

The Rebound Specialist: Episode 03 - The Professional Golfer

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Figure 1: Cover Art

“Are you ever going to give me a price, Eddie?”

“What’s a bigger share of eleven hundred endorsement deals worth to you?” Eddie loosened his shoulder, wound back, caught his pitching wedge clean. Ball dropped four feet from the hole.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard this from every publicist in LA.” Jake followed Eddie onto the green.

Doogan carried his putter, gave Eddie space.

“She’s playing top-tier golf, Jake. Barely clearing what? A million a year? Is that even half what Korda or Ko are clearing? And don’t even start me on the chick with the big ass, what’s her name?”

“Candy Williams. But Mara appeals to a different demographic.”

“A publicist tell you that? They show you a pie chart? Color copied at Kinko’s?”

“Eddie—” Doogan tried to slow him down.

“Look, you’re right, Jake. That’s not what we do. I don’t have a prospectus or whatever bullshit they handed you that’s probably lining your garbage can, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“So what do you do?”

“We’re a breath of fresh air. What she needs, when she needs it. And this weekend, you’re going to need it. Celebrity Pro-Am in LA, no other big events. This thing’s crawling with reporters, paparazzi, sports apparel companies—it’s a STEM fundraiser. Mark Zuckerberg’s coming and that douchebag doesn’t leave the Bay Area for anything but a congressional hearing.”

“Eddie!” Doogan spoke up.

“Yeah. There are endorsement deals this week.” Jake pulled his driver out.

“And you want your girl having fun. Playing great golf, sure. But having fun. It’s a celebrity Pro-Am. This is where she reminds the world she’s at the top of her game and still remembers it’s a game.”

“You’re overselling.” Doogan set up his tee shot.

“I’m accurately selling. There’s a difference.”

Jake almost smiled. “Mara Palani isn’t—she’s not going to suddenly become warm and fuzzy because some charming guy shows up.”

“I’m not that charming.” Doogan faded his drive more than he wanted.

Eddie laughed. “See? Already selling himself short. That’s the humility that works. You can’t teach that. It’s authentic.”

Jake looked at Doogan. “You’ve been quiet.”

“Eddie talks enough for both of us.”

“I’m getting that.” Jake stepped to the tee, set his ball. “Tiger Woods came back. Phil Mickelson. Jordan Spieth. Steve Stricker. Men make comebacks all the time.” He swung. Ball sliced right, landed rough. “Name one woman who came back after childbirth and won a major.”

Silence. Doogan glanced at Eddie, who for once had nothing.

Jake collected his tee. “Michelle Wie? That was injury, and she was young. Alison Lee came back fast, struggled with mom guilt, never won a major. For men, comebacks are expected. For women after a baby?” He shook his head. “Mara’s pulling off something almost nobody does. She’s shooting better now than before her son was born.”

Doogan put his driver back, grabbed the cart, headed down to the fairway. “Then this isn’t about her game.”

“No.” Jake’s voice went flat. “This is about the other inequality. Top ten LPGA players make a third of what PGA players make.

Drop to top twenty, maybe a quarter. And Mara can't hit every tournament—she's flying back and forth to the islands to be with her son."

Eddie leaned on his club.

"To make this work," Jake continued, "to balance her son Alex and staying on tour, she needs endorsements. But the focus to get her game back to this level—it's given her a harder edge. She's short with interviewers. Not the sweet, charismatic young woman she was before. She's—"

"—focused," Doogan said. Jake turned. "Tiger was focused when he came back."

"Exactly." Jake's jaw tightened. "Tiger's focused, he's praised for his mental game. Mara's focused, she's a cold bitch. That's the double standard."

Doogan lined up his shot.

Jake watched. "She shouldn't have to be locked in on her game and press-friendly at the same time. But here we are. If you can help her enjoy this week, smile a little, be more open in interviews—maybe I can lock in some endorsement deals. Then she won't have to hit as many tour stops. More time with her son."

Doogan swung. Ball sailed long, landed shy of the green. "A week at a golf resort helping someone remember why she loves this?" He returned the club. "That sounds like a nice change of pace."

Eddie grinned. "That's what I'm talking about. Enthusiasm. You hear that, Jake? He's already in."

"I'm considering."

"He's in. Doogan doesn't consider—he commits or walks. And he's not walking. Look at his face. That's commitment face."

"This is my regular face. Where is it?"

Jake watched them. Something shifted. “The Hidden Hills. Rancho Palos Verdes. Hybrid celebrity Pro-Am slash women-in-STEM scholarship fundraiser.”

“Beautiful venue,” Eddie said. “Great food. Ocean views. See what I’m saying? This is basically a vacation that pays.”

“Her regular caddy?”

“Visiting family back East. I gave Jenny the week off. Paid her full rate anyway. Tournament organizers need a substitute.”

“That’s where I come in.”

“Monday night there’s a welcome gala. Charity auction. One lot is caddying for Mara all week. You win it.” Jake paused. “Makes it seem natural. Just some guy who wanted to support the cause and got lucky.”

Doogan lined up. “How much am I bidding?”

“Whatever it takes. Three or four thousand should do it.”

Eddie whistled. “Steep for charity.”

“Steep for access.” Jake met Doogan’s eyes. “Tournament runs Tuesday through Friday—skills competitions, Pro-Am rounds, exhibition finale. No tour pressure. Just golf and fun.”

Eddie pulled his pitching wedge, sized up his approach.

“When does it start?”

“Gala’s tomorrow evening. Tournament kicks off Tuesday morning.”

“That’s fast.”

“That’s necessary.”

They walked toward the green.

Eddie filled the silence. “So full week at a resort, caddying for an LPGA pro, helping her have some fun. That’s the play?”

“That’s the play.”

“And she doesn’t know.”

“She doesn’t know.” Jake’s tone went flat. “She’ll think you’re just some auction winner who happens to be competent.”

“Very competent,” Eddie said. “Played college golf. Knows the game. Won’t embarrass himself.”

“I’m standing right here.”

“Making my point. The humility. You can’t fake that.”

They reached Eddie’s ball. He pulled a club, studied the distance.

Doogan crouched at his ball, read the lie. Clean shot to the green.
“Then I’ll see you Monday night.”

2

“And you’re paying cash today?”

“That’s right.” Abby returned the clipboard. “No insurance.”

“The nurse will call you back in a few minutes. Have a seat.”

Abby moved to the waiting area. Two other patients: elderly man reading, young woman on her phone. Clinic smelled like antiseptic and air freshener covering something stale. Fluorescent lights hummed.

She adjusted her earpiece.

“I’m in.” Low voice, pretended to check her phone.

Baxter’s voice crackled. “Copy that. I’ve got the clinic’s security camera feed. Two cameras in the lobby, one in the hallway. No cameras in exam rooms or staff area.”

“What about coverage in the back?”

“Pretty standard. Cameras cover public areas, reception, main hallway. Nothing in treatment areas for privacy. But there’s one room that’s interesting—Exam Room 1, down at the end past the nurses’ station. No camera anywhere near it. Not even in the hallway.”

“That’s unusual.”

“Yeah. According to the appointment system, that room’s only used by Nancy. She sees specific patients there, but I can’t tell what kind yet. Scheduling notes are coded.”

“Sarah Mitchell?”

Medical assistant at the doorway. Abby stood, followed her down the hallway. Beige walls, generic watercolors, exam room numbers. The assistant stopped at Room 4.

“Have a seat. Doctor will be with you shortly.”

Door closed. Abby waited thirty seconds.

“Baxter, what do you see?”

“Hallway’s clear. Nancy’s at the nurses’ station. Two other staff in exam rooms. You’ve got maybe three minutes before someone checks.”

Abby cracked the door, slipped out. Empty left. Another corridor right. She moved quickly. Exam 5. Exam 6. Supply closet.

Far end of the hallway, past the branch: Exam Room 1. Nancy’s room. No camera coverage. She started toward it.

“Abby, wait—Nancy just stood up. She’s looking at something.”

Abby froze. Too exposed. She pivoted, spotted another door.

“Staff Only.”

Handle turned. Unlocked.

She slipped inside, eased the door shut. Small room—break table, microwave, lockers. Against the far wall: large beige metal filing cabinet. Five drawers, alphabet labels. Horizontal pulls, circular locks.

“Baxter, I’m in. Filing cabinet. Five drawers.”

“Good. Try the top drawer.”

Abby pulled. Locked. Second drawer. Also locked.

“All locked.”

