

A. L. Brooks

the  
*Long  
Shot*



# Chapter 1

THE BEAD OF SWEAT TRACKED its way down Morgan's neck. She exhaled slowly and tried to relax her tight shoulders.

Ten feet. That's all this putt was. Ten feet between her and a playoff for a chance to win the first major of her career.

*But you've been this close before, a nasty little voice whispered in her head. Twice. And each time you blew it.*

Strange how that voice only ever made an appearance at the pressure moments. Never on the practice rounds or in the gym or out on a run. Only when it was the crunch shot on the final green of the final round.

A tickle of warm breeze lifted a few loose strands of hair underneath her ponytail. Somewhere behind her someone coughed, and to her right the creek in front of the green gurgled as it trundled over the bedrock.

She shouldn't be aware of any of this. She should be focused only on the small, white ball in front of her, the weight of the putter in her hand. *Come on, concentrate!*

If Harry could read her mind, he'd be tutting. Knowing her caddy stood behind her, probably with his hands in his pockets and probably wondering what the hell she was up to, Morgan slowly inhaled before stepping forward to the ball.

The putter settled in her hands, the rubberized grip warm against her palms and fingertips. She glanced to her left, even though she knew exactly where the hole was. Licking her lips, she settled her feet into place. She adjusted her position in minute increments until she hit that spot, that perfect blend of balance and poise and calm, her head over the ball.

“It’ll swing left but not as much as you might think,” Harry had said when they’d lined up the shot only a minute or so before. It seemed like a lifetime ago. “Don’t overcompensate. You’ll twitch ’cause you’re nervous, and that will probably be enough to send it on its way.”

She’d rolled her eyes at him but appreciated what he’d tried to do—relax her, make it seem like any other putt on any other day.

*Ten feet, that’s all.*

Breathe in, take the putter back, then breathe out and swing it back in to make contact.

As soon as the ball moved, the crowd noise erupted. Shouts of “*Get in the hole!*” came from all angles, but Morgan didn’t react, didn’t move, simply kept her head turned toward the hole, watching the ball roll, bobble a little, start to swing left, and...

The groans and gasps that surrounded her were loud, a rolling wave that threatened to drown her.

The ball swung by the hole, its trajectory too far to the left.

She closed her eyes and gripped the putter so tightly she wondered if it would snap.

Harry’s hand on the small of her back brought her back into the reality, the reality she really didn’t want to face. But she was a professional, and courtesy dictated she walk forward, tap her ball in from where it had come to a stop a mere three inches from the hole, and then step out of the way after acknowledging the muted applause from the crowd.

Kim Lee, her Korean opponent, stepped up and calmly slotted in her two-foot putt to confirm the win. As the crowd went wild, she raised her arms aloft, a huge smile splitting her face.

Morgan gave her a moment. After handing the putter to Harry, she shook his hand, then strolled across the green to congratulate Lee, who had now won the Women’s US Open. Kim Lee was all smiles but patted Morgan on the shoulder as they grasped hands.

“Bad luck.” Lee’s words seemed heartfelt.

Morgan mustered a smile. “You played well. You deserve the win.”

Hundreds of camera flashes pinged off around them. The ESPN and Golf Channel TV cameramen circled around them. Keeping her smile fixed in place, Morgan shook Lee’s hand.

“Thank you!” Lee gushed before letting go and facing the applauding crowd, whose cheers rose in volume. Sure, most of the crowd would have rather seen a home winner, but they were golf fans above all else, and the best player had won.

Morgan, her face aching from maintaining the smile, walked over to where Harry tucked her putter back into the bag, his towel rammed into one of his pockets. His face was expressionless; he was the consummate pro, and she loved him for it. The last thing she needed to see right now was any sort of disappointment on the face of the man who’d caddied for her the whole of her professional career.

“I’m thinking pulled-pork burger and fries,” he said when she reached him.

“What?” Even for Harry, that comment was way out of left field.

“Tonight. For dinner. I’m buying.” He gave her a slow smile. “Might even shout you a beer too. Light, of course.”

Morgan sighed. “Harry, you know I can’t.”

“Oh, all right, a soda, then.”

