

The Rebound Specialist: Episode 01 - The Receptionist

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Figure 1: Cover Art

1

“I think we should stop seeing each other.”

Doogan had known it was coming. Had felt it all week. The words still hit.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” She blinked. “That’s it?”

“What were you expecting? Tears? A dramatic exit through the kitchen?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one question.”

“Alright.” He leaned back. “Have you looked at the dessert menu? Its supposed to be amazing.”

Her laugh came quick and genuine.

“The dessert menu?”

“The way you do that. Deflect with a joke when something matters.”

“Who says this matters?”

“You do. You’re doing the hand thing.”

Doogan looked down. His thumb was tracing circles on the tablecloth. He stopped.

“Lawyer tricks,” he said. “Observing body language. Very unfair.”

“We’ve had a lot of dinners, Doogan. I’ve learned a few things.” She leaned forward. “So. Aren’t you going to ask why?”

“Do I need to?”

“Humor me.”

“Why?”

She smiled—not sad, not apologetic. Proud. “Because a few weeks ago I couldn’t get through a deposition without hiding in the bath-

room. Now I've got a hearing next week and I think I'm going to win."

"You're going to destroy them."

"See? That. You say it like you mean it." She traced the rim of her glass. "After my divorce I felt broken but you helped me remember who I was before that. Which means—"

"You don't need me anymore."

"I was going to say 'I'm ready to take the next steps on my own'."

"And I'll be the lost one now."

She laughed. "We both know that's not going to happen." He'd gotten good at making her laugh. Probably too good.

The waiter appeared at their table. The restaurant hummed with quiet conversations, silverware against plates. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Just the check," Claire said, then glanced at him. "What was that about the dessert menu?"

"Are you asking as someone who's dumping me, or someone who wants to prolong this?"

"A little of both, honestly."

"Mixed signals, Counselor."

"I'm a complex person."

"You're a person who wants tiramisu."

"I really do." she said, a little shy about admitting that.

"Then we should get tiramisu." Doogan looked up at the waiter. "One with two forks. And another ten minutes before you bring the check."

He nodded and slipped away between tables.

Claire watched him with that look—the one that saw too much.
“You’re being very gracious about this.”

“What’s the alternative? Make a scene? Beg you to reconsider over Italian desserts?”

“You could at least pretend to be a little upset.”

“Who says I’m not?”

“Your face. Your tone. Your entire demeanor.”

“Lawyer tricks again.”

“Doogan.”

He met her eyes. The candlelight caught those gold flecks he’d noticed that first night at the bar near her firm. The ones he’d spent weeks pretending not to memorize. The wine in her glass caught the light, amber and warm.

“I’m happy for you,” he said. And meant it. Mostly. “You’re going to walk into that hearing and win. You’re going to keep winning. And you won’t need anyone telling you that anymore.”

“I’ll miss hearing it from you, though. And I’ll miss your cooking.”

“The lasagna convinced you I was worth keeping around?”

“It is a hell of a lasagna.” She smiled. “Which was the problem.”

“Nah. If I’ve learned one thing about you, its that you don’t let something as innocent as a man cooking change your mind.”

“There’s nothing innocent about your cooking.”

“It’s a convenient skill.”

“And your completely unearned confidence. I’ll miss that too.”

“I am definitely more at home in my kitchen. I’m less confident in restaurants.”

“You’ve been mispronouncing ‘gnocchi’ all night.”

“The waiter understood me.”

“The waiter is being paid to understand you.”

“See? When I cook, no one notices.”

“I noticed...every time.”

“Yes, I believe that.” Doogan looked down, then up. Make eye contact.

The tiramisu arrived—layers of cream and coffee-soaked cake, cocoa dusted across the top. The first bite was sweet, the espresso sharp underneath. They ate in comfortable silence for a minute.

“For what it’s worth,” Doogan said finally, “I think you’re making the right call.”

“About the restaurant? We both know what would happen if you cooked for me again.” she said hinting at what had happened every time he had cooked for her.

“About ending it. Although, dinner at my place would have been more fun.”

“You’re agreeing with me dumping you.” She pointed her fork at him.
“That’s either very mature or deeply suspicious.”

“I’m a complicated man.”

“You’re a man who avoids direct answers.”

“You won’t need them anymore. I’m recycling.”

She laughed again—the kind that made her nose wrinkle. “This is why I’m going to miss you. The smile, the jokes, the way you make everything feel lighter even when it shouldn’t.”

“If you keep talking like that, people will think you like me.”

“I do like you. That’s not why I’m ending this.”

“I know.”

And he did. She was right about all of it—the timing, the logic, the whole reason they were sitting here. It was the right call.

Didn't mean it didn't sting.

The waiter returned with the check. Claire reached for it out of politeness, but Doogan was faster.

"I've got this."

"You always do." She watched him sign the receipt. "Doogan?"

"Yeah?"

"This was real. You know that, right? What we had—what you did for me. It was real."

"I know."

"Good." She stood, picking up her jacket. "You weren't just some...I don't know...rebound thing. You matter. These last few weeks matter."

He stood too, folding the pen in with the signed receipt into the leather check folder.

"Come on," he said. "I'll walk you out."

2

The night air was warm with the Santa Ana wind. Claire walked close enough that their shoulders almost touched.