“Okay, okay, hold on.” Typing sounds. “You need two paperclips. Can you find paperclips?”

Abby scanned. Cup on the break table—pens and paperclips. She grabbed two, straightened them. “Got them.”

“Okay, these are barrel locks so you need to bend one into an L-shape for tension, and the other—”

“Wait.” Abby froze. “Do you actually know how to pick locks?”

“Um... kind of...”

“What does ‘kind of’ mean?”

Pause. “I’m... reading about it. Right now.”

“You’re reading about it?”

“Yeah, on Reddit. Very detailed instructions! And pictures!”

“Baxter!” Hushed but sharp.

“Look, it’s not that different from hacking, conceptually. You’re just manipulating physical pins instead of digital—”

“Are we really learning lock-picking together while I’m actively breaking into a medical records room?”

Longer pause. Quieter: “When you put it that way, it does sound... less optimal.”

Footsteps outside.

“Someone’s coming.”

“Nancy just left the nurses’ station. Heading your way.”

Abby’s eyes swept. Locked drawers. No time. Then she spotted it—cardboard box on the floor next to the cabinet. Label: “TO BE SHREDDDED.” She crouched, rifled through. Patient intake forms. Appointment logs. And—there—printed patient list. Names, dates, notes. Several names crossed off in blue pen.

“Grab it!” Baxter blurted.

She shoved it into her purse, stood, moved toward the door.

Too late.

Door opened. Nancy stepped through, clipboard in hand, eyes cold and suspicious.

“What are you doing in here?”

“I’m so sorry. I got turned around looking for the bathroom.”

Nancy's gaze flicked to the filing cabinet, then back. "This room is clearly marked 'Staff Only.'"

"I know, I just—"

"The bathroom's down the hall. Opposite direction." Nancy stepped fully in, blocking the doorway. "You were in Exam 4. That's three doors past the bathroom. You'd have to walk past it to get here."

Abby forced an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

"Right." Nancy's eyes narrowed.

Abby slipped back into the exam room, closed the door shy of latching. Waited a beat, cracked it to confirm Nancy was gone.

On her way out, the receptionist noticed. "Ma'am?"

"Don't you have to check out or something?"

"No." Hushed voice. "All the information's fake, remember? And I'm not paying a bill."

"Good point."

Receptionist looked confused. "But the doctor will be ready in just—"

Abby walked out the front door into evening air. Didn't look back.

3

“—come on, John. If you’ll go to fifteen, I’ll see if I can get you an hour driving the ball return cart while Candy’s warming up.” Harry Halligan said it to a captive audience. Chuckled along.

Paddle up from the table of evening gowns and tuxedos.

“Fifteen! There it is. Connie! Where are you, Connie?”

“Too rich for me.” Red Chanel gown mouthed it.

“Then fifteen has it! The drink cart for Wednesday’s Best Ball will be manned by our own John Malcolm. The cart girls will make sure you don’t get lost, John.”

Applause broke out. Southern California Hollywood and LPGA royalty dressed to the nines.

Doogan spotted Mara at a table with two members from a hit show, their spouses, her manager Jake, and a few others he didn’t recognize.

“Okay, before we get to the next lot, it’s time to upgrade the booze.”

Laughter and applause as an attractive blonde walked out with two champagne bottles. Dress slit far up one side. Grin that everyone noticed. Doogan glanced over—Mara rolled her eyes.

“Giving our lovely assistants a break is tour leader Candy Williams.” Harry bowed, let Candy take center stage. “Safe to assume the winning bid will be delivered to your table by the lovely Candy?”

“Absolutely.” She leaned into the microphone.

Applause. Men fumbling for paddles.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the champagne at your tables is mediocre on purpose. This lovely pair of Dom Pérignon can be yours for a starting price of... five hundred dollars.”

Paddle went up immediately.

Mara excused herself, headed to the bar. Doogan made his move.

“Can I buy the lady a drink?”

“Just sparkling water. Work week for me. And it’s a hosted bar.”

“I was hoping you’d maybe miss that last detail.”

“Quite the gentleman.”

“Seven fifty. Do I hear seven fifty?” Harry continued.

“Whenever possible. Name’s Doogan.”

“Mara. But you knew that.”

“What gave it away?”

“Your left hand’s tanner than your right.”

Doogan looked at his right hand. Golf glove. “Gotcha.”

“One thousand. Come on, Mark. You know your table would love the champagne.”

“Is this where you tell me you’re a big fan of women’s professional golf?”

“Hardly.”

She looked at him, puzzled. Took a sip of sparkling water. Ice sloshed.

“I’m a big fan of women in STEM. Golf’s a nice bonus.”

“Women in STEM?” She chuckled.

“Well, I’m a big fan of women.”

“One thousand for the champagne to the Nielsen table.”

“Now that I believe. I should get back. Nice to meet you, Doogan.”

“Nice to meet you, Mara.”

She returned to her seat, avoided Candy carrying champagne to the Nielsen table.

“Next up we have a... open caddy spot?” Harry looked confused. “Got it.” Brief whisper from an assistant. “Turns out our own Mara Palani is without a caddy this week. Winner will carry Mara’s bags for three days of tournament play.”

Applause broke out.

“Don’t even think about it, John. I’ve seen you play. You’re not qualified to carry your own clubs.” Laughter.

“We’ll start at one thousand.”

Three paddles up.

“Fifteen hundred?”

Two paddles. One belonging to a husband with confused wife looking at him.

“Two thousand?”

Priscilla Chan, seated with husband Mark Zuckerberg, raised her paddle.

“Twenty-five hundred?”

She hesitated. Lowered it.

Doogan raised his.

“New bidder in the back! Twenty-five hundred. Do I hear three thousand?”

Priscilla’s paddle shot up.

“Three thousand! Do we have thirty-five hundred?”

Priscilla looked away. Mark Zuckerberg’s paddle went up.

“Four thousand?”

Doogan looked over, gave Priscilla an almost pleading nod.

Priscilla made an inviting gesture, surrendering.

Doogan raised his paddle.

“Four thousand going once... twice...” Harry paused. “Sold! Paddle sixty-three.”

Tournament coordinator materialized. Expensive suit, clipboard. “Congratulations, Mr. Andres?”

“Andrews. Doogan Andrews.”

“Right. You’ll get details when you settle up at the front desk.”

“Thank you.”

“Next up, a golf bag autographed by an amazing woman who came out of retirement for this event, Michelle Wie West. Don’t worry, John. You might be qualified to carry this one.” Laughter.

Mara got up, made eye contact with Doogan, headed to the bar. Doogan took the hint.

“We’ll start the bidding at one thousand dollars.”

“Four thousand dollars to carry my clubs?”

“Seemed like a bargain.”

“Have you caddied before?”

“No, but I’ve seen Tin Cup. Does that count?”

“You’re not going to tell me the golf swing’s like a poem, are you?”

“I think it plays better on the driving range, but if you insist...”

She laughed. Held up her hand. “I think we’re good.”

“I can hand you the club you ask for and a bottle of water when you want it. I’m guessing that’s about as much as you need.”

“Ms. Palani?” Assistant appeared. “Your pairing this week is Brenda Atwood.”

“Who?”

“She’s on Studio 60? The sketch comedy show?”

Mara looked blank.

“She does Cher impressions?”

“Does she play golf?”

“I can check—”

“Never mind. Thanks.”

“Could be worse, right?” Doogan added. “You could be paired with blondie over there.”

Mara glanced at Candy. “No, because she’s a pro... kind of.” Coy smile.

“Ouch. But fair.”

“It’s late for me so I’m heading back to my hotel. I guess we’ll see if you can do more than quote Kevin Costner on the tee box Wednesday morning. Have a nice evening.”

“You too. Looking forward to it.”

She glanced back. Smiled at Doogan.

“Well, you stayed on budget.” Jake appeared, drink in hand.

“Yeah, got lucky. Bidding against billionaires can get ugly fast.”

“That couple’s matching all the funds raised this week. They probably feel their tax deduction’s covered.”

“Next up, for you movie fans, a Bushwood Estates caddy vest used in the film, donated by Michael Ritchie himself,” Harry started on the next item.

“So what’s your approach?”

“With Mara? With the weather we’ve had, she’ll want to play into the wind on five and fourteen. But she knows that better than I do. She’s a professional.”

“I mean for charming her or whatever it is I’ve hired you to do.”

“Don’t worry. I’m a professional too, Jake.”