She bumped his shoulder with hers. It was a constant source of annoyance to him that she was an inch taller than his five ten, and the shoulder bump always emphasized it. Which was why she regularly performed it.

“You know what I mean,” she said, her voice not much more than a whisper.

Harry sighed, pulled the towel from his pocket, and wiped his hands on it before stuffing it into the side pocket of the bag that held all of Morgan’s clubs and equipment. When he stood to face her again, his eyes were full of kindness and understanding.

A lump formed in her throat.

“I’d never tell you what to do, you know that,” he said.

She placed a gentle hand on his bicep to stop him. “I know. But it’d hurt Mom if I didn’t go.”

Harry exhaled noisily and ran a tanned hand over his even more tanned face. His brown eyes held hers. “Jack won, by the way. Just so you know.”

Morgan closed her eyes. “Shit.” She shook her head. “Good for him.”

“Burger with me instead?”

She opened her eyes and gazed fondly at him. “Thanks, but no. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. I’ve never doubted that.” His eyes crinkled as he grinned. “I’ll see you after the circus?”

“Yeah. Let’s have one drink at the bar before you head off, okay?”

“You got yourself a deal, little lady.”

Morgan groaned. She hated it when he called her that. Which was why he did it. She stuck her tongue out at him; Harry roared with laughter. They hugged, his strong arms encircling her completely and making her feel safe and protected for just a moment.

Morgan sucked in a deep breath, stepped out of his embrace, and turned back to the melee of people who now crowded the eighteenth green.

ESPN still interviewed Kim Lee, but Cindy Thomson from the Golf Channel hovered only a few yards away, her hawklike amber eyes on Morgan and Harry.

“Looks like I’m up,” Morgan muttered.

“You got this.”

Handing her cap to him, Morgan swept a hand over her hair. She plastered her fake smile back on, then stepped over to Cindy.

“Bad luck.” Cindy shook her hand limply, her look of sympathy as fake as Morgan’s smile.

Cindy was one of those never-quite-made-it players who’d rapidly realized they’d do better in front of the camera talking about golf rather than playing it. She was now the lead roving reporter for the Golf Channel’s coverage of the women’s game and, therefore, someone Morgan had to make nice with on a regular basis, even though she loathed her. Cindy was all fake blonde hair—and, rumor had it, fake breasts too—with layered-on makeup and expensive shoes. An airhead, Morgan’s father had called her once, and Morgan unfortunately couldn’t help but agree.

With a snap of her hand, Cindy directed the cameraman behind her to get into position, and Morgan saw the light illuminate on the camera that told her she was live.

“I’ve got the runner-up with me here, Morgan Spencer.” Cindy’s gaze bored into Morgan’s. “Morgan, can you tell us how you’re feeling right now? Third major in a row you’ve been right up there and couldn’t quite get over the line. That’s got to hurt, yes?”

*Gee, thanks, Cindy.*

“Well, it’s not easy, no,” Morgan said with a wry grin.

If there was one thing her manager had always told her, it was to never rise to the bait from these kinds of reporters. Her own self-discipline, honed from years of being in the limelight, meant Morgan could switch into her autopilot mode of interviewing at will. No one looking on would ever know how angry or upset she was. No one got to see that side of her, not ever. Even Harry was spared it. A punchbag in a gym was the only witness, and she knew come tomorrow morning she'd really need that kind of workout.

Cindy was right: three majors in a row, and Morgan had blown it on the final hole in each and every one. In last year's British Open, it had been a poor drive. In the ANA International two months ago, it had been the approach that had ended up in the bunker. And here today, a missed putt. She knew exactly what the headlines would say and wouldn't bother buying any of the papers or checking online later.

And God knew tonight she'd hear all about it anyway.

Maybe Harry was right—maybe she should skip it and go for a burger with him instead. But then her mom would have to deal with the other family stuff on her own, and that wasn't fair.

Mentally gritting her teeth, she braced herself for Cindy's additional questions.

"It seems the nerves might get to you on those big moments. What are you going to do to try to resolve that?"

The sickening gleam in Cindy's eyes turned Morgan's stomach. She really was enjoying this.