“This was nice,” she said. “Is that a weird thing to say about your own breakup dinner?”

“Depends. How nice?”

“Nice enough that I’m regretting not letting you cook for me.”

“The night is still young.”

“And we both know that I’ll lose my nerve if that happens. You made these last few weeks feel like exactly what I needed.”

“I’m happy for you, sad for your nerve”

“You’ll live.” She smiled. “I’m releasing you back into the wild, Doogan. Try not to break too many hearts.”

“Like a rehabilitated sea turtle.”

“Sure. A sea turtle who’s suspiciously good at knowing exactly what to say.”

“I feel like we’re mixing metaphors now.”

“You started it with the turtle.”

The valet stand glowed twenty feet ahead. An older couple was collecting their keys. Beyond them, a younger pair stood rigid—the woman’s arms crossed, the man’s hands jammed in his pockets.

“Thank you,” Claire said. “I mean it. For everything.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t. That’s why I’m saying it.” She squeezed his arm once. “Take care of yourself, Doogan. Try not to break any hearts.”

“I’ll just be alone in my condo, cooking for one.”

“Uh huh...” She smiled, rolled her eyes sarcastically and handed her ticket to the valet ahead of him.

A silver BMW sedan rolled up first. Doogan tipped the kid before he could move and opened her door.

She slid behind the wheel. The weight of the moment had just caught her, “Goodbye, Doogan.”

“Drive safe, Counselor.”

She pulled away. Taillights vanished into traffic.

Doogan told himself it was fine. It was always fine.

The young couple near the valet had escalated. The woman—mid-twenties, dark curly hair, fury radiating off her in waves—jabbed a finger at the man’s chest.

“You said you were working late. Working. Late.”

“Babe, I can explain—”

“Don’t ‘babe’ me. Not after—” She stopped, noticed Doogan standing there. “What are you looking at?”

“Sorry. Just waiting for my car.”

“Great. Enjoy your car.” She snapped before turning back to her boyfriend. “We’re done.”

She stormed off toward the street. The guy stood frozen, watching her go.

Doogan handed his ticket to the valet and stepped closer. “Hey.”

He barely registered Doogan. “What?”

“The trick is knowing when to follow and when not to follow.” Doogan nodded toward her retreating figure. “This is a follow-her moment.”

“She said we’re done.”

“She said that standing ten feet from you instead of getting in an uber.” He shrugged. “Go.”

His jaw tightened. He took off running, calling her name. She stopped. Turned. Doogan couldn’t hear what he said, but her arms uncrossed.

The Cougar rumbled up to the curb. Faded dark blue paint, top down, an engine note that suggested mechanical stubbornness more than reliability.

The valet handed Doogan the keys with barely concealed judgment.
“Nice car.”

“She has a good personality.”

Doogan tipped him and slid behind the wheel. The leather was warm from sitting in the southern California evening air. He was just pulling away from the valet area when his earpiece buzzed.

Eddie’s voice came through. “How’d it go?”

“She dumped me with grace and poise.”

“Beautiful. Clean exit?”

“Clean as it gets.”

“Perfect. I’ll let her sister know and send her our final bill.” A pause.
“Oh, Abby’s asking how much dinner was so we can add it to the final expenses.”

“This one’s on me.”

“Doogan—”

“On me, Eddie.”

A beat of silence. Then: “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Getting too close. That’s the whole point of having a business model—you don’t pay for your own work.”

“Consider it a tip for good behavior.”

“That’s not how tips work.” Eddie sighed. “Fine. Your funeral. So listen, got something for you. Marketing executive, early thirties, just got dumped by her fiancé. Her best friend hired us.”

“Pass.”

“Come on. Classic rebound case.” Eddie paused. “She’s got the money, Doogan. And the friend’s desperate.”

“Still pass.”

“Fine. Next up, an actress-”

“Pass. Hard pass.”

“There’s real money here, buddy. And this won’t be like the last one-”

“Yes it will. Pass.”

“Fine. There’s a third one, but we should talk about it in person.”

“What’s the pitch?”

“Come over—I’m ordering Thai. We’ll eat, we’ll talk, you can decide if it’s worth your time.”

Doogan stopped at a red light. The Cougar idled rough, threatening to stall.

“You bribing me with Thai food now? I just ate dinner.”

“I’m bribing you with a late night snack and the company of friends. Is it working?”

The light turned green. He gave the engine gas and it caught, rumbling forward.

“Yeah. It’s working.”

3

“There he is!” Eddie was already talking before Doogan cleared the doorway. “Fresh from a broken heart, our hero, food’s getting cold—”

The kitchen smelled like peanut sauce and lemongrass. Thai takeout containers lined the island, steam still rising from opened lids. Eddie was piling food onto plates, gesturing with chopsticks. She kissed Doogan’s cheek and handed him a beer, condensation cold on the bottle. “Andrews. You survived.”

“Barely.” He took a long pull.

“Did that tetanus trap you call a car make it here, or should I call a tow truck preemptively?”

“The Cougar’s fine.”

“The Cougar is a rolling health code violation.” She slid onto a barstool at the island, her silk blouse catching the overhead light. The granite counter was cool under her hands. “But I’m sure it has a lovely personality.”

Eddie shoved a plate toward Doogan. Noodles spilled over the edge. “Okay, so, the new job—Sebastian LeClere. CEO, medical billing company. He’s got a situation with his receptionist.”

