. He's resting one hand against the wall and one foot on the Maestro's wheelchair, casually blocking the way. Actually, this slim dude's already on her radar – she clocked him this morning when he started revving his motorbike in the car park. Concluding that a civilised conversation between chums looks somewhat different, Wanda decides to act.

"Peeps," she calls down the hall. "You won't believe it! Someone out there's just pushed over a Honda."

The dude, who'd just bent down to hiss something in the Maestro's ear, looks up.

"Dark blue?"

"Was once, I'd say. Hard to tell, now."

Bristling, the guy straightens up and goes to see for himself. Which puts the grin right back on the Maestro's face.

"Hey, Wanda-Woman," he croons, straightening his collar. "All good?"

Wanda furrows her brow. "Well, I'm good," she says slowly.



“Just like everything out there in the car park, if I’m not mistaken. Now that’s what I call a bluff. Respect!”

Wanda doesn’t go there.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You... all good... too?”

“All good in the hood!” the Maestro says, not looking at Wanda. He’s far too busy flicking invisible bits of fluff off his shoulder.

Wanda knows that’s not true, but she also knows that the Maestro would never tell her what’s really going on. So she’ll have to do some digging. But she was planning on that, anyway.

# 16

Two weeks later, it's time. They meet in the music storeroom after class on Friday. Five students who could hardly be more different. And Wanda. The room isn't ideal, in fact, it's the opposite: poky and stuffed with broken instruments. Not to mention the clothes racks full of dusty costumes from some musical or other and the boxes heaped with CDs and DVDs that should've been thrown out ages ago. It was, however, the only room that wasn't locked.

The Maestro turns up last.

"Yikes," is his response to this unusual mix of contemporaries. He halts in the doorway, pupils dashing from left to right, catching momentarily on Lynn. "What's going on here?" he asks, voicing the question on everyone's lips.

The five of them look at each other, baffled. It's pretty obvious no-one's going to say anything. Which would be true to form – it's not like they have anything to say to each other normally. Give or take the odd insult, that is.

"Hey, Desiree," Kai breaks the silence as he rolls up the sleeves of his snazzy jumper. "Is this your walk-in wardrobe? That'd explain a couple of things."

Wanda looks at Desiree, who's kindly ignoring Kai's wisecrack. Schulze's nostrils are flaring, though.

"But seriously," Kai's clearly decided to take charge. Force of habit. "None of you are here for the fight?"

Lynn, who's leaning against the wall, shakes her head. "I thought we were here to learn creativity techniques."

"Obviously," mutters the Maestro, who's slid onto the sofa in the corner. Now he's taking his cap off. Apparently, he's decided to make himself comfortable.

Unfazed, Lynn pulls a yellow flyer out of her rucksack.

"99 Creativity Techniques: A Workshop to Release your Inner Muse." Schulze, who's surreptitiously been edging closer to Lynn, peers over her shoulder – but Lynn's already put the flyer away, leaving Schulze with no choice but to edge away again.

"Bullshit," mutters Desiree, heading for the door.

"Why are you here, then?" asks the Maestro. Desiree stops, snarls something unintelligible. "Oh, I get it," says the Maestro with a knowing nod. "Anger management. Important."

As he's talking, the Maestro ducks behind a cushion. Which wins him some laughs. Desiree keeps her fists to herself, though.

"And you?" She asks right back. "Why are *you* here?"

The Maestro cocks his eyebrows.

"Detention. I'm supposed to be sorting out the CDs in this tip. So I spend my time *meaningfully*." The Maestro draws an exclamation mark in the air as he says the last word.

"What did you do?" Kai wants to know.

The Maestro pulls a face.

"Uhh," he grunts and scratches his neck. "When I come to think of it... nothing. I was a good little lamb the whole day long. The dragon's detention slip took a detour on its way to me. I didn't even question it."

“Because it’s nothing new,” Desiree guesses.

“Right.”

The Maestro grins proudly.

“And now, my most esteemed fellow students, I find myself asking what’s behind all this. Or who.” He looks at Wanda. She’s the only one who hasn’t said anything yet. Apart from Schulze, but he never says anything. When Wanda meets the Maestro’s gaze, he raises an eyebrow. The movement is barely perceptible, but Wanda understands the question it holds.

She nods, takes a deep breath – and finally tells everyone what’s going on.

"I've invited you here to..."

A chorus of protest stops Wanda in her tracks.

"Invited? Is it your birthday or something?"

"Where's the cake?"

"And the decorations?"

"Now that's what I call an invitation!" Kai chips in. "How about: lured us here under false pretences?"

"So, am I right in thinking there's no creativity workshop?" Lynn asks shirtily.

The Maestro lets out a demonstrative groan.

"No, Lynn. There was never any creativity workshop. And do you know why? Because art is a complete waste of time."

Lynn looks as if she's going to retort but thinks better of it.

"Bullshit," Desiree mutters over and over, louder each time.