Morgan kept her smile fixed on her lips. "Well, I'm not sure it is nerves. We'll take a look at the tapes later and see if there's anything we need to work on."

Her jaw ached from keeping her tone even when all she wanted to do was yell at Cindy.

"You're thirty-one now, and you've been a pro for about six years, I believe. Do you think a major is still in your future?"

It was like death by a thousand cuts. Every question was designed to inflict yet more damage.

"I think every pro wants to win a major, and I really believe I've got that in me. I wasn't lucky enough today, but there's another one not too far away."

"Will you speak to your dad? See what advice he can give you?"

And there it was, the one question trotted out every time she appeared in front of the cameras. The one that twisted her stomach in knots and had her clenching her fists.

“I’ll be seeing my folks later tonight, so I’m sure we’ll talk about the match.”

The lies came so easily, as they always had, and hurt just as badly. The irony wasn’t lost on her of how proud her father would be of her for handling herself so well in front of the press.

Cindy pressed one finger to her earpiece. “Thanks for your time, Morgan, and good luck for the next one.”

Before Morgan could respond, Cindy whirled around and marched off in Kim Lee’s direction.

Morgan just had time to inhale one deep breath before the guy from ESPN stepped up. She forced her smile even wider and stared into the camera.

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Later, after finally escaping the post-match press conference, Morgan found Harry in the club’s bar, as expected. He had a cold beer, half drunk, in front of him at a table in the quietest corner of the room. What Morgan wouldn’t give for a long beer, just as cold, right now. But the way she felt, if she started with one, she wouldn’t want to stop, and a late supper with her parents was not something she could turn up drunk to.

After ordering a Perrier with a twist, she slumped into the chair opposite Harry.

He looked her up and down. “Sharks didn’t totally rip you to shreds?”

She grinned wryly. “Not quite, but they got in some good hits, as usual.”

“Bastards.” Harry rarely swore, but when he did, his target was usually the press. Either that or the divorce lawyers each of his three ex-wives had hired.

Morgan waved a hand. “They’re only doing their job. And, hey, some of those questions are perfectly valid.”

*Like, why do I keep screwing it up in majors?*

Harry shrugged and took a long drink of his beer. “So you heading off straight away?”

Stifling a yawn, Morgan nodded. “I may as well. It’ll be good to see Mom again.” She rubbed her chin. “How long’s it been now? Jeez, I can’t even remember.”

Harry chuckled. “I think it’s maybe...two months? Before the ANA, I think.”

“I think you’re right. Wow. I had no idea.”

“Say hi to Bree for me.”

Morgan smiled. Harry had always had a soft spot for her mom. Maybe even a little crush. “I will.”

“How is she?”

“Well, I haven’t seen her in two months or spoken to her in two weeks, so I can’t say. God, I’m a bad daughter.” She smiled ruefully. “But last time I did speak to her, she was pretty tired. You know she does all that charity stuff, and it takes up a lot of her time.”

He nodded. Morgan wasn’t surprised he didn’t ask after her father; the two men had never seen eye to eye.

Morgan sighed. She was usually better at speaking to her mom more regularly, but now that she was a top-ten—usually top-five—finisher in every tournament she played, free time to head home and see her folks was rarer. She didn’t even like to guess when she’d last seen her brother, Jack. At that thought, her stomach twisted again, and she sighed. “How did you know Jack had won?”

Harry didn’t look surprised at the question. “I set up an alert on the app on my phone. Just after your drive at the eighteenth, I snuck a look. I figured if you knew in advance...”

“Thanks.” She tipped her glass in his direction.

“Any time.”

Morgan downed the last of her drink and inhaled deeply. “Okay, time for me to get going.”

Harry stood with her, then walked around the small table to give her a hug. “Take it easy.”

“I’ll try. Tuesday morning, eight?”

He nodded. “If you’re late, I’ll make you run up every fairway.”

She laughed. “I’m never late, and you know it.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again.

“What?” She tilted her head.



“Not necessarily Tuesday, but sometime before Thursday we need to talk about what happened out there today. We need to fix it.”

“I know. We will. Definitely.”

He squeezed her forearm, then sat back down to his beer.