“What kind of situation?”

“The romantic kind. They had a thing, now he needs to focus on work, he wants it handled cleanly.” Eddie grabbed a spring roll, bit into it. “Her name’s Annabelle Anders. Late twenties. He says she’s gotten distant, won’t talk to him, whole thing’s become awkward at the office.”

“Is he married?”

“Says no.”

Abby snorted into her wine glass.

“That’s what he said.” Eddie pointed at Doogan with his chopsticks. “The believing part is your department. That’s why we meet in person. You do your thing, read the guy, figure out if he’s lying.”

Doogan pushed noodles around his plate. The smell of basil and fish sauce filled the kitchen. “Why does an unmarried CEO need us? Can’t he just transfer her? Give her a raise and some distance?”

“Asked him that exact question. He said it’s delicate. Personal. Doesn’t want her to feel rejected, doesn’t want office drama, wants someone to—and I’m quoting here—‘help her move on gracefully.’”

“That’s what they all say.” Abby injected.

“It’s what they all say because it’s what they all want! That’s literally our business model.”

Abby set down her chopsticks. “Let me guess. You already set a meeting.”

“Tomorrow. Ten o’clock. Duke’s Coffee. Business casual.”

She burst out laughing.

Doogan looked at her. “What?”

“Nothing.” She was still grinning. “I just find it fascinating that every time you get a sketchy client with a weird request, the meeting happens at some random coffee shop in the middle of nowhere.” She started counting on her fingers. “Duke’s. That place on Silver Lake with the cheeky imitation Hawaiian art?”

“Duke’s has good scones.”

“That’s not a defense, Eddie.” Doogan added, loosely agreeing with Abby.

“It’s not a defense, it’s a statement of fact. They have excellent scones. And the location is about discretion, which—”

“Plausible deniability.” Doogan added.

“—which is a service we provide.” Eddie turned to Doogan, shifting gears without missing a beat. “Look. I’m not saying it’s a guaranteed yes. I’m saying meet the guy, read him, see what your gut tells you. If it’s a no, we walk. Done. No hard feelings.”

“My gut already says no.”

“Your gut said no to Hendricks. Remember Hendricks? That job paid for the new roof.”

Abby’s eyebrow went up. “That’s where the roof money came from?”

“Well, its not like I could pull it from the designer handbag budget.” Eddie said, firing a shot back at Abby. “The point is—” Eddie barreled forward, “—Doogan, just take the meeting. Sit down with Sebastian. Let him talk. Either he’s what he says he is, or he’s not, and either way, you’ll know in five minutes.” He grabbed a spring roll and took a bite. “That’s all I’m asking. One meeting.”

Eddie wasn’t wrong. Doogan wouldn’t know until he sat across from Sebastian LeClere.

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

“That’s my guy. Let’s go with business casual. These CEO types seem to notice those things and maybe take an uber.” Eddie said throwing shade on Doogan’s car again.

Abby stood and collected plates, stacking them with precision. “Take the Cougar tomorrow. At least you’ll look interesting.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Andrews.” Her smile went sharp. “Try not to fall for this one.”

Doogan stood, leaving his half-finished beer on the counter. He didn’t dignify that with a response.

4

“—and then I cross-referenced her tagged photos with geo-metadata, found her dog’s Instagram—”

“Her dog has Instagram?”

“Four thousand followers. The poodle posts from a specific farmer’s market every Saturday morning. Hits the latte stand for a dog treat and the owner gets a trendy coffee. Almost always around the same time.”

Doogan’s legs burned. Three miles. Sweat stuck his shirt to his back, the morning air sharp in his lungs. The earpiece stayed clear despite his breathing.

“So where is she?”

“That’s the thing. She’s surprisingly hard to pin down for someone with an active social media presence. No check-ins, locations always turned off. But her friends aren’t as careful, and her dog’s account—”

“So the owner is paranoid but her dog, not so much? Got to love SoCal.”

The light changed. He picked up the pace again, feet hitting pavement in steady rhythm.

“What else do you have on her?”

“I’m still digging. Everyone leaves a trail. That’s like, the whole point of the internet.” A pause. Keyboard clicking. “Do you always pay for the dates?”

Doogan nearly missed his stride. “Where’s that coming from?”

“Abby mentioned it. That you always pick up the check.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Even when they offer?”

“Especially when they offer.” He dodged a woman walking a golden retriever. “Women get self-conscious about it sometimes. I’ll joke, distract them. But I always pay.”

“So the guy always has to?”

“Not about having to. It’s about wanting to.” Doogan crested a hill. “No expectations. That’s the key. You pay because you enjoy their company, not because you think it buys you something.”

“But—”

“These women—assistants, yoga instructors, receptionists—they get drawn to wealthy, powerful men who pay for dinner like it’s an extension of paying for them. That provider thing women respond to. But when I do it?” He let gravity carry him down. “I’m just grateful for their time. That’s the difference.”

Baxter was quiet for a moment. “Is that how the rebounds have always gone? Like, back to the first one?” A beat. “Wait, what was the first one?”

“College. Eddie was my fraternity brother. VP of the frat had a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“The trust fund kind. Hooking up with a girl from the sister sorority all semester. But he was secretly engaged to some family friend’s daughter back home.”