The Maestro raises his hands placatingly.

"Esteemed... uh... beings," he says. "Let's hear Wanda out."

"Oh, you already know the new girl's name." Kai's tone is suggestive. "How's that then?"

Lynn looks up again, this time straight at Wanda. Wanda, however, simply shrugs.

"You should know, too," Wanda says to Kai. "After all, *the new girl* has sport with you."

That knocks Kai off his game, at least for a moment. He doesn't seem to remember the girl who climbed to the sports hall ceiling fondly. Never mind: Wanda seizes the opportunity to bring the conversation back on track.

"Do you want the short explanation or the long one?" she asks the group.

"The short one."

"The mega short one!"

And that's a general consensus.

"Okay," says Wanda, glancing at her watch. "Here it is: in exactly two weeks and two-and-a-half hours, we're going to break into the Park Villa."

# 18

A fly buzzing and Desiree's knuckles cracking, that's all that can be heard. Everyone is wrestling with whether that was a joke. A bad joke, obviously. But a joke, though; just a joke. Little by little Wanda's expression chases away any doubt. She's serious. Damn serious.

And because everyone knows the monstrosity of a house that is the Park Villa, all hell breaks loose.

"The Bruckmann Villa?"

"You gone funny in the head?"

"What's that supposed to mean: *we're going to break in?*"

"Absolute bullshit!"

Schulze is the only one who doesn't say anything. He waits until it's quietened down then clears his throat.

"Ah, Friday afternoon is difficult," he announces. "I've got chess."

The others stare at him in bewilderment.

"He can speak," mutters Kai.

"You serious?" exclaims Lynn.

"Yeah," says Schulze, unperturbed. "It used to be Wednesdays, now it's Fridays."

"Okay, I'll rephrase," the Maestro intervenes. "That's your only problem with this whole shebang? That you've got chess on Fridays?"

"Back to the point," says Lynn. "I for one will definitely not be breaking into any villas."

"It's a pretty cool idea, though," Desiree pipes up. "I've often wondered what it'd be like to rob a bank. Everyone's talking about it, but no-one knows it was me."

Kai pulls a face.

"Sounds like a case for the school psychologist."

"Sounds like a case for: shut your trap."

Kai and Desiree glower at one another, and the whole room holds its breath. Wanda studies them, one after the other, conscious that in this very moment the whole thing could blow up. She waits one, two seconds, then steps between the bristling adversaries, casually breaking their line of sight. It has the desired effect. The tension eases – at least a little.

"Suggestion." Wanda clears her throat. "First, I answer your questions. If you have any..."

"Hundreds," says the Maestro.

The others nod.

"Personally, I'm most interested in what it is you actually want from the Villa. I mean, is there a safe there or something?"

"Nah." Wanda shakes her head. "A tennis ball."

“Illusionist,” reads the Maestro as Wanda opens the second image. “I like it. I must say, you’ve been quick to grasp my true nature.”



### 1. The Team

<i>The Maestro</i>	=	<i>The illusionist</i>
<i>Lynn</i>	=	<i>The mechanic</i>
<i>Desiree</i>	=	<i>The calligrapher</i>
<i>Kai</i>	=	<i>The jock</i>
<i>Schulze</i>	=	<i>The invisible man</i>
<i>Wanda</i>	=	<i>The mastermind</i>

Wanda grimaces. “To be honest, it’s less about your true natures than your specific role in our plan.”

“Good thing, else I’d be protesting too,” says Lynn. “I’m not a mechanic. I’m an artist.”

The Maestro rolls his eyes but stays quiet.

“Well, I do see myself as a jock,” Kai adds thoughtfully. “But it’s still annoying that everyone only sees the sportsperson in me. I mean, I’m so much more than that.”

“Like what?” Desiree feigns interest.

“What do you mean?”

“What else are you? An Aries?”

“A damn good cook, for one thing,” says Kai, unfazed. “My Gua Boa is amazeballs. Took forever to tease the recipe out of my Gran. And I’m really good at bolognaise, too.”

“Ooh, I love a good spag bol,” Lynn chips in. “Do you use tomato puree?”

“Okay,” Wanda interrupts before the two descend into culinary geekspeak. “That brings us to the set-up.” She taps on her display and the first sketchnotes appear.

## ② Ausgangssituation



## 2. The Set-Up

*The ball*

*Is in a glass case on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor*

*In the study*

*Locked when the master of the house is away from his desk*

*Except*

*Fridays*

*At 16:00 (just after) for ca. 1 hour*

*REASON*

*Mr B*

*Has tennis practice 4-5*

*On the on-site court*

*The housekeeper uses the time to clean the study*

*Thoroughly!*

*THIS IS OUR CHANCE!*

*ALSO important*

*The gardeners are there*

*Until 16.30*

*Why the heck is that important?*

- 1. The dog (harmless but yappy :( ) is locked in the kitchen*
- 2. The conservatory is unlocked*

“I don’t get it,” says Lynn, clearing her throat. “We’re supposed to steal the ball while the study’s being cleaned? What about the housekeeper? She’ll be there too!”