Morgan left the now busy bar with only a handful of people stopping her to commiserate. She accepted their words with her practiced grace, ignoring the twinge in her heart each time those words made her think about missing that putt.

It didn't take long to retrieve her overnight bag and stow it in the trunk of the rental car. Normally, she'd stay on at the hotel for the night after a tournament before being whisked away in a sponsor's car straight to the airport the next morning and then either home or on to the next tournament, but not tonight. Although the room was still booked for the night, for once she was mistress of her own time. Even though where she headed filled her with a certain amount of hesitancy, the freedom to hit the road on her own was wonderful.

She turned up the volume on the radio as she hit the highway and sang along as loud as she could to one banal pop song after another. Belting out the lyrics to songs that spoke of simple things like first kisses and secret looks across a dance floor was one of her few guilty pleasures. She laughed as she imagined the looks on the faces of all those reporters if they saw her cutting so loose. Someone had given her a nickname ten years ago, when she'd really started to climb up the rankings, and it had stuck: Morgan “Ice” Spencer. They all called her that now. Equally cool on the course as off it, she had a reputation for never letting out a hint of what she felt inside. Only a few people knew she wasn't that cold—Harry, her mom, Jack to a certain extent, and... No, she wouldn't think about *her*. That was still way too painful.

Pushing those thoughts away, Morgan concentrated on the road. And on preparing herself for what she was bound to walk into in around twenty minutes' time.

\* \* \*

“Darling!” Her mom rushed forward as the door swung open and pulled Morgan into a warm embrace.

“Hey, Mom.” Morgan clung on, wishing she could spend the whole evening right here in her mom’s caring arms and not have to deal with the rest of it.

“Bad luck, darling. You played well.”

“You watched?”

Her mom stepped back, a wide smile on her face even though her eyes showed her concern. “Of course I did! I’m afraid I couldn’t look at that last putt, though. The tension was too much.”

Morgan chuckled. “Yeah, I had my eyes shut too.”

“Oh, you!” Her mom nudged her with a beautifully manicured fingertip. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“That’s the way it goes sometimes.” Morgan shrugged. “Another day they go in.”

“Very true. Well, come on in. I have food keeping warm in the oven.”

“You’ve eaten already?”

Morgan stepped through with her small overnight bag and placed it on the marble floor of the foyer. Her parents’ grand house could easily grace the cover of every home-and-garden magazine and be admired by many, but its clinical, almost cold finish did nothing for Morgan.

“No, I’ll join you. Your father...ate earlier.”

Her mom ran a hand through her hair, the soft waves of it lifting with her fingers but settling back perfectly into place once they’d passed.

Ignoring the comment about her father for now, Morgan followed her mom into the expansive kitchen that ran the width of the house. Split into two sections, the main area held the kitchen itself, and the slightly smaller area to the left was where casual meals were taken at a large oak table.

As her mom spooned their food onto plates, Morgan poured them each a small glass of wine from the open bottle she found in the refrigerator. She smiled as they moved around each other. Even though Morgan hadn’t lived with her parents for nearly ten years now, she’d fallen right back into the same pattern of sharing an evening with her mom as she had way back then.

There was still no sign of her father as they sat down to their food, but for once she didn’t have the energy to ask, and her mom didn’t volunteer anything. It should have been awkward, but it wasn’t, and so she accepted the clink of her mom’s wineglass against her own before tucking into her food with gusto.

“I didn’t realize how hungry I was,” she said after a few rushed mouthfuls. Her mom smiled. “Well, you have been rather busy today.”

Morgan grinned and continued eating, the tuna casserole hot and filling.

“Up eight ranking places!” Her father’s voice from behind her made her jump in her seat.

She met her mom’s eyes, inhaled, and turned. “Hey, Dad.”

Her father, his iPad clutched in his hand and raised somewhat triumphantly, also startled and stared at her. “Morgan. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“A little while ago. Just catching up with Mom and having some food.” She waved her fork at her plate.

“Good. Good.” He stepped forward and awkwardly leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. “Did you hear about Jack’s win?” He straightened, his face lit up with pride.

