



Episode 1: The Receptionist

The Rebound Specialist

Scene 1

The candle between them flickered. Claire set down her wine glass with the kind of precision lawyers use when they're about to deliver bad news.

"I think we should stop seeing each other."

Doogan had known it was coming. Had felt it all week. Still landed like a punchline he wasn't ready for.

"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. "Can I still get the bread basket refilled?"

Her laugh came quick and genuine. "God, I'm going to miss that."

"The bread basket?"

"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."

"Three months 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 three months ago I couldn't get through a deposition without hiding in the bathroom. 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."

"I do mean it."

"I know you do. That's the whole point." She traced the rim of her glass. "You made me believe I could do this. And now I do. Which means—"

"You don't need the training wheels anymore."

"I was going to say 'safety net,' but yours is better."

"I'm excellent at metaphors. It's one of my many gifts."

"Along with modesty."

"Exactly."

She laughed again. He'd gotten good at making her laugh. Probably too good.

The waiter materialized. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Just the check," Claire said, then glanced at him. "Unless you want dessert?"

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

"A little of both, actually."

"Mixed signals, Counselor."

"I'm a complex person."

"You're a person who wants tiramisu."

"I really do."

"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 vanished.

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 three months pretending not to memorize.

"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."

"You'll miss the free dinners."

"That too." She smiled. "And the way you always order the exact wrong wine and make it work anyway."

"It's a skill."

"And your completely unearned confidence about restaurant choices."

"This place was excellent."

"You've been mispronouncing 'gnocchi' all night."

"The waiter understood me."

"The waiter is being paid to understand you."

"See? I contribute to the economy. I'm a job creator."

The tiramisu arrived. They ate in comfortable silence for a minute.

"For what it's worth," Doogan said finally, "I think you're making the right call."

"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. That was the thing. 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."

"It's one of my many—"

"Gifts. Yes. I remember." 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. "Because even though its over, this did matter. You matter. The last three months 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."

Scene 2

The night air was warm as they stepped outside toward the valet station. Claire walked close enough that their shoulders almost touched. Old habit.

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

"Depends. Are you grading on a curve?"

"I'm a lawyer. I don't do curves."

"And yet you curved me."

She stopped at the corner of the building, turning to face him. "I didn't curve you. I'm releasing you back into the wild."

"Like a rehabilitated sea turtle."

"Exactly like that. A sea turtle who's very good at eye contact and terrible at long-term commitment."

"I feel like we're mixing metaphors now."

"You started it."

The valet stand glowed twenty feet ahead. A kid in a red vest was handing keys to an older couple. 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."

"No promises."

She smiled 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.

"Of course you did." She slid behind the wheel. "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 turned 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."

Something clicked in his eyes. 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 like a promise someone forgot to keep. Faded dark blue paint, patched soft top, 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 anyway and slid behind the wheel. The leather was warm from sitting. He put the top down—why not—and was reaching for the ignition when his earpiece buzzed.

Eddie's voice came through. "How'd it go?"

"She dumped me with grace and poise. Said I helped her believe in herself again."

"Beautiful. Clean exit?"

"Clean as it gets."

"Perfect. I'll let her sister know and send her our final bill. She doesn't suspect, does she?"

"No, she doesn't suspect. I'm a professional for a reason." Doogan said, almost reluctantly.

"That's my boy. So listen, got a couple things for you."

"Eddie."

"Just hear me out. First one's easy. Marketing executive, early thirties, just got dumped by her fiancé. Her best friend hired us. She's worried she's going to do something stupid."

"Define stupid."

"Quit her job and move back to Ohio."

"That might be stupid."

"Right? The friend says she's spiraling—won't leave her apartment, keeps texting the ex, the whole disaster package. She just needs someone to remind her she's desirable before she blows up her whole life."

"Pass."

"Come on. Classic rebound case. Quick in, quick out, help her remember she's worth more than some finance bro who couldn't commit."

"Let her friends handle it."

"Her friends tried. That's why they're calling us." Eddie paused. "She's got the money, Doogan. And the friend's desperate."

"Still pass."

"Fine. Second one's trickier. Actress—you've seen her, that streaming thing about the lawyers—"

"Pass."