“—three thousand dollars, Eddie. Jake paid three thousand dollars for him to carry golf clubs.”

Doogan heard Abby’s voice through the front door.

“Four thousand.” Eddie didn’t look up from his phone.

“What?”

“It was four thousand.”

Doogan entered through the unlocked front door.

Eddie spotted him. “There he is! The big spender.”

Abby appeared from the kitchen, wine glass in hand. “How much did you actually spend? That we now have to bill Jake?”

“Three or four thousand. Something like that.”

“Something like that?” Eddie laughed. “You don’t remember?”

“I was focused on Mara.”

“Of course you were.” Abby crossed to the living room where Baxter’s face filled the monitor on the coffee table. “Jake could’ve just introduced you. Would’ve been cheaper.”

“Wouldn’t have been believable.”

“Oh, so you’re method acting now?”

“It’s called—”

“It’s called spending three...or four grand we don’t need to spend.” Abby sipped her wine, gestured at the screen. “Baxter’s been waiting.”

Doogan moved to the couch. “Hey, Baxter.”

“Hey. How was—”

“He won,” Eddie cut in. “Obviously. Because when Doogan commits, he commits. Goes all in. Which is why we’re now three thousand dollars lighter and—”

“Can we focus?” Baxter’s voice cracked through. “I’ve got the patient data.”

“Right.” Eddie dropped onto the couch. “What’ve we got?”

“Before the clinic scrubbed their files, I exported what I could. Names, addresses, some dates. But no diagnoses. No treatment notes. No billing codes.”

Abby set her wine down. “How many patients?”

“Forty-three.”

“That’s a lot,” Eddie said.

“It’s not just a lot.” Baxter’s screen shifted, showed a spreadsheet. “Twenty of them had prescriptions filled. Lots of prescriptions. More than you’d expect for—”

“For what?” Abby leaned closer.

“For healthy people. Alice Chen—forty-eight. Fifteen prescriptions in one year. All expensive. But before this clinic? No indication I can find that she was sick.”

“You’re saying that’s a lot for a healthy person?”

“I’m saying that from what I could google about these prescriptions, I would be surprised if she can even make it into the clinic unassisted.”

Abby pulled the folded patient list from her purse. “I’ve got twenty-three names from the shredder. Several are crossed off.”

“Crossed off how?” Eddie sat forward.

She unfolded it, showed the camera. “Blue pen. Eight names. Like someone checking off—”

“Crossed off?” Doogan asked. “Like... deceased?”

“No, they’re not marked deceased in the patient summaries. No insurance or billing so I can’t be sure but usually clinics track that.” Baxter added.

“So why are they crossed out?”

“Can you read the names?” Baxter asked.

“They’re not crossed out for privacy,” Abby added. “It’s like it was some checklist.”

Baxter typed. Waited. “Okay. So those eight crossed-off names? None of them show up in pharmacy records.”

“None?” Doogan asked.

“Zero prescriptions. Which is weird, right? You go to a clinic, you get prescriptions. That’s how clinics work.”

“Clinics don’t also have just one exam room that’s off camera that only one nurse uses.”

Doogan spoke. “There’s a secret exam room?”

“Exam Room 1. End of the hall.”

“No cameras?”

“Not even in the hallway. Only room with zero coverage. And it looks like only one nurse uses it.”

“That’s intentional,” Doogan said.

Eddie looked at him. “What are you thinking?”

“You’re running a clinic. Cameras everywhere for liability. Except one room. Why?”

“Because you don’t want people seeing what happens in that room,” Abby said.

Baxter nodded on screen. “I can try to dig into her patient assignments, but most of that data’s gone. All I know is she’s the head

nurse and extremely—”

“Territorial,” Abby finished. “She practically searched me. Tons of work done. Fake rack for sure. Oh, and her nails? French tips. Professional job. Expensive.”

“You noticed her nails?” Eddie asked.

“I notice everything.”

“That’s not normal.”

“Says the man who color-coordinates his golf shirts by season.”

“That’s style, babe.”

“That’s narcissism.”

Doogan cut through. “Two lists. Abby’s shredded paper with crossed-off names. Baxter’s pharmacy data with the over-prescribed patients.”

“Divide and conquer,” Eddie said.

“I’ll take the crossed-off names.” Abby picked up her wine. “Those must be the ones someone is hiding, someone will talk.”

“And I’ll visit the over-prescribed patients,” Eddie said. “Find out why healthy people are suddenly medicating like—”

“What about me?” Baxter asked.

“Nancy,” Doogan said. “Background. Finances. Anything that explains the private exam room.”

Abby looked at Doogan. “And you’re doing what?”

“Golf. Fun day tomorrow. I will get to see what kind of hand I’ve been dealt.”

Eddie laughed. “Of course.”

“It’s work.”

“Four thousand dollars’ worth of work.” Eddie stretched. “With a gorgeous professional athlete. Jake’s getting his money’s worth.”

“I thought it was three thousand” Abby countered.

“Three or four thousand, but it was so long ago.”

“It was an hour ago,” Eddie replied.

Abby raised her glass. “To Doogan’s sacrifice.”

5

“Mother fu—”

“She certainly sounds like a seasoned golfer.” Doogan had found his crew.

Brenda Atwood stood before a worn patch of grass, driver in hand, looking like victim of a conspiracy between club and ball.

“I’d say she has the shanks but the shanks might be an improvement.” Mara sighed.

“It says you’re supposed to extend down through the ball.” Marcus read from his phone.

“Extend?!” Brenda gestured at the ground. “I am damn near digging a ditch here.”

“Coffee?” Doogan held up a cardboard tray with four cups.

“There’s a video.” Marcus turned the phone. “See? This guy—”

“Marcus, that’s a kid. He’s like twelve.”

“He has two million followers.”

Mara stood, arms crossed, watching Brenda and Marcus hunt for answers on YouTube.

“Morning.” Doogan gestured coffees toward her.

Mara turned. “You’re early. A day early. Best Ball isn’t until tomorrow.”

“Figured you might need coffee.”

“If this keeps up, I might need something stronger.”

He handed one to Mara. She sipped, made a face—not quite approval, not rejection either.

“Not what you usually drink?”

“It’s fine.”

Brenda spotted him. “Oh thank God. You’re the caddy, right?”

“Doogan.”

“Brenda. This is Marcus.” Mara introduced them.

“Thank God. Marcus is caddying tomorrow but I think we need advice about that.”

Marcus looked up from his phone. “Hi. Do you know anything about hip rotation?”

Doogan handed him a cup. “Vanilla latte, extra shot, oat milk.”

Marcus blinked. “How did you—”

“Lucky guess.” Doogan offered the last cup to Brenda. “Caramel macchiato, extra whip.”

Brenda took it like he’d handed her gold. “Okay, you’re officially my favorite person here.”

Marcus sipped his latte. Paused. “This is perfect.”

“I aim to please.”

Mara watched this with something between suspicion and curiosity. “You didn’t ask what anyone wanted.”

“Coffee shops have patterns. Brenda strikes me as a caramel person. Marcus has that extra-shot energy even at six AM. And you—” He gestured at her cup. “—drink whatever’s in front of you because you’re thinking about something else.”

“Golf.”

“You know we don’t need caddies today, right?”

“I’m just trying to get my money’s worth.”

Brenda broke the tension. “Can one of you please tell me why this is happening?”

“May I?” Doogan asked Mara.

“Be my guest.”

Doogan walked over, moved Marcus aside gently, positioned himself right in front of Brenda, crouched down close to the tee.

“I tend to think of the golf swing as a poem.”

“Oh. My. God.” Mara rolled her eyes hard.

“The opening phrase will always be the grip.”

“Stop it—”

Doogan laughed, waved his hand like erasing words.

“No, that seems nice,” Brenda said.

“It’s from a movie. Good Lord.” Mara rolled her eyes.

“Let all the advice you found online go,” Doogan said.

“What do you mean?”

“Let it go. It’s junk.” Doogan picked her ball off the tee, offered it. She took it, confused. “What do you notice?”

“It’s a ball.”

“Is it heavy?”

“No.”

“Squishy?”

“No. Hard with dimples.”

“Right. Light, hard shell, dimples. Made to go far with limited effort. Physics handles spin and loft. The ball wants you to succeed. You don’t need hip rotation, shoulder drive, follow-through, wrist snap, any of that.”

“But YouTube—” Marcus interrupted.

“—is a graveyard of bad advice.”

“So then what?” Brenda asked.