The Maestro nods. “Should we just wander in, say a cheery hello, and ask if they’d kindly lend us the ball?”

“What on earth has the conservatory got to do with anything?” Kai chimes in.

Wanda shakes her head.

“I reckon it’ll all become clear when I show you the plan.”

Which leads her to the next sketchnote.



### ③ Ablauf



14:50

Der Meister ruft im Tennisverein an, gibt sich als Mr Bs Assistent aus und bestellt den Trainer ab.



15:00

Lynn schneidet ein Loch in den Maschendrahtzaun und betritt das Gelände.



↓ ↓ ↓

15:05

Lynn bricht in die Garage ein und führt dort einen Wasserrohrbruch herbei.

15:45



kehrt zurück nach Hause. Wegen der Überschwemmung parkt er seinen Wagen in der Einfahrt.

15:50

Kai springt als Tennistrainer ein. Während des Unterrichts stellt er sicher, dass Mr B keine Sicht auf die Villa hat.



16:00 Wanda klettert über das Autodach zum Balkon im 2. OG und blickt durch das Fenster ins Arbeitszimmer. Sobald die Haushälterin aufschließt, gibt Wanda dem Meister ein Zeichen.

16:03

Der Meister klingelt und verwickelt die Haushälterin vor der Haustür in ein Gespräch.



16:08

Schulze betritt das Gelände durch das offene Loch im Zaun und schleicht sich durch den offenen Wintergarten in die nun menschenleere Villa. Im Arbeitszimmer tauscht er den Ball aus.



16:20

Schulze verlässt die Villa wieder auf dem gleichen Weg. (Achtung: Um 16:30 machen die Gärtner Feierabend, dann ist auch der Wintergarten wieder abgesperrt.)



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!



### 3. The Plan

14:50: The Maestro rings the tennis club pretending to be Mr B's assistant and cancels his tennis lesson.

15:00 Lynn cuts a hole in the chain-link fence and enters the grounds.

15:05 Lynn breaks into the garage and bursts a water pipe.

15:45 Mr B comes home. He parks on the drive because of the flooding.

15:50 Kai stands in as tennis coach. During the lesson, he makes sure Mr B can't see the villa.

16:00 Wanda uses the car roof to reach the second-floor balcony and look through the study window. As soon as the housekeeper unlocks the door, she signals to the Maestro.

16:03 The Maestro rings the doorbell and keeps the housekeeper busy chatting on the doorstep.

16:08 Schulze enters the grounds through the hole in the fence and sneaks through the unlocked conservatory into the now-empty villa. In the study, he swaps the balls over.

16:20 Schulze exits the same way. (Warning: The conservatory is locked again at 16:30 when the gardeners finish for the day.)

**MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!**

Something fundamental has changed. In this second week, in the days before the coup, they're all still busy preparing – but now they're having fun, too. Not that they hang out at school, that would be suspicious. Kai spends his free time as always, with his sports mates and fans, Lynn's busy in her workshop, and Desiree and Schulze are goodness knows where. Only Wanda and the Maestro huddle together, like before. But there's a bond between all six of them. When they pass in the hall they nod, or wink, or flash a smile. It's secret, but it's certain: they're a crew.

Their individual preparations are regularly interrupted by a call from the Maestro. He withholds his number and pretends to be a talent scout, art dealer, guy from the phone company, the dragon's secretary, or even Satan himself. Sometimes he's rather convincing, other times less so. Once the Maestro has finally perfected the pitch and tone for his call to the tennis club, he moves on to plying the others with homemade cupcakes.

"If that's something you've baked, you can scram," Kai calls out to the Maestro, who's appeared on the playing field with a box on his lap. "Coach says I need to watch my diet."



The Maestro shrugs, picks up a pink-iced cupcake and takes a decadent bite.

"Tried something new." He reports, unasked. Unasked and smacking his lips.

"Coconut flakes. Extremely good for athletes. You know, magnesium, potassium, omega-3."

With these words, he takes a second cupcake out of the box. This one has green icing, and it's just as pretty. Kai's stomach rumbles.

"Is there chocolate in it?" he asks.

"Would you like that?" responds the Maestro enticingly. "Why don't you find out for yourself?"



"You miserable tease!" scolds Kai, jumping over the railing. "But I'm only having one, alright?"

In the end, it's two. And then Kai tells the Maestro his big idea. During his grand performance as a tennis coach, he won't actually play any tennis. He'll focus on fitness training instead.

"And that means?" asks the Maestro.


"It means I'll set up those little orange cones and chase Mr B from one to the next. Facing away from the house, of course. He won't even think about picking up a tennis racket. And if he doesn't, I won't have to, either."

"Sounds good," says the Maestro.

"Yep." Kai nods and takes a final final cupcake. "I think so too."

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