“Wait, he was cheating on his fiancée?”

“The fiancée didn’t know about the sorority girl. The sorority girl didn’t know about the fiancée. Classic mess.” He slowed for a red light. “The VP panicked. Eddie found him—Eddie’s always had a nose for desperate people with money.”

“What did Eddie do?”

“Pitched him a solution. For a price, I’d charm the girl, make her

grateful for the breakup, make sure she moved on cleanly.” The light changed. “I thought Eddie was insane. Told him no.”

“But you did it anyway.”

“We were broke, neither of us from the kind of money our fraternity brothers came from. Eddie saw an opportunity, which is kind of his thing.” He pushed forward, picking up speed. “So I found a way to ‘accidentally’ keep running into her. Coffee shop, library, one study session. Made her forget about trust fund boy.”

“And it worked?”

“She told him she was grateful they could both move on. Wished him well.” The memory still felt sharp. “Didn’t even seem hurt. Just... relieved someone had actually paid attention to her.”

“That’s kind of genius.”

“Eddie thought so. Started pitching me on making it a regular thing.” Doogan was approaching Duke’s Coffee now, the strip mall visible ahead. “I said no. This was one time, never again.”

“But here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“So what changed?”

“I never found anything in college that I was any better at than this and Eddie can’t resist a business opportunity.”

Baxter made a sound like he was writing that down. “Got it. I guess you have to play to your strengths.”

“Something like that.”

More keyboard sounds. Then: “Oh! Got something. I faked a cosmetics company profile—got added to her Snapchat.”

“That feels ethically questionable.”

“All young social media addicts hope for an endorsement.” Baxter’s excitement was back. “She shares location to close friends, and now I’m a close friend. Well, GlamourGirl_Marketing is a close friend. But same thing.”

“Where is she?”

“Not at the market yet but I’ll keep an eye on her. Oh, and the dog is a white teacup poodle”

“Sounds about right. Please tell me its named Precious.”

“No, looks like Coco. That guess was oddly specific.”

“You need to watch more movies, Baxter.”

“You and Eddie both say that a lot. I have a whole list now.”

Doogan slowed to a walk, letting his heart rate settle. Duke’s Coffee sat at the end of the strip, unremarkable except for Eddie’s sedan in the parking lot.

“Good work, Baxter.”

“Really?” His voice went up half an octave.

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late.” A beat. “Hey, thanks for telling me about the first job. That’s actually pretty cool.”

“Helped me pass the time during my run.”

“Going dark for the client meet?”

“Yeah. Keep digging on Annabelle. And see what you can find on this CEO.”

“Yeah, he’s definitely not an oversharer on social media but I’m still checking...”

“Keep looking. Got to go.” Doogan cut him off.

The line went quiet. Doogan pulled the door open and stepped into the air conditioning, scanning for Eddie's inevitable wave.

5

Duke's Coffee smelled like dark roast and breakfast foods. Morning sun angled through the front windows. Eddie sat in a back booth, mid-pitch when Doogan walked up, still in running gear.

Eddie stopped. "Business casual?"

"Running gear is business casual for a farmer's market meet-cute." He slid into the booth across from them. "This buys me a reason to be jogging through the market later."

The man beside Eddie stood halfway, extending a hand. "Sebastian LeClere."

Firm handshake. Tailored shirt. Cologne that cost more than the breakfast. European accent, Belgian maybe, faint but consistent. Late forties, maybe early fifties.

"Eddie says you're very good at what you do."

"Eddie says a lot of things."

Sebastian smiled. "I appreciate discretion. This situation is... delicate."

Doogan signaled the server, ordered coffee. Sebastian's plate sat untouched—bacon, eggs, toast. The bacon glistened under the café lights.

"Tell me about Annabelle."

"She's wonderful. We had a connection—brief, but meaningful. But now it's..."

"Complicated?"

Sebastian blinked. "Something like that."

"Complicated is kind of our thing." Eddie interrupted.

"What's her coffee preference?"

“I... I don’t recall.”

“Does she take lunch at her desk or go out?”

A pause. “I believe she goes out.”

“Where?”

“I’m not certain.”

Doogan leaned back. Sebastian leaned forward, compensating.

“My company is very important me and my position can be very demanding. I don’t have time to—”

“Follow your receptionist around. I get it.” His coffee arrived. He took a sip. “You’re not married?”

“No.”

“And what does this company do?”

“Medical billing.”

“And you can’t just transfer this girl to some other department or even just fire her for some HR friendly reason?”

Sebastian’s smile tightened. “I prefer to avoid mess. Professional complications. Surely you understand.”

Eddie jumped in. “What Doogan’s getting at is, we need to know the situation to handle it right. Background. Context. How long have you two been—”

“A few months. Discretely. Now it’s complicated.” Sebastian looked at Doogan. “I’m told you’re exceptional at making these transitions... comfortable.”

“For who?”

“For everyone involved.”

The coffee was good. Something about Sebastian didn’t fit—the polished surface with nothing underneath, like an expensive suit on

a mannequin.

Doogan stood. “I need to go. She’ll be at the Farmer’s market soon, and I’ve got a meet-cute to make happen.”

“Wait, we haven’t—”

“I’ll handle it.” He grabbed a piece of bacon from Sebastian’s plate as he passed. “You should eat. You’re paying for it.”