“First, shorter club.” He swapped her driver for an eight iron.

“It’s so much shorter.”

“More forgiving. Stance: shoulder width, stable. Like a tripod on a camera. Less your base moves, less you compensate up top.”

“But don’t I turn into—”

“No. Keep your base stable and still. Address the ball.”

“Hello, ball.” Marcus chuckled.

“Line up in the exact position you want when you strike.” Doogan crouched. “What do you notice about the club head?”

“It’s flush with the ball.”

“Exactly. Hit it twisted this way, ball slices. Twisted that way, hooks. Get the club back to this point, every time. Loosen shoulders, don’t strangle the grip. Just tight enough it doesn’t fly out. Nothing more.”

“But don’t I have to power it up, ‘grip it and rip it’?”

“We’ll cover John Daly at the bar. For now, loose and easy. Ball is light, engineered. Just get the club back to this point. The less you move base, shoulders, hips, the better. Take a swing.”

“Don’t you have to move?”

“You’re not going to hit me. You’re going to hit that ball.”

Brenda tried to relax. At the last minute, looked down the range.

“Hold on!”

“What?”

“What are you looking at?”

“Where the ball’s going?”

“We’ll watch for you. You watch the ball. Every time you hit it, describe what the club head looked like when it made contact. To

do that, what will you need?”

“Focus on the ball. Right.”

“But how will I hit my target?”

“When you walk up, watch your target. Setting stance, watch target. Lining up club head, watch target. After that, aiming’s done. If you did it right and club head makes it back to that spot, you’ll be on target. Most importantly, relax.”

Doogan didn’t move, despite making Brenda uncomfortable being that close.

Brenda took a deep inhale, relaxed hands and shoulders, lined up the club.

“Breathe.”

She exhaled. Wound back, head down until arms couldn’t go comfortably further, then one smooth motion down. Crisp slicing sound. Arms flung straight toward the fairway. Ball arced long, landed soft about ninety yards away.

“That felt...”

“Effortless?”

“Yeah.”

“I got it!” Marcus hopped, gesturing to his phone.

“Nice! Post it, hashtag it!” Brenda said back.

“Hit a few more. Before you start your backswing, say that word.”

“Which word?”

“Effortless.”

“Out loud?”

“For now, yes.”

Doogan headed back to Mara.

“Caddy and swing coach?” she asked.

“The second one’s on the house.”

“That was impressive.”

“You don’t need to warm up?”

“Effortless,” Brenda repeated. Another clean shot.

“If she’s going to hit like that tomorrow, maybe I should. Before you got here, I assumed bottom of the pack but now...”

“Tomorrow’s Best Ball so she’ll just follow you around. But the day after is a scramble.”

“This is a celebrity Pro-Am so it’s pretty forgiving, but it looked hopeless half an hour ago. Nice work.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m going to hit a few. Should I expect pointers?”

“I’ve seen your drive on TV. You won’t need advice from me.”

Commotion behind them. They turned. Crowd of press and fans moving in a clump. Center: Candy Williams in a cherry red skirt too short for LPGA standards, thin blonde woman following.

“Who’s the matching blonde with Candy?”

“That’s Tilly London, reality TV star. Almost a Kardashian.” Marcus interrupted.

“What kind of golf bag is that?”

“Louis Vuitton. Golf shoes are Manolos.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen those in the pro shop.”

“You need to hang out at better pro shops.” Mara fired back.

“She has nearly five million followers. Between her and Candy, eight million. This is the influencer event right now.” Marcus added.

“Lovely.” Mara said flatly.

“I have a feeling you’re going to feel better about this soon.”

“Unlikely.”

Tilly handed her bag to her assistant, pulled a driver—high-end, brand new, never practice-swung. Fetched a sparkling white ball from a wire bucket, dropped it on turf, lined up, posed for a shot.

“Keep watching.” Doogan reassured.

Tilly wound up, left knee drifting in like batting cages, unwound. Thrush of air, thud. Turf and dirt sprung from tee. Ball just dribbled forward.

“Mother fu—”

“This is good coffee.” Doogan took a sip.

Mara smiled.

6

“So what we’re really talking about here is aggressive growth. You want your money working, not sitting.”

Phil Blakely rose, moved over to the window of his corner office, floor-to-ceiling glass, skyline below. Mid-forties, tailored suit, expensive watch.

Eddie nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Risk tolerance.” The broker turned, walked back. “How much volatility can you stomach?”

“A little.”

“Don’t be that guy.”

“Pardon?”

“There are two types of investors, Eddie. Predators and prey.”

“I mean—”

“The predators hunt for their dinner. No hunting and they starve.”

“And the prey?”

“They are dinner. You know what a guy like me loves?”

Eddie glanced over at Phil’s bookcase, Ironman Triathlon finish, accepting a local golf tournament trophy mixed in with the occasional overly posed family pic. “Outdoor sports?”

“Day traders.”

“Day traders?”

“Yes. I love people tied to the internet, desperately hoping for some nugget of knowledge to get ahead of the market, ready to react in a moment.”

“Aggressive and risk tolerant.”

“Easy to manipulate. Look, put your money here at Keller-Watkins and we will manipulate them together. Buy before they know the opportunity exists, dump it before they realize they were tricked. Dance around the options market like we have a time machine.”

“Sounds—”

“Profitable.”

“Right.”

The guy hadn’t stopped moving. Typing, gesturing, pulling up charts.

Eddie’s phone buzzed. He pulled it out. Abby.

“I need to take this.”

“Sure.” The broker waved at the door. “I’ll pull up the paperwork.”

Eddie stepped into the hallway, answered. “Hey.”

Abby pulled onto the main road.

“I just left.”

“How’d it go?”

“Sad.”

“What happened?”

“The patient’s dead. His mother answered the door.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. She invited me in. Showed me pictures.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“That I was an old friend who’d lost touch. She didn’t question it.”

Eddie’s voice: “What’d she say?”

“He’d been sick for a while. Cancer. Their insurance wasn’t great. But she showed me this picture—him in Ireland, near the coast. He looked awful. Gaunt, hollow. But happy.”

“Ireland?”

“He took her there before he died. To see where her grandparents were from. She kept saying how grateful she was for that trip.”

Silence on the line.

“Eddie?”

“I’m here. Just—that’s rough.”

“What about yours?”

“Mine’s not sick.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he’s not sick. At all. Guy’s a finance bro. Kind of a douchebag but definitely not sick.”

Abby frowned. “But he’s on Baxter’s list?”

“Yeah. High prescriptions, extensive medical records. But it doesn’t add up.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Hold on.” Eddie’s voice muffled. Then: “Baxter’s calling in.”

Click.

Baxter’s voice: “—can you both hear me?”

“Yeah,” Abby said.

“I’m here,” Eddie added.

“Okay, so I’ve been cross-referencing the lists. Abby, whose house were you at?”

“Richard Pemberton. Crossed off in blue pen on the shredded list.”

“Right. And?”

“Deceased. Mother said he died three months ago.”

“Jesus.” Typing sounds. “Okay, so I’m looking at the clinic records right now. Richard Pemberton’s file doesn’t show deceased. It just... stops. Last entry was four months ago. A routine visit. Then nothing.”

“No death certificate?” Abby asked.

“Not in their system. And there should be. Clinics are supposed to flag deceased patients.”

Eddie’s voice: “What about mine? Phil...something.”

More typing. “Blakely. Shows... thirteen prescriptions in the last year. Pain killers, anti-anxiety, sleep aids. But no major diagnoses. Just a bunch of prescriptions without supporting medical records.”

“There’s no way that guy is dying, at least not from anything he sees coming.”

“Then why is he on all this medication?” Baxter asked.

Silence.

“What if the crossed-out names are all dead?”

“Then why aren’t they marked deceased in the system?” Baxter’s voice, quiet now.

“And why do healthy people have pharmacy records that say they’re dying?” Eddie added.

“This isn’t adding up at all.”

“Just hold it lightly. Remember what Doogan said.”

Marcus stood behind Brenda at the driving range, hands hovering near her grip. It was the morning of the best ball round of the Pro Am and Brenda was feeling some nerves. She adjusted. Re-adjusted. Looked at him.

“Do I have to keep saying ‘effortless’ out loud?”

“I think so?” he replied, shrugging.

Mara was leaning on her driver, watching patiently.

“Give her time. She’s got tournament nerves right now.”

“Waggle!”

“What?” Brenda looked back. “Doogan, I was wondering where you were.”

“You and that movie.”