"You didn't even let me finish."

"I don't need to. Actresses come with publicists, and publicists come with complications."

"The publicist is who's paying."

"Even worse."

A pause. Eddie recalibrating. "Okay. Look, 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?"

"Is it working?"

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

"Yeah. It's working."

"Good. See you in twenty." The call clicked off.

The Cougar rumbled through the night. Warm air. City lights.

He turned up the radio and tried not to think about Claire.

Scene 3

"There he is!" Eddie was already talking before Doogan cleared the doorway. "Fresh from a broken heart, our hero, food's getting cold, we got pad thai, we got drunken noodles, we got spring rolls—Abby insisted on the spring rolls even though nobody ever eats the spring rolls, but that's a whole separate conversation we don't need to have right now."

The kitchen smelled like peanut sauce and money. Thai takeout containers lined the island. The pendant lights hummed.

"I eat the spring rolls," Abby said, emerging from the hallway. She kissed Doogan's cheek and handed him a beer. "Andrews. You survived."

"Barely."

"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, crossing her legs. "But I'm sure it has a lovely personality."

Eddie was piling food onto plates, gesturing with chopsticks. "Okay, so, the new job—and I'm just going to get right into it because I've been sitting on this all day and Abby keeps making that face like I'm hiding something, which, technically, yes, I was waiting for you, but that's not hiding, that's strategic timing—"

"Those are the same thing when you do them," Abby said.

"They're not. They're related but distinct concepts. Anyway." Eddie shoved a plate toward Doogan. "Sebastian LeClere. Wealthy guy, CEO of some kind of medical billing company, very polished on the phone. He's got a situation with his receptionist."

"What kind of situation?"

"The romantic kind. They had a thing, now she's pulling away, he wants it handled cleanly. Professionally." Eddie was already onto his next thought. "Her name's Annabelle Anders. Late twenties. Smart, pretty, exactly his type—his words, not mine. 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.

"What?" Eddie spread his hands. "That's what he said."

"And you believed him."

"I didn't say I believed him, I said that's what he said. There's a difference. The believing part is Doogan's department." He pointed at Doogan. "That's why we meet in person. So you can do your thing, read the guy, figure out if he's lying or just sad or what."

Doogan pushed noodles around his plate. "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."

"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 in Silver Lake with all the goat paintings. The tea house that was definitely money laundering."

"Duke's has good scones."

"That's not a defense, Eddie."

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

"Plausible deniability."

"—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?"

"The point is—" Eddie barreled forward, "—Doogan's gut is an asset, not a veto. You use it to read people, not to avoid meeting them. 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. One meeting."

"That's my guy."

"If I say no, you drop it?"

"Scout's honor."

"You were never a scout."

"I was briefly a scout. There was an incident involving a campfire and a can of aerosol—you know what, not relevant. Point is, we're set."

Abby stood and collected plates. "Take the Cougar tomorrow. It'll make you look eccentric instead of suspicious."

"Thanks for the endorsement."

"You're welcome, Andrews." Her smile went sharp. "Try not to fall for this one."

Doogan didn't dignify that with a response.

Scene 4

"—and then I cross-referenced her tagged photos with geo-metadata from her friends' public accounts, which gave me a pattern, and once I had the pattern I could narrow down to like three possible locations, and then I found her dog's Instagram—"

"Her dog has Instagram?"

"Her dog has four thousand followers." Baxter's voice buzzed in his ear, enthusiastic as always. "People are weird about their dogs."

Doogan was three miles into his run, cutting through the neighborhood streets, the morning air still cool enough to feel good. The earpiece was doing its job—Baxter's voice crystal 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 on her main account. But her friends aren't as careful, and her dog's account—"

"Is run by someone less paranoid."

"Exactly! The poodle posts from a specific farmer's market every Saturday morning. Multiple weeks in a row. Same vendor tags. Same time frame."

Doogan slowed at a crosswalk, jogging in place. "Farmer's market on a Saturday. That's not exactly unique."

"No, but her Instagram—her actual Instagram—has three photos from the same market in the last month. Different angles, but I matched the produce stand awnings. And get this: there's a coffee vendor she photographs constantly. Like, obsessively. Latte art with little hearts. I think she might have a thing for the barista."