Outside, the morning air felt cleaner. The sun had burned off the early haze. Doogan was about half way to the Farmer’s market when a call came in from Eddie, his voice slightly strained in Doogan’s earpiece.

“That was fast.”

“He doesn’t know her. At all, Eddie.”

“So?”

“So why hire us to break up with someone he’s never dated?” Doogan bit into the bacon. “Something’s off.”

“You’re still doing it, though.”

He was. Because Annabelle existed, and whatever Sebastian’s angle was, she didn’t deserve to be caught in it.

“I’ll meet her. See what I see.”

“That’s my guy.”

“If this goes sideways—”

“It won’t.”

6

The poodle found him before he found her.

Doogan was browsing heirloom tomatoes or pretending to, since the vendor had been eyeing him for a full minute when a white ball of fluff appeared at his ankles, nose working overtime.

“Hey there.” He crouched down, one hand scratching behind her ears while the other slipped into his pocket. The bacon from Sebastian’s plate, fed while he kept his eyes on the approaching owner.

Coco devoured the evidence and immediately decided he was her new favorite person.

“Coco! Oh my god—” A woman rushed over. Late twenties, dark hair pulled back, Stanford hoodie over yoga pants. “I’m so sorry. She got away from me.”

“No harm done.” He gave Coco one last scratch and stood. The dog sat at his feet, tail sweeping the pavement, clearly not planning to leave. “She’s friendly.”

“She’s a menace.” Annabelle grabbed the leash, but Coco wasn’t budging. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Coco looked up at him. Looked at Annabelle. Stayed exactly where she was.

“She doesn’t seem to agree.”

“She never agrees. That’s the problem.” Annabelle tugged again. Nothing. “Seriously?”

“Maybe she likes tomatoes.”

“She hates tomatoes. She hates most vegetables. She’s very particular.” Annabelle gave him a look—half exasperation, half curiosity. “You must just have one of those faces.”

“That only a cute poodle could love?”

She laughed. That was not what she was thinking.

“Sorry. She’s usually better behaved. Or at least better at pretending to be behaved.”

“Aren’t we all?” He stepped back from the tomato stand, and Coco finally followed—but only because he was moving. “She’s got good taste, though. These are the best tomatoes in the market.”

“You an expert?”

“I’m a man who takes produce seriously.”

“That’s either very impressive or very concerning.”

“Depends on the day.”

Annabelle smiled. Coco was still pressed against his leg.

“I’m Annabelle.”

“Doogan.”

“That’s unusual.”

“Family name. My mother veto’d about six names before my father relented and gave in on this one.”

“Your mother sounds like a character.”

“She prefers ‘Southern.’” He glanced down at Coco. “You come here often? The market, I mean. Not the tomato stand specifically.”

“Every Saturday. Coco likes the attention, and I like the coffee vendor.” She gestured vaguely toward the other end of the market. “There’s a guy who does these little hearts in the foam, and they’re very...”

“Instagram worthy?”

She chuckled, self consciously “You don’t like foam designs?”

“I’m more of a ‘drink it before it gets cold’ person.”

“A purist.”

“A realist. Foam art doesn’t improve the taste.”

“That’s a controversial opinion for Southern California.”

“I’m simple like that.”

Coco had started sniffing toward the next stall—a cheese vendor—and Annabelle let herself be pulled along. The market smelled like fresh bread and overripe peaches. Doogan fell into step beside them. The movement felt natural.

“I have a feeling you’re not that simple. So what brings you to the farmer’s market?” she asked. “Besides the tomatoes.”

“Morning run. Needed to cool down, saw the signs, figured I’d browse.”

“Find what you were hoping for?”

“Pleasantly surprised, actually.” he said giving her a smile.

“Oh...” She was studying him now. “Most people just grab a smoothie and keep going.”

“Most people don’t appreciate a good tomato.”

“Oh, right...the produce.”

“I told you. I take produce seriously.”

They reached the cheese vendor. Coco was straining toward a sample tray, and Annabelle scooped her up before she could cause an incident.

“She’s going to expect this every week now,” Annabelle said, settling the dog against her hip. “Running into handsome strangers who let her violate their personal space.”

“Handsome?”

“I said what I said.”

“I’ll take it.” Doogan picked up a wedge of aged cheddar, pretended

to consider it. “Does she usually drag you into conversations with strangers?”

“Only the ones who don’t run away fast enough.”

“Noted.”

Annabelle shifted Coco to her other arm. The dog watched Doogan with total devotion.

“I should probably rescue you,” she said. “Before she decides you’re her new owner.”

“I don’t mind.”

“That’s what they all say. Then she follows you home and suddenly you’re buying organic dog food and apologizing to your neighbors.”

“Voice of experience?”

“Bitter, hard-won experience. She’s a handful.”

He set down the cheese. “An armful at least. I should finish my run. Before my legs remember how far I’ve already gone.”

“Very wise.” She paused. “It was nice meeting you, Doogan. And sorry again about—” She gestured at Coco. “The ambush.”

“Best ambush I’ve had all week.”

“That’s either flattering or your week has been very boring.”

“Little of both.”

Doogan turned toward the market exit, and Coco let out a small, betrayed whine.

“Traitor,” Annabelle muttered at the dog.

He was halfway down the aisle when he heard her call out.