Morgan’s anger rose. *Wow, less than ten seconds to make it all about Jack. Must be a record.* “Uh, yeah, Dad, I did. That’s great for him.”

“Isn’t it? And I just got the updated rankings. Up to 108. He keeps going like this, he’s gonna break back into the top one hundred soon.”

“That’s marvelous.” Her mom reached out and covered Morgan’s hand briefly before she continued. “And obviously, Morgan did well today too, Gordy.”

Her dad, to Morgan’s surprise, did at least have the grace to look embarrassed but only for one fleeting moment.

“Oh, sure. Of course. Second place is a good result.”

And there it was, hidden in the tone and the choice of words. Good but not good enough. Certainly not good enough for the daughter of Gordon “Gordy” Spencer, winner of six majors on the men’s tour over the course of his career, including two US Opens and a Masters.

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. He was still imposing, even at the age of seventy-five. Although tall, he had a slight stoop, and her mom had mentioned on their last call that his right hip gave him some trouble.

“Jack’s coming home tomorrow. Will you be here to congratulate him?”

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes or, worse, scream, Morgan shook her head. “Need to be on the road early. I’ve got a flight west tomorrow.”

She could have elaborated, told him which tournament was up next, what her hopes were for it, what she thought she'd need to work on in her game, but she knew that tonight, after Jack's win, she'd be wasting her breath.

"Well, that's a shame. Boy's worked hard this year," he said. "That tennis tour is tough. Winning any tournament out there when you've got the likes of Nadal and Djokovic winning everything else is something to be celebrated."

"I know, Dad." Morgan tried not to sound exasperated, but her mom's fingers tightening against hers indicated she might not have succeeded.

Her dad bristled, but she held up a hand.

"I'm not trying to be difficult. I have places to be. I'm committed to playing the full year, I've got sponsorship requirements, and I *want* to play. I can't just drop that to stay home and pat Jack on the back."

It came out much sharper than she'd intended, and she knew she'd gone too far when her Dad stood as tall as he could, his chest expanding as he did so.

"This is important," he snapped. "Jack could break back into the top one hundred players in the world soon! He needs all of our support to do that."

"I'm world number four." Morgan's throat, damn it, tightened as she pushed back her chair and stood to face him. "Me." She jabbed a finger into her chest. "Me. I'm the world number four in women's golf."

"Don't start that again." Her father turned away.

"Gordy." Her mother half rose from her chair, but it was no use.

Without another word, Morgan's father strode out of the room.

Morgan closed her eyes, her hands clenched into tight fists at her sides. *Always the same. Why the hell did I expect anything different?*

"Thanks for supper, Mom." She finally opened her eyes and looked at her mom across the wide table. "It was good, but I think I'd better get back on the road tonight after all."

"I...I thought you were staying?" Her mom's eyes went wide and shimmered with wetness.

"I can't." Morgan's voice cracked, but she willed herself to keep it together. She wouldn't cry, not for him.

"I'll talk to him." Her mother wrung her hands together.

Morgan sighed. “No. Don’t. It’s not worth it.” She walked out to the foyer, grabbed her lightweight jacket from the hook where she’d hung it up less than an hour before, and pulled it on.

“Please stay,” her mom whispered, her hand tentative on Morgan’s arm.

A sob choking her throat, Morgan shook her head and pulled her mom in for a long hug. “I can’t. Not now. I’m too angry and... Well, you know.”

“I know. I’m so sorry, Morgan. And I’m so proud of you, for what you’re achieving.”

“Thanks.” Morgan swallowed. “And I’m proud of Jack too. You know that, right?”

Her mom stepped back slightly, staring at Morgan. “Of course I do, honey!”

“I’ll call him later and congratulate him. If he’s not too drunk by then.” Morgan managed a smile, and her mom returned it.

“You do that. And you call me when you get to California, okay?”

Of course her mom knew where she headed next, and the thought that she had Morgan’s schedule memorized like that allowed a small ball of warmth to push back at the coldness her father’s words had caused her.

“I will. Take it easy, Mom.”

“Of course, darling.” Her mom hugged her one last time, then opened the door.

Morgan stepped out into the cool night, the air refreshing on her face, where anger and hurt burned just beneath the surface of her skin.