“Better yet, let me introduce you to someone. Brenda Atwood this is Winston Reilly.”

Winston stepped out from the background, an elderly black man wearing a golf polo, chinos and golf shoes, pulling an empty golf hand cart behind him.

“Hello, Winston.”

“My wife loves you on that show. The impressions are so funny.”

“Aw, thank you!”

“So I have an idea. I’m worried Marcus trying to be the caddy you need might cut into his ability to manage your social media accounts.”

“Oh, thank God!” Marcus exclaimed.

“Are you sure, I mean—” Brenda looked over at Marcus.

“It’s more than okay. Welcome to the team, Winston!” Marcus shook Winston’s hand.

“Okay, Winston. How do I fix this?”

Winston wasted no time.

“Where did you find Winston?”

“He was hustling skins games at a nearby nine hole muni course.”

“And he’s going to save Brenda’s game?”

“Old guys like Winston have been playing for decades but they’re not driving two-fifty off the tee anymore. Their bodies don’t work like that. So they can’t rely on mechanics.”

“...not unlike Brenda.”

“Exactly. Old guys like Winston are short game assassins. They’ll lose two getting into green approach distance at least and make it up chipping and putting. Today is best ball so you’ve got that covered but tomorrow—”

“—is a scramble. She’ll have to finish the holes herself.”

“Following now?”

“Smart. Not just a pretty face, are you?”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Almost.”

“I’ll take it.”

“How’s an old guy in his late sixties going to carry her clubs?”

“That’s why we brought the hand cart. Don’t worry. I already checked the tournament rules.”

“And I just go back and forth with the club?” Brenda asked.

“Yeah, just waggle it. It will nicely relax your arms and hands.”

“I told you,” Doogan said smugly.

“Yes you did.” Mara groaned.

“—perfectly healthy. Her doctor confirmed it, says the prescriptions don’t make sense—”

Doogan pressed his finger to his ear, turned away from the eighteenth green. Eddie’s voice through the earpiece. In the distance, Brenda and Mara were holding court with a captive group.

“It was a good day. And yes, fun. More fun than I expected. But we have another day tomorrow so we need to stay focused.” Mara said, media hanging on every word.

“Then why prescribe them?”

“That’s the question. And she’s loaded—five car dealerships—so it’s not money.”

“Doesn’t add up.”

“I owe it all to my amazing caddy, Winston.” Brenda gushed.

Winston shook his head.

“Abby find anything?”

“Hang on—”

Abby’s voice replaced Eddie’s.

“Two interviews. Deceased woman, three months ago. Pancreatic cancer. Dying man, liver failure, maybe weeks left. Both of them, minimal records at the clinic.”

“So healthy people over-prescribed, dying people under-documented.”

“Right. What’s the connection?”

Jake stood near the media, watching Mara and Brenda, smiling with approval.

Doogan nodded. “What’s next.”

“Baxter’s going in tonight.”

“Baxter? Why?”

“The patient files don’t add up and we need to see inside that exam room.”

“She’s coming my way. I need to go.”

“Good luck.”

The earpiece went silent.

“You missed the photo op,” Mara said.

“I have a feeling I can see it on social media in a few moments.”

Mara glanced back to see Marcus not missing a moment. “Good point.”

“You had a good day.”

“I did. Thank you for that.”

“I just carried your clubs.”

“Uh huh. So...um...Brenda pulled some strings and got us a table at some trendy LA spot...Nobu...or something. But I’m not looking forward to navigating LA traffic so I was thinking...”

“You’d like a ride? You know we have Uber and Lyft here, right?”

“I’ve heard but how can I be sure that the driver will know all of my favorite movie quotes.”

“I think your odds are better than you think this close to Hollywood but I’d love to pick you up.”

“Do you think Winston would—”

“I’m sure he’s heading home already.”

Winston headed to the parking lot.

“7am tomorrow? We’re the second group.”

Winston nodded.

“Heading home to his wife?”

“With a whole day of new stories to share with her, I’m sure.”

“I think we all want our ‘Winston’ to come home to us.”

“Preferably with stories?”

“Exactly. I better go rescue Brenda from the reporters. Seven o’clock?”

A familiar sedan sat in the parking lot.

“Uh...right. Seven.”

Mara headed back.

Doogan tapped his right ear. “Baxter?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“I have company.”

“Company?”

“Martinez is here.”

“But how did he—”

“Doesn’t matter.” Doogan headed to his car.

“Mr. Andrews. Pick up a side job?”

Doogan glanced down at the caddy’s vest.

“Well, I have to pay my lawyer’s fees somehow, don’t I?”

“Yeah, he’s a real piece of work. But with a condo like yours I’m guessing you can afford him.”

“My modest place?”

“Please. On my salary, I’d be lucky to pay for a parking spot in your building.”

“Being a caddy at a fancy Pro Am must pay better than I realized.”

“I can put in a good word for you.”

“Maybe when I solve this case. I hate to leave loose ends. Speaking of loose ends—” Martinez produced a zip-lock evidence bag from his jacket pocket. The earpiece.

“Pick up a new gadget?”

“What is it? The earpiece?” Baxter blurted out into Doogan’s earpiece.

“Your lawyer, Mr. Stillman filed a phonebook of paperwork with the department to get this back. Not exactly Radio Shack, is it?”

“What is Radio Shack?” Baxter asked.

“Oh, yeah...it does look familiar.”

“The IT guys at the station can’t seem to match it to anything. Not familiar parts, can’t be monitored, even with our search warrant.”

“You have a search warrant?”

“You’ve watched enough police shows to know the answer to that, Mr. Andrews.”

Doogan said nothing.

Martinez looked into Doogan’s ears. “Uh huh. Hello, Mr. Baxter.”

“Oh no!”

Doogan smiled. “I appreciate you coming all this way to return my property to me, Detective Martinez. How is the investigation going?”

“It’s a strange one for sure. Can’t seem to find anyone who wanted Ms. Anders dead. The clinic is odd but nothing indicating murder. And then there’s you—”

“Me?”

“Somehow involved, difficult to get any real background on and your job as a consultant never seems to take you anywhere near an office

building. Come on, Mr. Andrews. Surely you recognize that as long as you're a question mark, I have to keep asking."

Doogan said nothing.

"I'll be in touch, Mr. Andrews. Enjoy the tournament."

"I googled it. Was Radio Shack really a thing?"

"Not now, Baxter."

9

“—and there she is, blonde woman, late forties, scrubs. That’s her, right?”

Baxter stood near the reception desk, clipboard in hand.

“That’s Nancy.” Abby’s voice in his ear. “Don’t stare at the camera.”

“You’re staring directly at it.”

Baxter looked down at the clipboard.

“She’s leaving.” Eddie this time. “Grabbing her purse. Heading for the door. We’ve got her on the front camera.”

Nancy walked past. The front door chimed.

“Okay.” Baxter exhaled. “She’s gone?”

“Confirmed. We’re watching all the feeds. You’ve got maybe thirty minutes.”

The temp receptionist looked up. Young, bored.

Baxter approached, held up the clipboard. “IT support. I’m here to check the network connections in the exam rooms. Building management called it in.”

She glanced at the clipboard. “Sure. Do you need anything?”

“Just access to the rooms. Won’t take long.”

“They’re all unlocked except—” She paused. “Exam Room 1 is locked. Nancy keeps it locked.”

“I’ll need to check that one too. Network issues can happen anywhere.”

The temp receptionist hesitated. Looked at the clipboard again. Looked at the locked door down the hall.

“Nancy usually handles that room herself.”

“I understand. But if the network’s down in there, it affects the whole system. I just need five minutes.”

She picked up a key ring from the desk drawer. “Okay, but be quick. She gets... particular about her room.”

“Two minutes. I promise.”

He followed her down the hallway.

“You’re doing great. Just stay calm.”

The temp unlocked Exam Room 1, pushed the door open. “There you go. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

Baxter stepped inside. Closed the door most of the way—not latched, just enough for privacy.

The room looked nothing like a standard exam room. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

No exam table. No counter with cotton swabs. Instead: a hospital bed with rails, IV stand, breathing equipment mounted on the wall. Machines with digital displays, coiled tubing, tanks labeled with medical codes.

“You seeing this?” Baxter whispered.

“Yeah.” “What is that?”

Baxter moved closer, read the label on the nearest machine. “Philips Respironics.”

“It’s a... breathing machine. For respiratory support.”

“Like a ventilator?”