"Or she just likes latte art."

"Nobody likes latte art that much."

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

"What else do you have on her?"

"Not much. Employment checks out—receptionist at LeClere's company. But before that? Thin. Either she's private or someone cleaned up her footprint."

"How did you and Eddie do this before the internet?"

Doogan laughed, breath coming harder on an uphill stretch. "Very differently."

"No, but seriously. How did you find people? How did you get background information?"

"Phonebooks. Libraries. A lot of talking to human beings." He crested the hill and let gravity carry him down the other side. "You want to hear about the first job?"

"Yes. Obviously yes."

"College. Eddie and I were fraternity brothers." He dodged a woman walking a golden retriever. "The VP had a problem—hooking up with a sorority girl while secretly engaged to someone back home. Needed to end things without blowing up his life."

"That's messy."

"Very. Eddie pitched him a solution. For a price, I'd charm the girl, make her grateful for the breakup." He slowed at a crosswalk. "I thought Eddie was insane. Said no."

"But you did it anyway."

"Rent was due. The Cougar needed a transmission." The light changed. He pushed forward. "Engineered a few chance encounters. Made her forget about trust fund boy."

"And it worked?"

"She wished him happiness in his marriage. Didn't seem hurt. Just relieved someone had paid attention to her."

"That's kind of amazing."

"Eddie immediately started pitching me on making it a regular thing. I said no. Absolutely not. This was a one-time favor."

"But here you are."

"Here I am." The light changed. Doogan started running again, slower now, cooling down. "The trick is not thinking about it too hard."

"You say that a lot."

"Because it's true a lot."

More keyboard sounds. Then: "Oh! Got something. I posed as a cosmetics company rep doing market research—got added to her Snapchat."

"That feels ethically questionable."

"It feels like doing my job." 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?"

"Farmer's market. Saturday mornings. Nine to eleven." A pause. "Also, she has a white teacup poodle."

"Of course she does."

"Named Coco. Very photogenic."

Doogan was approaching Duke's Coffee now—the strip mall facade visible ahead, morning light catching the windows. Sebastian LeClere and Eddie would be waiting inside.

"Good work, Baxter."

"Really?" His voice went up half an octave.

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Too late." A beat. "Hey, one more thing. The poodle's name is Coco. In case that helps."

"It might."

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.

"Going dark for the client meet."

"Copy that. I'll keep digging on Annabelle. There's something off about her digital presence—it's too clean. Like someone pruned it."

"Or like she's just a normal person who doesn't overshare."

"Nobody's that normal," Baxter said. "Nobody."

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

Scene 5

"—so I told him, I said look, you want the premium service, you pay the premium price, that's how this works —" Eddie was mid-pitch when Doogan walked up to their table, still in running gear.

Eddie stopped. "Business casual?"

"Running gear is business casual for a farmer's market meet-cute." He pulled out a chair. "This buys me a reason to be jogging through the market later."

The man across from Eddie stood halfway, extending a hand. "Sebastian LeClere. You must be Doogan."

Firm handshake. Tailored shirt. Cologne that cost more than the breakfast. European accent, 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. Bright, efficient. We had a connection—brief, but meaningful. Now she's pulling away, and I need to ensure the transition doesn't affect the office dynamic."

"What's her coffee order?"

Sebastian blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You work together. You had a connection. What does she drink?"

"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.

"I run a medical billing company. Emergence Medical Billing. Very specialized work, 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."

"Then why not just ask her out properly? Take her to dinner, see where it goes?"

"The office dynamic—"

"Would survive dinner."

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. Casually. Now it's awkward." 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. Farmer's market opens at nine, and I've got a meet-cute to engineer."

"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.

Eddie caught up with him at the corner. "That was fast."

"He doesn't know her. At all."

"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."

It would. Doogan got in the Cougar and headed toward the market.

Scene 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, embarrassment already coloring her cheeks. 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's what my mother always said. Right before she'd add 'and that's not a compliment.'"

She laughed.

"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 heirlooms 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 grandfather's, supposedly. Though my mother also said she was heavily medicated during labor, so the paperwork might be suspect."

"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. Very instagrammable."