She opened the rental car, climbed in, and started the engine. The inbuilt GPS pinged to life, and she tapped the name of her hotel into the destination box and then hit a few more keys to choose the longer route back, avoiding the highways. She needed the drive and the solitude. And the cheesy pop music, of course. An old Madonna track came on, and she grinned. Yeah, that would do.

## Chapter 2

“SHE BLEW IT! AGAIN!”

Adrienne looked up from her laptop as Jenny stomped into the office and flung herself down into the guest couch. The leather gave way beneath her with a soft sigh, and the huge vase of flowers on the side table wobbled but stayed upright.

“Who blew what?” Adrienne asked, although she had a pretty good idea what Jenny was ranting about.

Jenny threw her arms up. “Morgan Spencer! How could she?”

She groaned and sunk her head into her hands, nearly crashing her legs into the low oak coffee table that stood between the couch and Adrienne’s desk as she slipped down further into her seat.

Adrienne chuckled. She was a big fan of women’s golf, but Jenny was fanatical. And she was particularly fanatical about Morgan Spencer, whom she’d had a huge crush on for years. Every time Morgan failed to live up to the heights of the pedestal Jenny had placed her on, it was rather amusing to watch the resulting meltdown.

“Well, obviously she did it entirely to upset you,” Adrienne said drily, and chuckled when Jenny thumped the leather seat.

“She’s so frustrating! I totally get why the press go after her like they do. Although Cindy Thomson was particularly vicious, that bitch.”

Adrienne snorted softly in agreement. Oh yes, Cindy Thomson was indeed a bitch—Adrienne had firsthand experience of that when they’d clashed during the filming of a doc about the history of the Solheim Cup. Cindy had wanted more screen time, keen to get exposure at the start of her TV career. After Adrienne had refused for genuine production reasons,

Cindy had gone over Adrienne's head to someone she knew on the board of directors at the TV company, undermining Adrienne's position with her peers.

It pained Adrienne deeply every time she saw Cindy's face on her TV screen, knowing how many people Cindy had stomped all over to get to where she was now, the golden girl of women's golf presenting.

"So did you just drop in here to get all that off your chest, or was there something else?" Adrienne inquired, needing to push thoughts of Cindy Thomson out of her mind.

Jenny grinned sheepishly, scratching at the back of her head. "No, just the rant. Sorry."

Adrienne smiled in understanding at her assistant. Jenny was in her mid-twenties, still learning all there was to know about making TV sports films, and full of the passion that went with her youth and enthusiasm. More than a few times, Adrienne had needed to rein her in when her fiery nature threatened to derail a project or upset an A-lister, but Jenny was rapidly becoming a fine producer's assistant and would make a fantastic producer one day, if that was the direction she wished to go.

"You okay?" Jenny asked as she stood. "Wanna coffee or something? I think I spotted some leftover Danish in the conference room a minute ago." She bounced on the toes of her orange sneakers, the shoes the only splash of color in her outfit. Her black long-sleeved T-shirt and black jeans fitted her lean body like a glove. It wasn't Jenny's usual look—there was normally much more color involved—but it worked, especially with her black spiky hair, which she'd gelled up particularly high today.

"Coffee, yes, Danish, no."

"On it."

Jenny bounded out of the room, and Adrienne chuckled.

*Oh, to be that young again.* But even as the thought crossed her mind, she shook her head. No, she didn't want to be that age again, actually. And that was in spite of all that had happened to her this past year, knocking her back in ways she would never have imagined. No, forty-nine-year-old Adrienne was a better person—mostly—than the Adrienne who'd once been in Jenny's shoes, and the experience she'd gained from life since then sat comfortably with her.

Well, not all of it, but she'd challenge anyone to feel comfortable about being left out of the blue by their partner of ten years for a woman twenty years younger...

She sighed. *Yeah, like I really need to be thinking about all that again.* The trouble was, no matter how hard she tried, and no matter how much she'd thrown herself into her work since then, the day when Paula had come home and told her, in a cold and distant tone, that she was leaving and moving in with her new young love would never leave Adrienne's mind. The pain still cut deep, as did the embarrassment once all their friends found out. Left for a younger model. What a fucking cliché.