“Hey—Doogan?”

He turned.

“Same time next week?” She said it casually, like it didn’t matter. Her face said otherwise. “Coco will be devastated if you don’t show.”

“Can’t disappoint Coco.”

“That’s what I thought.”

He gave her a small wave and kept walking, the morning sun warm on his face.

He didn’t know her coffee order. Didn’t know about this market. Didn’t know about Coco. Something felt off but she seemed sweet enough to proceed.

7

“—it went fine, she asked me to come back. Next Saturday.”

Doogan stepped off of the elevator, arriving at his floor and headed down the hall to his condo.

“To the farmer’s market?” Eddie’s voice carried that salesman energy even on the phone. “That’s good, that’s really good, actually. Better than I expected for a first contact.”

“Yeah, well.” Doogan entered the code to the door and headed into his condo with its modern, urban aesthetic. “I left first. Gave her space to think about it.”

“Smart. Classic move. Leave them wanting more.”

The condo was perfectly decorated, muted tones, no detail missing. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the city skyline—city lights starting to flicker on as dusk settled. The place was immaculate. Always. A sectional sofa in charcoal gray, positioned for the view, exposed brick, dark elegance. A low coffee table with fresh flowers, regularly swapped out, the tv remote and a hardback novel, nothing accidental. Not cluttered, just enough to be interesting but nothing too personal, too messy.

Except the kitchen.

That was different.

Doogan set his phone on the soapstone, veined in dark simplicity, Doogan switched the call to speaker. The kitchen ran along the far wall, open to the living space: custom cabinetry in warm walnut, commercial-grade range with six burners and a griddle, Sub-Zero fridge that cost more than his Cougar. Knife block with German steel. Copper pots hanging from a ceiling rack, aligned by size.

This was where he felt in control.

“Okay, but here’s the thing,” Eddie said. “Sebastian isn’t the patient type. One meet-cute per week? That’s going to feel slow to him. He’s

going to want results.”

Doogan opened the fridge—mostly empty, except for essentials. Butter, good parmesan, a few vegetables. He didn’t keep much here unless he was cooking. “Then we manage his expectations.”

“Or we speed things up.” Eddie’s tone shifted—pitching mode. “I’m just saying, Baxter could probably find—”

“Already on it.” Baxter’s voice cut in, tinny through the phone’s speaker. “I pulled her transaction history. She shops at Gelsons almost every night. Always around six, six-thirty.”

Doogan closed the fridge. Leaned against the counter, arms crossed. Through the windows, the skyline glowed—high-rises and palm trees, the sprawl of Southern California stretching toward the coast.

“Every night?” That was Eddie, perking up. “That’s a pattern.”

“Someone who doesn’t plan too far ahead, shops for her appetite after a work day,” Doogan said. “Lives alone. Probably doesn’t meal-prep.”

“So we set up another ‘coincidence.’” Eddie was already building the pitch. “You show up at Gelsons Monday night. ‘Oh, hey, fancy seeing you here.’ Gets us moving faster.”

Doogan didn’t answer immediately. He stared out at the city—the lights, the distance, the clean separation between here and down there.

“You still there?” Eddie asked.

“Yeah.”

“What’s the problem?”

“No problem.”

“Doogan.”

“I said no problem.”

A beat of silence. Then Eddie, quieter: “You like her.”

“I met her once.”

“And?”

“And she’s smart. Sharp. Quick on her feet but young, sweet...not damaged yet.”

“Great. Perfect. That makes the job easier.”

“Or harder.”

Eddie sighed—long-suffering, affectionate. “Look, you always do this. You meet them, you connect, you start overthinking. It’s part of the process. It’s why you’re good at it.”

“And if I’m not overthinking?”

“Then you’re lying to yourself, which is also part of the process.”

Doogan almost smiled. Pushed off the counter and moved to the windows. The condo felt too big sometimes. Too perfect. Like a stage set for a life he didn’t actually live but it worked, time and time again.

“Monday night,” Eddie said. “Gelsons. You can help her decide what she wants for dinner. Just say you’re there anyway, right? Just shopping. Total coincidence.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll update Sebastian. Keep him happy.”

“Yeah.”

From the phone, Baxter’s voice piped up again. “Hey, Doogan? She’s been stalking your Instagram.”

Doogan blinked. “Already?”

“Yeah, she wasted no time. She viewed your profile four times since the Farmer’s market. Scrolled through photos, read the comments,

two of them. She seems especially interested in the cooking and sailing pics.”

Eddie laughed. “Good. She’s doing her homework. Good job on the social media, Baxter. Looks legit.”

“Thanks. I update it twice a week. Keeps the algorithm happy.”

Doogan rubbed his face. Turned away from the windows. The kitchen always felt like home turf to Doogan. He’d designed this space for exactly one thing: cooking for someone else, something intimate.

“Doogan?” Eddie again. “You good?”

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“Monday night.”

“Monday night.”

“And hey—relax, alright? You’re going to do great. You always do.”

The call ended. Silence filled the condo.

Doogan stood in his perfect kitchen, in his perfect apartment, looking out at a city full of lights and people and lives that weren’t his.

He thought about Annabelle. The way she’d laughed at his terrible jokes. The way she’d called him handsome without hesitation.

The way he was going to lie to her on Monday.

He pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge and headed into his room to shower from his morning run.

“I know, I know...but he wants a status update.”

Doogan turned a Roma tomato over in his hand, pretending to examine it. “We just accepted the job. What’s his hurry? Tell him I’m meeting her tonight. I’ll call you after.” He kept his voice low. Through the produce section’s windows, he’d spotted her—office attire, professional but not stuffy. Monday evening dinner run, just like Baxter predicted.

“Doogan, he’s going to want specifics—”

“Eddie. I gotta go.”

He tapped the earpiece off. Annabelle Anders. Right on schedule.

Doogan dropped the tomato into his basket and repositioned himself where she’d surely see him. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead. The produce section smelled like misted lettuce and cardboard. In his ear, Baxter’s voice replaced Eddie’s silence.

“She’s early. Her usual time is six-fifteen, but it’s only—oh. You already see her.”

Doogan didn’t respond. She was working her way through the entrance, grabbing a basket, glancing at her phone.

“Want me to mute?”

“Uh huh.” Under his breath.

“Got it. I’m here if you need me.”

He picked up another tomato. Gave it serious consideration. The kind of consideration that says *I’m a man who takes produce seriously and definitely didn’t plan this encounter.*

“You again.”

Doogan looked up. She was three feet away, basket in hand, smile uncertain but warm.

“Me again.” He held up the tomato. “You have an opinion on Romas versus heirloom?”

“Still shopping for tomatoes, I see.” Her tone was lighter than Saturday. Almost playful. “This is becoming a pattern.”

“I heard they had good tomatoes here.” He set the tomato down, deadpan. “Turns out the rumors were true.”

She laughed. “You came to this specific grocery store because someone said they had good tomatoes?”

“You don’t?”

“No. Normal people do not do that.”

“Your loss.” He selected another heirloom, examining it with exaggerated seriousness. “So. Tomatoes. Monday night shopping?”

“Dinner run on the way home from work.” She gestured at her basket. “The exciting life of a receptionist. Just shopping for tomatoes tonight?”

“Among other things. You?”

She held up her basket. Doogan could see the contents clearly—a stack of trendy premade meals, the kind with minimalist packaging and maximum markup. The sort of thing a wellness influencer would endorse.

“Very healthy,” Doogan said. “Very... photogenic.”

“They’re convenient.”

“They’re also terrible.”

“Excuse me?”

“They’re not *food*. They’re content. Designed to look good on Instagram, not taste good on a Monday.”

She crossed her arms, but she was still smiling. “And you’re some kind of food snob?”

“I’m a realist. Those containers are going to taste like plastic and disappointment.”

“You don’t know that.”

“What’s your favorite restaurant?”

The pivot caught her off guard. “What?”

“Restaurant. Favorite. Go.”

“I—Providence, I guess. But I haven’t been in—”

In his ear, Baxter’s voice cut in: “Providence is known for their risotto according to this Yelp review—shrimp, I guess—and it’s all over their social media.”

“And at Providence, what do you order?”

“The tasting menu, usually.”

“But if you weren’t doing the tasting menu. If you walked in and ordered one thing.”

She considered. “Hmmm...not sure...”

“Shrimp risotto? Probably with a sweet white wine - a Riesling maybe.”

Her eyes went wide. “How did you—” She stopped. Stared at him. “Okay, that’s either really impressive or really creepy.”

“I prefer mysterious.”

She laughed, actual and unguarded. “You’re definitely that.”

“I’m glad you noticed.”

“You know,” Doogan said, turning back to the tomatoes, “this place has everything you need for a real risotto. Arborio rice, shallots, decent parmesan.” He selected three more tomatoes. “Even the shrimp’s not terrible, if you know what to look for.”

“Are you suggesting something?”

“I’m buying groceries. What you do with that information is up to you.”

Doogan moved past her toward the rice aisle. She didn’t follow immediately—he could feel her watching him go, calculating.

Good.

Ten minutes later, Doogan was in the checkout line with a basket full of risotto ingredients when she appeared behind him.

“You really think you can make it better than Providence?”

“I think I can make it better than whatever’s in that container.”

She glanced at her basket. The premade meals looked even sadder under the fluorescent lights.

“The shallots here aren’t great,” she said.

“I’ll make do.”

“And the parmesan is pre-grated.”

“Criminal, but survivable.”

They were both checked out now, standing in the no-man’s-land between the registers and the exit. She bit her lower lip.

“I don’t usually invite strange men from grocery stores to cook for me.”

“I’m not strange. I’m unconventional. There’s a difference.”

In his ear, Baxter’s voice: “She’s not going to—”

“Fine.” She looked at him directly, decision made.

Baxter went silent.

“Fine?” Doogan said.

“You can cook. I’ll provide the kitchen and the judgment.”

“That’s all I ask.”

They walked out into the early evening light, a gust from the late fall breeze. She pointed across the street to a modern low-rise with that particular LA blend of glass and concrete.

“It’s right there. Building with the blue awning.”

“Convenient.”

“That’s why I shop here.” She paused at the crosswalk. “Fair warning—I have minimal cooking utensils.”

“Risotto needs a pan and a spoon. You have those?”

“Probably.”

“Then we’re in business.”

The light changed. They crossed together.

In his ear, Baxter’s voice: “This doesn’t work for anyone else, you know that, right?”