"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 contain multitudes."

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

"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."

"In running gear."

"I commit to my routines."

"Clearly." She was studying him now. "Most people just grab a smoothie and keep going."

"Most people don't appreciate a good heirloom."

"There you go with the tomatoes again."

"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."

He set down the cheese. "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 and Sebastian's lies already unraveling in his head.

He didn't know her coffee order. Didn't know about this market. Didn't know about Coco.

Whatever story he'd sold them, Annabelle Anders wasn't in it.

But Doogan was now.

Scene 7

"—and you just *left*?"

Eddie was staring at Doogan like he'd confessed to a felony.

"I left."

"You had her. She was into you. The dog was *obsessed* with you—and you walked away without getting her number, without suggesting coffee, without—"

"She asked me to come back next Saturday."

Eddie stopped. Processed. His face cycled through confusion, skepticism, and finally landed on grudging respect.

"She asked *you*."

"To the farmer's market. Next Saturday."

"Huh." He dropped into a chair. "That's better."

"That's the whole point. You don't close too fast. Leave them curious."

"Yeah, ok...but this CEO isn't the patient type, Doogan. He's going to want things to move a bit faster than one Saturday at a time."

From the tablet on the counter, Baxter's voice cut in. "Wait, I don't get it. Why is that better? She was interested. Why not just ask her out?"

Eddie and Doogan exchanged a look. Abby, at the kitchen island with her laptop and wine, didn't even glance up.

"Baxter," Eddie said, pivoting into mentor mode, "when you're in too early, you're just another guy. But when *she* makes the move—when she's the one asking—now she's invested. Now she's thinking about you. That's the difference between a date and a *connection*."

"But isn't that... manipulative?"

Abby snorted. "Welcome to the business."

Doogan cut in. "What do we have on her?"

"Not much," Baxter said. "Instagram's coffee art and the dog. Weirdly private."

"Transaction patterns?" Eddie leaned forward.

Baxter hesitated. "I mean... technically that's not exactly—"

"Just tell us what you found."

"There's a Gelsons. She shops there almost every night. Like, she's there at least five times a week. Always around six, six-thirty."

"Every night?" Abby looked up. "Who shops for groceries every night?"

"Someone who cooks fresh every night," Doogan said. "Someone who lives alone and doesn't want leftovers."

"Or someone who doesn't have anything else to do." Eddie was already calculating. "Either way, that's a pattern. That's an opportunity."

"That's stalking," Abby said.

"It's research-based positioning."

"It's stalking with a credit card statement."

"Could you find her address?" Doogan asked Baxter.

He shook his head. "That's where it gets weird. The billing address on everything routes to a PO Box. Can't get a physical location."

"So we know where she shops but not where she lives."

"Pretty much."

Eddie spread his hands. "So? You show up at Gelsons. 'What a coincidence.' Start from there. At least it gets us on a slightly faster pace than one hour each Saturday."

Abby closed her laptop. "I want it on the record that I think this whole thing is ridiculous. And you—" She pointed at Doogan. "—are going to end up liking this woman."

"I'm not—"

"You always do." She stood, collecting her wine. "Five nights a week at Gelsons. Pick one. Try not to look too surprised when you 'accidentally' run into her."

She walked out. Eddie and Doogan sat in the silence she left behind.

"She's not wrong," Eddie said finally.

"I know."

He drummed his fingers on the counter. "Monday night. You good?"

"I'm good."

"And if Sebastian asks about progress?"

"Tell him I'm working on it. Tell him patience."

Eddie snorted. "Yeah. I'll tell him patience."

Doogan was almost to the door when he called after him.

"Hey. The leaving first thing. Making her ask you to come back." He was almost smiling. "That was smooth."

"Basic psychology."

"Still smooth."

Scene 8

"—look, I'm just telling you what he said. He wants a status update. He's paying premium rates and he expects premium turnaround."

Doogan turned a Roma tomato over in his hand, pretending to examine it. "Tell him I'm meeting her tonight."

"Tonight? That's fast. What's the play?"

"Working on it. I'll call you back."

"Doogan, he's going to want specifics—"

"Eddie. I gotta go."