Straightening at her desk, she rolled her shoulders a couple of times and focused back on her screen. When Jenny returned with her coffee and placed it on the *I love San Francisco* coaster on the corner of the desk, Adrienne was almost too engrossed to notice, mumbling a sound that could have meant "thanks" and scrolling slowly down the proposal that had landed in her in-box overnight.

*Well, well, well. Interesting.*

Adrienne reached for the coffee, blew on it for a moment, then sipped cautiously. Perfect. Her gaze drifted to the tall bookcase on her left, her awards proudly displayed in amongst photos of the wonderful people she'd worked with over the years. Was there a chance to add another one to her treasured collection? She read over the proposal again. It had been sent by one of the development execs upstairs, Daniel, and, as he said in his e-mail, was such an obvious addition to the project they were already working on it would be foolish not to pursue it. And when it came to her work, Adrienne wasn't a foolish woman.

She picked up the phone and called him.

"Thought I might be hearing from you." She could hear the smirk he wore as he spoke. He was an oily character, and personally she loathed him. She'd seen him act like a predator when it came to the younger female members of the staff, and it pained her that no one seemed willing to do anything about it. He did have more great ideas than not, she had to begrudgingly admit, so she'd spent the last three years swallowing down her feelings about him, and instead they'd worked together to put out a brilliant portfolio of work for TC Productions.



“I like the idea,” she said, as usual getting straight to the point. She and Daniel were not the sort of people who wasted time on social niceties.

“And shouldn’t take too much effort to tag on, no?”

“Not at all. Except for access.”

“Yes. Do you know her manager?”

“Not personally, but I know how to reach out to him.”

“Great. Keep me posted.”

He hung up, and Adrienne rolled her eyes. He would take all the plaudits for this once she’d done all the running around to make it happen, but she’d still have her name on the credits, and, if she pulled this off the way her brain was already imagining, who knew what else it might lead to.

A glow warmed her body. This was what she needed to take her mind off everything else—a big, fat, juicy project that she could really sink her teeth into.

Perfect.

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The apartment was cold. Adrienne threw her keys on the table near the front door and shivered. Stupid New York weather—forty-five degrees in early June was insane. After opening the narrow cupboard housing the heating controls, she turned them up, hearing the system kick in moments later.

God, how she missed her house. Their house, the one she and Paula had bought a year after they got together and had lived in until a year ago when Paula dropped her bomb on their relationship. The house had had to be sold—partly because she couldn’t afford the upkeep for it on her own, but mostly because suddenly, overnight, it didn’t feel like *home* anymore. Not after what Paula had done.

She stood in the bland hallway of the apartment she now rented instead and sighed. Beige walls, fake wooden floor, plain furniture. When she’d first looked at it, caught up in the throes of her grief, she chose it precisely because it was so bland. It made her feel nothing, and that was good back then because she’d ached and hurt in so many ways. She hadn’t wanted to come home to anything that challenged her any further. But now it depressed her.

Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe that meant she was, as her friend Tricia had been trying to tell her for a while, ready to put some color back into her life. Of course, Tricia's version of color was for Adrienne to date again, or at least get laid, but Adrienne wasn't remotely ready for *that*.

After finally removing her coat when she thought she could cope with the lukewarm temperature of the place, she walked into the small kitchen and poured herself a glass of the red wine she'd opened the night before. She yawned widely after her first sip; it was already past ten, and she'd put yet another ridiculously long day in at the office. Still, it was worth it, as the project she'd been working on for the last three months was about to really get off the ground. Just one key phone call to make tomorrow...

The buzzing of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts. The caller display showed Tricia's name, and she smiled as she answered.

"Isn't it past your bedtime?"

Tricia laughed. "Ha ha. I have been known to stay up past ten on a school night, you know. Sometimes even eleven!"

Adrienne chuckled at the reference to school night. Tricia was an associate professor at NYU. "So how are you?"

"Good. This summer semester's already kicking my ass, but I'm still alive."

"Tough class?"

"Meh. More like disinterested. Which makes no sense when they've all paid so much to get here. Feels like I've been talking to a blank wall most days."