“Similar. More portable. For long-term care.”

“Why would Nancy have that in a clinic exam room?”

Baxter scanned the other equipment. “What is this stuff used for? It’s not in the other exam rooms.”

“This is hospice equipment. For palliative care.”

“What the hell is Nancy doing with hospice equipment?”

“I don’t know.”

Two manila folders sat open on the small desk in the corner. Baxter stepped over, glanced at the names.

“There are patient files here. Names: Richard... something, can’t read the last name. Oh, Thomas. And Michael Franks.”

“Why is this door unlocked?”

Baxter spun around.

Nancy stood in the doorway, purse still over her shoulder.

“Who are you?”

“I’m—IT support. Building management sent me to check—”

“This door is always locked.” She stepped inside, let the door swing shut. “Always. Who let you in here?”

“The receptionist. I needed to check the network connection and she said—”

“The temp?”

“I think so, yeah—”

Nancy moved past him, checked the desk, the files. Her hands moved quickly.

“You shouldn’t be in here.”

“I was just checking the router connection. There was a work order—”

She turned, looked at him directly. “From who?”

“Building management.”

“We didn’t call building management.”

Baxter held up the clipboard. “I’m just following the work order. I’ll be done in two minutes and—”

“Get out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Get. Out.” Nancy pointed at the door. “Now.”

“Go. Don’t push it.”

Baxter nodded, backed toward the door. “Sorry for the confusion. I’ll follow up with—”

“You do that.” Nancy crossed her arms. “And next time, maybe call ahead.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“Here we go.” Mara approached the fourth tee box. “Can they never tee off, like normal players?”

“Apparently not.” Doogan followed, carrying her clubs. They approached the next hole after a surprisingly solid first three holes of the scramble round of the tournament and were now watching Candy and Tilly put on quite the show on the fourth tee box.

Brenda and Marcus came up on the right side of them. Brenda did her best blonde impersonation. “Tour card or OnlyFans? Tour card or OnlyFans? How does a girl decide?”

Mara laughed. Candy turned and shot Brenda a look.

“I am not sure she’s a fan.”

“Excuse me, Ms. Williams, you’re up.” the tournament official interrupted.

Candy shot her a look before looking back at Brenda and Mara.

She bent down, placed the tee in the turf, followed by the ball.

“Was that necessary?”

“I have a feeling her social media fanbase would say yes.”

“All true golf fans, I’m sure.”

Mara laughed.

Candy stretched back her club slowly, paused, then whipped her arms, twisting her torso and crushing the ball off the tee. The crowd responded.

“265 maybe—” Winston added.

“270.” Mara replied, flatly.

“She can hit the driver.”

“I wonder if it’s one of those counterweight things. Like her booty whips her arms around faster or something.”

“BBL Powered. Sounds about right.” Mara tried not to laugh.

Candy looked back at Mara and her group before changing expressions and posing for Tilly’s selfie, dropping her driver and heading down the fairway, her caddy rushing to retrieve the club.

Moments later the media gathering had thinned considerably. “Ms. Atwood. Ms. Palani, you’ll just need to pause while—” the tournament official spoke up.

“Oh, don’t worry, sweetie.” Brenda accepted the driver from Winston’s extended hand. “I don’t think I could hit anywhere near their spot.”

The official acknowledged with a smile.

“You know, Brenda—”

“I keep telling you—”

“Right. My wife loves your Britney Spears impersonation and well—”

“It would seem fitting given the last group through. And it would be TikTok gold.”

Brenda’s entire demeanor changed. Her voice went up to an almost whiny pitch and she repeated much of what Tilly London had said before her shot, verbatim.

Brenda rolled her shoulders back before twisting forward again, slicing into the rough on the right side of the fairway, about one hundred yards down.

“Oops, I did it again. I sliced off the teeeeeee—”

The media captured the moment. Doogan, Winston, Mara, and Marcus all laughed.

“Got lost in the rough, oh, baby, baby.”

“Ms. Palani?” The official prompted. “You might want to—”

Mara was distracted by Brenda. She placed the tee and the ball, walked around to examine the fairway, then stepped up to the ball and centered herself.

“Ms. Palani?”

Mara was trying not to laugh.

“Remember? Effort—”

“—I’m not saying that.”

Brenda went quiet. The tournament official had her hand up as if to catch Mara’s attention.

Mara took a deep breath, let it out and said “Effortless” before taking a slow, graceful backswing, almost picture perfect pause and then it happened. As if a rubber band had been stretched to just shy of the breaking point before unleashing its energy, Mara unwound her stroke and the sound of wind and the crisp sound of clean contact followed.

“Wow.”

“Wow is right.”

“Two-seventy—”

“No. More.”

Further down the fairway, Candy heard something she was not used to hearing.

“Fore!” echoed out from the tee box area. Unused to hearing it, Candy turned to look up the fairway but it was too late. The ball sailed about fifteen feet beside her, landing about eight yards past her and bouncing before rolling and finally stopping, nearly fifteen yards in front of her.

“What the hell was that?”

“That bitch!” Candy exclaimed before realizing that she was still on camera. She tried to smile it off but the moment had happened.

Back on the tee box, Mara was frozen in her follow through pose.

“Ms. Palani, that will be a two stroke penalty for hitting into another group.”

“Worth it!”

“Definitely.”

“Hashtag that, bitches!”

“—absolutely. Brenda kept me laughing all day.”

Mara was surrounded by a cluster of reporters near the eighteenth green. Doogan stood off to the side with Winston.

“Ms. Palani, you’re tied for first despite the two-stroke penalty on four. How did you recover?”

“Honestly, I think we were having too much fun to even notice.”

Laughter rippled through the reporters. One of them called out to Brenda.

“Ms. Atwood, how does it feel to be tied for the lead?”

“Terrifying?” Brenda grinned. “I’ve never been tied for first in anything before. I think I was first in my sixth grade class to get my period but they don’t really give you an award for that.”

“Winston, I can’t thank you enough,” Doogan reached his hand out to shake Winston’s.

“Doogan, it was my privilege. Besides, this has been so much fun for me.”

“I’m sorry your wife didn’t get to meet Brenda.”

“Doogan, she’s been dead for seven years.”

“Oh, I’m—”

“Don’t be. I just pretend she’s still around so people aren’t uncomfortable that an old guy like me lives alone. This week has been one of the best that I’ve had since I lost her and every night I do tell her about my day, even if she can’t hear me.”

“She hears you.”

“Thank you. And if you’re ever looking to grab a quick nine, you know where to find me.”

“I will definitely take you up on that. You’re not going to say ‘good-bye’ to Brenda and Mara.”

He looked back over at the media frenzy taking place. “Always leave ’em wanting more, Doogan.”

“Good advice.”

“I am meeting with a shoe company tomorrow and a sportswear company tonight. I have to admit—”

“Don’t go getting all mushy on me now, Jake.” Doogan didn’t take his eye off Mara to respond to her manager who had appeared to his left.

“If she can win tomorrow—”

“Yeah, I know. Everyone loves a—”

“—winner. So whatever you’re doing, keep it up.”

“Yeah.”

Jake patted Doogan on the shoulder before disappearing into the crowd.

“Still here?” Mara was walking towards him.

“I wouldn’t miss this.”

“What happened to Winston?”

“I am not sure he was feeling TikTok worthy.”

“Brenda will be crushed.”

“Winston is easy to find. I’ll let her know where.”

“She’ll appreciate that. Even the press were asking about him. He’s quite the character.”

“Yes, he is.”

“So I was wondering—”

“—I’m not going on tour with you.”

Mara laughed. “How about dinner?”

“Where did Brenda pull influence and get us into this time? That place last time could have doubled as the White House press briefing room. I’ve never seen so many cameras.”

“I was thinking something a little less TMZ this time.”

“Oh?” she had Doogan’s attention now.

“Some place quiet. Just us?”

“You said the magic words.”

“Pick me up? Seven?”

“Perfect.”

From the clubhouse, surrounded by celebrity journalists, he could make out Candy giving them the side eye. Might as well enjoy a quiet evening. Tomorrow would be war.

“—no, I’m serious. He came out of the porta-potty on my backswing, trying to pitch out of the rough, live...on TV.”

“I have to ask...”

“Bogey. Yeah, I finished in the money but just barely.”

“Clearly the fault of the whoever put that porta-potty there.”

“My point exactly.” Mara giggled a little. “Can I make a confession?”

“This is my first date since...”

“...your son?”