Through the produce section's front window, he'd spotted her—office attire, professional but not stuffy, Monday evening dinner run just like Baxter predicted.

Annabelle Anders. Right on schedule.

Doogan dropped the tomato into his basket and repositioned himself near the heirloom display. In his ear, Baxter's voice replaced Eddie's.

"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, smiling.

"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 drove to a 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?"

"I'm sure they're fine." He picked up an heirloom, deep red, perfectly ripe. "But they're not *food*. They're content. Somebody designed that packaging to look good on Instagram, not to 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?"

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 very strange."

"I prefer unconventional."

"That's not better."

"It's more honest."

"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.

"Need help carrying that?" Doogan nodded at her bag.

"My place is across the street."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

She bit her lower lip. "I don't usually..."

"You don't usually what?"

"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."

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. 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: "She's been all over your Instagram."

Doogan tapped the earpiece once. Enough audience for tonight.

Scene 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."

"I'm sure it has character."

"That's a polite way of describing chaos."

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 somewhere and sat at his feet, tail wagging.

"She remembers you."

"I'm memorable."

"That remains to be seen." Annabelle leaned against the counter, watching him work. "You really know what you're doing."

"Risotto's easy. You just have to pay attention."

He heated the pan, started the shallots. The rhythm came naturally—dice, sauté, deglaze. She handed him things before he asked for them.

"Oh—wait." She disappeared into the living room and returned with a wine bottle. "A client gave me this. Supposed to be really good."

Doogan took it. Woodmark Vineyards, Napa. The label looked expensive but unfamiliar.

"You don't recognize it."

"I'm more of a beer guy."

"Liar. You knew my risotto order at Providence." She found two glasses. "You're full of surprises."

"I contain multitudes."

"You said that at the market."

"Still true."

She opened the bottle and poured. The wine was pale gold.

"To coincidences," she said, raising her glass.

"And grocery stores."

They drank. The chardonnay was decent, not great. Doogan might have undersold his wine knowledge. He added rice to the pan, stirred, let it toast.

"This is nice," Annabelle said. "I don't usually—"

"Invite strangers to cook?"

"Trust people this fast." She was closer now, watching him work. "But you don't feel like a stranger."

"That's usually a good thing."

"I think it can be a dangerous thing."

He added the first ladle of stock. The rice absorbed it hungrily.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

She smiled. "Why aren't you married?"

The question landed somewhere unexpected. He stirred the risotto. "Never found the right timing."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer I've got."

"Hmm." She refilled their glasses. "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. "The point is I believed him. For a while. Then I decided I'd rather be alone than be someone's compromise."

Doogan added more stock. Stirred. The risotto was silky now, coming together.

"That's not nothing."

"That's not a compliment."

"Sure it is." He met her eyes. "Most people settle. You didn't. That takes guts."

Her guard dropped.

"You're good at this."

"Cooking?"

"Everything." She set down her glass and turned him toward her. "The talking. The timing. Is this why all the podcasts rave about more experienced men?"

"Is that another way of saying older?"

"That's not a bad thing."

"It's honest."

She kissed him. Soft at first, then certain. He kissed her back and felt the familiar pull—the moment when the job stopped being a job and became something else.

The risotto could wait.

She led him toward the bedroom. Coco whined from the kitchen.

"She'll survive," Annabelle said.

The bedroom was dark, the sheets cool. She was warm. She was laughing. She was telling him about her first apartment, the one with the radiator that sounded like a dying animal, and he was telling her about the Cougar's transmission problems, and somehow they were both laughing and then they weren't laughing anymore.

Afterward, she traced patterns on his chest.

"This wasn't the plan," she said.

"Plans change."

"Do they?" She propped herself up on one elbow. "You don't seem like someone whose plans change."

"What do I seem like?"

"Someone who always knows the next move."

He didn't answer. Couldn't, really. Because she was right. And because for the first time in a long time, he didn't know the next move. Didn't want to.

She fell asleep with her head on his shoulder. Her breathing evened out. The room was quiet.

Doogan stared at the ceiling. Sebastian's lies. Annabelle's trust. The math didn't add up, and he couldn't stop running the numbers.

He closed his eyes.

Someone tapped his forehead.

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.