Doogan tapped the earpiece once. Enough audience for tonight.

9

“Sorry about the mess.” Annabelle kicked a pair of running shoes under the couch as he followed her inside.

The condo was small but camera-ready. Plants on the windowsill. Design magazines fanned across the coffee table.

“This is mess?” Doogan set the grocery bag on the kitchen counter. “You should see my place.” he said, humility was always best in these situations.

“I’m sure it has character.”

“That’s a polite way of describing it.”

She laughed and opened a cabinet. “Utensils. I have a pan, a wooden spoon, and—” She held up a cheese grater. “This.”

“That’ll do.”

He unpacked the groceries while she cleared counter space. The kitchen opened to the living room, no walls between them. Coco appeared from the bedroom and sat at his feet, tail wagging hopefully.

“She remembers you.”

“I’m memorable.”

“That remains to be seen.” Annabelle leaned against the counter beside him, close enough to hand him things. “You really know what you’re doing.”

“Risotto’s easy. You just have to pay attention.”

He heated the pan, the burner clicking to life. Started the shallots. The smell hit immediately—sweet, sharp. His hands moved—dice, sauté, deglaze. The knife found its rhythm. She handed him things before he asked for them.

“Oh—wait.” She disappeared into the living room and returned with a wine bottle. “Our billing company rep gave me this. Supposed to

be really good.”

Doogan took it. Woodmark Vineyards, Napa. The label looked expensive but not familiar.

“You don’t recognize it.”

“I’m more of a beer guy.”

“Liar. You knew my risotto order at Providence, even nailed the wine choice” She found two glasses. “You’re full of surprises.”

“Hopefully good ones.” he said jokingly.

“Looking good so far.” She said, her eyes darting back to his like she was caught checking him out. She smiled, opened the bottle and poured. The wine was pale gold, catching the kitchen light.

“To coincidences,” she said, raising her glass.

“And grocery stores.”

They drank. The chardonnay was decent, smooth going down. Doogan added rice to the pan, stirred, let it toast. The grains crackled, turning translucent at the edges.

“This is nice,” Annabelle said. “I don’t usually—”

“Invite strangers to cook?”

“Trust people this fast.” She was closer now, watching him work. Watching his hands. “But you don’t feel like a stranger.”

“That’s usually a good thing.”

“I think it can be a dangerous thing.”

She refilled their glasses. He added stock to the rice, one ladle at a time. The rhythm was meditative—stir, wait, add more. She stood close enough he could smell her perfume under the cooking smells.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

She smiled. “Why aren’t you married?”

“How do you know I’m not married?”

“I *might* have checked you out online?”

“And?” he asked playfully.

“I only looked for a bit but you certainly seem single.” she said downplaying what was clear an online stalking session.

The question landed somewhere unexpected. He stirred the risotto, adding another ladle of stock. “Never found the right timing, I guess.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the answer I’ve got.”

“Hmm.” She drank, then refilled both glasses again. The bottle was half gone now. “My last boyfriend said I was too much work. Too demanding. Too—” She waved a hand. “Everything.”

“He sounds like an idiot.”

“He was. That’s not the point.” She set down the bottle, swaying slightly. “The point is I believed him. For a while. Then I decided I’d rather be alone than be someone’s compromise.”

The risotto was silky now, coming together. Steam rose from the pan, carrying the smell of butter and cheese. Doogan’s head felt... strange. Light. Like he’d had more than two glasses.

“That’s not nothing.”

“That’s not a compliment.”

“Sure it is.” He met her eyes. Had to focus to keep them in frame. “Most people settle. You didn’t. That takes...”

“Guts,” she finished, smiling. She reached for her glass, knocked it slightly. Wine sloshed. “Oops.”

“You okay?”

“Fine. Just—” She laughed. “I think that wine is stronger than I thought.”

Doogan’s hands felt heavy. The spoon was harder to hold. He stirred slower, trying to concentrate. The kitchen tilted slightly.

“Maybe we should eat,” he said. His voice sounded far away.

“Maybe.” But she wasn’t moving toward plates. She was moving toward him. “You’re good at this.”

“Cooking?”

“Everything.” Her hand on his chest. “The talking. The timing. The... you.”

She kissed him. Soft at first, then certain. He kissed her back and felt the room shift. Not metaphorically. Actually shift. The floor wasn’t quite level anymore.

“Annabelle—”

“Bedroom,” she said, taking his hand.

He followed because his feet were moving but his brain was lagging behind, processing slowly, everything wrapped in cotton. The risotto. They hadn’t eaten the risotto. That seemed important but he couldn’t remember why.

The bedroom was dark. She was laughing, pulling him toward the bed. Coco whined from somewhere far away. The kitchen? Had they left the stove on?

Doogan’s knees buckled. The bed caught him. Annabelle was saying something but the words blurred together, sound without meaning. Her face above his, then beside his, then gone. The ceiling was spinning. Or he was spinning. Both.

His eyes wouldn’t stay open.

Everything went dark.

Doogan opened his eyes. The room was wrong—too bright, too cold. A man stood over him. Badge. Hard expression.

“Rough night?”

The detective pointed beside him.

Doogan turned his head.

Annabelle. Still. Too still.

Her eyes open. Fixed.

Dead.

“Hands where I can see them,” the detective said.