“Yeah,” she admitted adjusting her napkin on her lap again.

“You don’t talk about him much.”

“Alex. I named him after a boy that lived down the street from me as a kid. Always loved that name.”

“And the boy?”

“Not so much. He broke my pink barbie car.”

“And you named your son that anyway?”

“It’s not the name’s fault.”

“Big of you.”

“Miss him?”

“Every time I’m away. He’s with my parents.”

“Nice to have family support.”

“It’s not just nice, it’s the only way this works.”

“Sounds like they’re very supportive.”

“They better be, this is my dad’s fault after all.”

“Dad’s fault? How?”

“He was the head of grounds at Kapalua.”

“Oh, wow. That course is—”

“Yeah, it is and his pride and joy.”

“So you grew up playing there?”

“Yeah, no pressure, right? I grew up getting golf tips from visiting pros and hustling tourists in skins games.”

“And your son?”

“Still too young for clubs but don’t think my dad isn’t counting days.”

“Runs in the family, then?”

“In more ways than one.” she said as her eyes darted down again.

“Oh, dad was—”

“—yeah, he was.”

“Anyone I would know?”

“Yeah. But he’s—”

“—not available.”

“Right. And this is the first date since him?”

“Can you blame me? Clearly my taste in men is broken.”

“I’ll try not to take it personally.”

She laughed.

“Nervous about tomorrow?”

“Nah, it’s not a point event and whatever prize money there is, will almost always be donated back to the cause.”

“But you have to admit that it would be nice to—”

“—beat the short skirt off that blonde bimbo? Yeah.”

“I am pretty sure that video would go viral.”

She laughed again. “She’s everything that annoys me about professional golf.”

“More entertainment than competition?”

“Exactly. She gets views because she’s young and blonde and she can hit the crap out of a driver.”

“And I’m pretty sure in some of her videos you can see her—”

“—yes, yes you can.”

“Not your style of golf?”

“Not at all. I came up with women like Michele Wie, Annika Sorenstam, Paula Creamer and sure they were all attractive women but it wasn’t about their looks or likes or whatever.”

“But you can’t let the new generation of influencers destroy what you loved. It’s still a game, right?”

“Yeah, good point. It’s just different for women.”

“How so?”

“Men can get focused and they are praised for their intensity. That same behavior from women gets you labeled a ‘cold bitch’. It’s just as hard for us to come back from time away as it is for men but we have to put on a pretty little smile while we do it.”

“Fair. Maybe don’t smile for them.”

“Then who? You?”

“Your son. Your dad. The little girls who are getting tips from pros and hustling tourists in skins games right now.”

She smiled. Possibly for Doogan that time.

“—maybe, hard to say.” she said as the elevator doors of her hotel opened.

“Hard to say? If you could, you would and I think you know it.”

“Play in a men’s event? I don’t know. The drive is the big factor.”

It was probably the slowest walk from the elevator to a room in the history of that hotel.

“Choose Port Royal or some other shorter, more technical course.”

“Maybe. It’s fun to think about. The money is definitely better in the PGA. One win in a men’s event would cover me for a couple of years on the islands with my son, living pretty comfy.”

“You wouldn’t miss it?”

“I’d miss some things.” she said as she arrived at her door.

“This is you?”

“Yeah, thank you for walking me.” she leaned forward and kissed Doogan. He reached a hand to her waist.

“That was nice.”

“Maybe you should—” her phone rang. She glanced down to her hand. “That’s—”

“I get it. He’s probably wondering how the tournament is going.”

“He’s too young to get any of it. I think he just likes to hear my voice and see me on Facetime.”

“Of course he does. Get a good night’s rest, Mara. Big day in the morning.”

“Good night, Doogan. Thank you.” she waved her key card over the lock and backed into the room “Hey, buddy! I can see you!” as her voice trailed away.

13

Two minutes into the elevator ride and Doogan's phone buzzed. Eddie.

"Strike out, slugger."

"How do you know these things?"

"Baxter said the earpieces have GPS. So even when you shut off the mic—"

"—you're still stalking me. Got it."

"So you got her to her door like a gentleman, just leave it at that, Doogan." Abby said.

"Thanks, Abby."

"You never told us how the tournament went so we had to check the news. They're tied for first with Reality Barbie and Golf Buns?" Eddie broke in.

"Yeah, they played great."

"How did you get the actress to play well enough in the scramble?"

"I called an old friend."

"Anyone I know?"

"Oh yeah, Winston."

"Winston? WINSTON?!?!? That old hustler. Is he still hustling muni tracks in Reseda?"

"Yeah, I found him hustling a nine holer and offered five hundred bucks to caddy for the actress."

"Eh, he's an old hustler but a good guy."

"Did you know his wife died?"

"I didn't know he was married—oh, no—I did know that. Francis or something like that. Yeah, very sad. Look, speaking of dead

people—”

“Great segue, Eddie.” Abby cut in.

“—so the patients who keep dying all see this one nurse.”

“Nancy?”

“Right. Nurse Nancy. The angel of death. And they see her in this one exam room with no cameras.”

“Right. Exam room one or something like that.”

“Exactly. And it’s loaded with palliative care devices, respirators, morphine buttons and crazy stuff like that.”

“That’s not illegal though.” Doogan approached his car in the basement parking garage.

“Yeah, I think we’re still not seeing the whole picture. But we are thinking we need to look into Nurse Nancy a bit more.”

“The woman you just described as the ‘angel of death’?”

“Exactly. But Baxter is coming up empty on the cyber stalking.”

“What else do we know about her?” Doogan said, pulling on the main road and heading for the freeway.

“She’s had tons of work done.” Abby chimed in.

“What is tons?” Doogan turned on to the freeway.

“She’s like one botox injection from ‘muppet status.’” Abby replied.

“Ew.”

“Right. But there are like a hundred plastic surgery places in LA so that won’t help us.”

“She has expensive nails.” Abby added.

“Nails. Nails...”

“Developing a new fetish, Eddie?”

“No, why is the nails thing ringing a bell?”

“No clue.”

“Got it. The stakeout attempt. There’s a nail place down at the opposite end from that clinic in the same strip mall.”

“Seems a little convenient.”

“Not really.” Abby said.

“LA traffic can make you get creative and some businesses will give discount to people working in the neighboring places so yeah...maybe.”

“But how much could a nail tech know?”

“Depends.”

“On what?!?!?” Eddie chimed in.

“Was she asian?” Abby asked.

“Seems racist but yes.”

“Women like Nancy assume the asian nail techs don’t understand very much english so they tend to just talk on their phones the whole time they’re getting their nails done.”

“Ah, got it. Seems worth a try.”

“OK, we’ll look into it tomorrow. Good luck on the pro round of the tournament, buddy.”

“Thanks. Good luck at the nail salon.”

“She’s not making content now, is she?” Mara said.

“No, she’s trying to play golf, possibly for the first time this year.”

In her brief pro career, she had made it to the U.S. Women’s Open but it was as much of a fluke as anything and the number of followers she picked up there was the only real payoff she cared about.

“I hate this hole.” Mara took the driver from Doogan’s outstretched hand.

“Yeah, I’m not sure who thought an uphill fairway with a plateau in the middle was a good idea but here we are.”

“Hit the plateau and you’re golden.” Eddies’s voice came on in Doogan’s ear.

“But—” Doogan replied just barely loud enough to be picked up by the earpiece.

“—come in a little short and without a bunch of back spin and it won’t stick, letting the ball roll backwards. Which makes—” Eddie continued.

“Kind of a make or break drive.” Doogan said out loud this time.

“Yeah.” Mara said, a little in her head.

“So just make the plateau.”

“Its two-sixty to the flat part and the uphill will steal distance.” Mara said looking down the fairway.

“So hit it two-seventy” Doogan said, handing her a tee.

“Right.”

“Effort—”

“—you know that’s a gimmick, right? Its a word to say to take you out of your brain for a minute.”

“Humor me.”

Because Candy had turned in a card before Mara the day before, even though they were tied, Mara had to tee off first.

“Here we go.” Mara said, setting the tee and ball and stepping back to look at the course before approaching and settling into her stance.

“Don’t come up short.” Candy said, quietly but not quietly enough. Tilly and her cohort of influencers giggled and were “shushed” by the tournament officials.

Mara breathed in deep through her nose, paused and then wound back slow and smooth, found the apex, paused and mouthed the word “Effortless” before unwinding in one clean motion. The ball arced high and landed on the front side of the plateau, settling to a stop.

A few moments later and Doogan’s earpiece erupted “Oh my God! We just saw it on the live stream. That was beautiful!”

“I think your skirt is the only thing coming up short so far but the tee box is yours.” Mara said quietly to Candy on her way back to Doogan and her bag.

Candy was feeling the pressure. She looked side eyed at Mara but didn’t say a word. Her shot off the tee was solid but it also faded just a bit to the right side of the course where the plateau hadn’t started, leaving her ball landing in an uphill spot where it paused before rolling back and even more to the right, stranding itself in the rough.

“That’s my girl!” Tilly called out.

Candy shot her a death stare and mouthed something like “moron” before returning her driver to her caddy.

Mara and Doogan headed to the plateau and her approach shot while a larger group of media and Tilly’s influencers all walked along the right side of the course, stalking Candy who was suddenly a lot less

charismatic.

“Think she’ll get out of it?” Mara said stretching and reaching for the seven iron in Doogan’s hand.

“I am pretty sure she usually edits out slices like that from her Instagram videos so it might be a crap shoot.”

Candy had held it together on the front nine. She’d get a birdie, next hole Mara would catch her again. Back and forth, all day. This was Candy’s first experience in the grind of the final day of tournament play in the stop seed, even if this was just an exhibition tournament.

Her caddy handed her an iron and she clenched it in her grip before stepping up to her ball with a very intense look and with one rip through the air, her ball flew high and on line, landing on the close side just outside of the collar of the green.

“She’ll have to chip on from there.”

Mara was already in place, took a breath, quiet and calm. The ball flew high, tons of spin found the green, nine feet from the flag and sat dead still.

“Wow!”

“Wow, indeed. She stuck that one right on target.” Eddies’s voice in his ear.

“Thank you,” she smiled handing her iron to Doogan as if she had done that a thousand times.

Candy managed to chip on to the green, on the opposite side of the hole from Mara about 4 feed out. Both sunk their putts, giving Mara the one stroke advantage with her birdie.

“The only hole worse than seventeen—”

“—is eighteen,” Doogan finished the thought, handing Mara her driver.

“Yeah.”

The eighteenth hole was clearly inspired by courses like Sawgrass, with an extreme dog leg left, wrapping around a huge stand of pine trees.

“She can either bomb it over the trees or lay up on the dog leg.” Eddie chimed in.

“She crushed that last one.” Doogan replied quietly.

“Yeah but she didn’t have much height on that one.”

“Hey! Baxter,” Doogan put his finger over the earpiece to improve the audio a bit.

“Yeah, Doogan?”

“I’m seeing some weather. What’s going on?”

“Yeah, a high pressure system has blown in. Happens in that area of the coast.”

“I see where you’re going with this. The open, maybe ten years ago?” Eddie chimed in.

“Exactly. It impacted the loft on a bunch of shots.”

“But won’t Candy know that too?” Baxter asked.

“No. She lives in Arizona, trains there too.” Eddie added.

“And there’s almost no pressure systems like that there.” Baxter was finally catching up.

“Yep.”

“Lay up.” Doogan handed the three wood to Mara who looked confused.

“Lay up? Really?”

“Trust me. Lay up.”

“But there’s no way that Candy is going to—”

“—let’s hope so.”

Mara approached the teebox, set the tee and ball in place and stepped back for the shot.

“Chicken shit.” Candy said under her breath after noticing the club selection.

Mara shot a glance back to Doogan who mouthed “trust me” to her back.

Mara hit a beautiful drive towards the back end of the dog leg, leaving a mid length approach to the green.

“You better be right or I just sold out.” she said to Doogan.

Candy approached the tee box, put down the tee and ball and started to line up for the dog leg to the right before looking directly back at Mara and then the media, smiling and shifting to the tree side.

Doogan could feel the air, the pressure system.

Candy smiled before winding up and crushing the ball off the tee. It hung in the air longer than she expected, moved slightly with the changing course of the air before falling, well short of the clearing and buried amongst the back side of the pine trees.

“Mother f—” she said before containing herself.

“She’s stealing Brenda’s line now.” Mara said, handing Doogan the three wood.

Since the edge of the trees where Candy found her ball were not in the penalty area, the officials declined to let her take a drop. Candy hadn’t hit out of the pine needles much before. It was definitely not Instagram-worthy—an avalanche of strokes and profanity.

Mara hit a beautiful approach shot on to the green and drained a twelve foot putt to win the pro exhibition.

Jake was introducing her to a number of important looking people and there was lots of posing for selfies and autographs taking place.

Brenda showed up with Marcus and they both bounced and screamed when Mara finally got over to them.

“Two meetings today and another one with shoe company tomorrow,” Jake said, coming up to Doogan who still had Mara’s golf bag on his shoulder. “Tell Eddie that I’ll wire the money as soon as I’m back in my room.”

“Pleasure doing business with you, Jake.”

“You were right. You are a professional.” he shook hands with Doogan before heading back to the business people he had been showing around.

It was a good fifteen minutes before Mara made it back to Doogan.

“You were right.” she said walking to him.

“I got lucky.”

“I think it was me that got lucky.”

“Nah, the way you play is definitely not luck.”

“I don’t mean my playing.”

“Ah.”

“I like you Doogan. I like you a lot.”

“But—”

“—my life is complicated. If it wasn’t for the meeting tomorrow morning, I’d already be on a flight back to Maui.”

“You’re a good mom, Mara.”

“I don’t always feel like it but thank you.”

“This has been a fun week. Well worth the donation.”

Mara laughed. “I will miss you, Doogan. You were a lot more than some donor from a charity auction.”

“Thank you for that. I’ll drop the clubs off at the clubhouse and let Jake know.”

“Take care of yourself.”

“You too and remember—”

“—effortless.”

“Right.”

“Your work is beautiful. I saw a woman earlier this week with the most intricate design. French tips but with these little details along the sides?”

Kim smiled, filing Abby’s nails with practiced efficiency. “Nancy. She comes in every two weeks like clockwork.”

“She must love what you do.”

“She loves how it looks.” Kim examined Abby’s cuticles, reached for the softener. “Pulls the ‘we are neighbors’ discount crap. Pays cash but what a bitch!”

“Never tips, complains the entire time.” Kim soaked Abby’s fingertips in the bowl. “But she wants the best work, so...”

“She works at that clinic down the way, right? I think I saw her there.”

“Head nurse or some shit. Acts like she owns the place.”

“She must do well. Those nails aren’t cheap.”

Kim laughed, starting on Abby’s other hand. “Girl, the nails are just the start. She’s had work done.” She gestured to her own face. “Lots of work. Botox, fillers, probably a lift. Maybe two.”

“Good for her.”

“Expensive, though. She’s got money for that but not tipping.” Kim rinsed Abby’s hands, dried them carefully. “She comes in here, puts on her AirPods, talks to her friends the whole time. Gossip, mostly. Other people’s sex lives.”

“Sounds like entertainment.”

“Usually.” Kim started buffing. “Sometimes she has work calls.”

“Work calls?” Abby perked up.

“First time, someone important. You could tell because she kept catching herself, looking around, rephrasing things. Something about a patient, how she can’t—” Kim glanced toward the door, lowered her voice. “—discontinue someone on her own.”

“Second time was the pharmacy I think. She ripped into whoever answered.” Kim shaped the nails with quick, precise movements. “I’ve never heard anyone yell at a pharmacist like that.”

“Sounds intense.”

“She’s intense.” Kim reached for the base coat. “Real piece of work. What’s that show, with the bitchy women with bleached hair and boob jobs?”

“Real Housewives?”

“Yeah, she’s that.”

Abby’s phone buzzed in her purse. Text from Baxter: *Got her financials. This is bad.*

“Color?” Kim held up the tray.

“Something neutral. You pick.”

Kim selected a soft champagne, started applying the first coat with smooth, even strokes. “Nancy always goes bold. Reds, bright pinks. Lots of rhinestones.”

“Of course she does.”

Twenty minutes later, Abby stood at the register, handed Kim three twenties.

“Keep the change.”

Kim’s eyes widened. “That’s—”

“You do beautiful work.”

“Thank you.”

“So Nancy? She ever talk about men.”

“All the time. She’s a real whore.”

“Anyone regularly?”

“No. She goes them like—what’s that thing you put trees into?”

“A wood chipper?”

“Yeah, that. She goes through men like a wood chipper.”

“Interesting. I think I might know just the guy for her.” she said with an evil grin.