"Are they just overwhelmed? I mean, they're all from overseas, so..."

"Yeah, maybe that's all it is. Don't worry, I'll think of something to light them up."

"I don't doubt that."

Tricia's laugh was soft. "So how about you?"

One of the things Adrienne loved most about Tricia was her refusal to sugarcoat things. Everyone else who had asked Adrienne that question for the last twelve months had done so with that "oh, poor you" inflection in their tone. Like they were afraid to actually ask in case Adrienne told them the truth they didn't want to hear—that she was still angry and bitter and upset. Tricia just asked her normally, like she would with anyone else she knew, anyone who hadn't had their heart ripped to shreds last year.

"I'm pretty good." She glanced around the kitchen. "I'm sick of this apartment, I finally realized."

"Yay!"

"I know. You've never liked it."

"No, but I also get why you took it. Still, I'm thrilled you've finally realized the beige cave of doom is not for you. Thank God."

Adrienne laughed out loud. "Well, I'm not actually going to do anything about it yet, so don't be holding a party. I'm hopefully about to go on the road for a few weeks, so I may as well leave it here with all my belongings until I get back."

"But when you get back, you'll look for something else? Please? Promise?"

"I will. I promise."

"I'm fist pumping right now. And jiggling."

"And you can jig with the best of them."

"I can." There was a pause, then Tricia's voice turned serious. "You sound good. Really good."

Adrienne's heart skipped a beat, then settled again. "I...am. Work is good. This project is finally getting going, hence me leaving town, and Daniel—"

"The snaky one?"

"Yes, the snaky one." Adrienne grinned. "Well, he actually came up with a brilliant addition to it that I hope I can pull off."

"Ooh, I'm intrigued. Tell me more. This is the women's golf documentary, yes?"

"Yes. So far I've just had a crew out gathering film of the first two majors of the year. You know we're doing a kind of life-in-a-year of the women's majors, yes?"

"Yeah, I remember. Not focusing on any player in particular but more the tournaments themselves, why they're so special to the players, et cetera."

"Wow, you really do listen to me sometimes."

"Oh, hardy har." Tricia snorted. "Go on, what's this extra part?"

"Well, did you hear Morgan Spencer failed again this past weekend? Missed a putt to go into a playoff for the Women's US Open, so that's three majors in a row she's blown it on the last hole."

“Hm, I might have caught a headline about that in today’s sports pages. Wow, that’s got to hurt.”

“Well, that’s the thing. I saw a tape of her press conference, and she didn’t look bothered at all. I mean, I know they call her Ice, and she’s got this reputation for being so cool out there, but I would have thought there would be *some* show of emotion after that loss. But no, nothing. It was almost like she was...bored by it all.”

“Okay, but everyone reacts to disappointment and loss in different ways, right? Especially people in the public eye with her kind of background.”

“True, but... Anyway, that’s Daniel’s idea, and I think it’s worth doing.”

“What idea?”

“Make Spencer the focus of the series. The woman who can’t seem to win a major, talking about the majors, talking about her dad’s six wins, yada yada yada. We’ll couple that with recent winners of majors on the women’s tour, get their take on what it meant for them to win one. And who knows, while we’re tracking Spencer, maybe she’ll actually win one at last, and we get to show it.”

“And she’s up for this?” Tricia sounded dubious, and for some reason it rankled with Adrienne.

“Well, she doesn’t know yet. I’m reaching out to her manager tomorrow, but I can’t see why she wouldn’t be. It’s a great story.”

“I guess...”

“What?”

“Nothing, ignore me.”

“No, tell me!”

“I don’t know, Addy. There’s just something about it not sitting right with me.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t think it kind of invades her privacy a little? Like, maybe she wouldn’t want this kind of exposure or attention?”

“She’s a top sportswoman. They get this kind of attention all the time.”

Tricia was silent for a while. Then she said, her voice quiet and concerned, “Just don’t forget she’s a person too. I know this is important to you and your career and portfolio. But she’s a person with feelings, even if she is in the public eye.”

Adrienne bristled, her stomach tight with tension. “I’m not completely heartless, you know!”

“I know, I know! That’s not what I was saying. It’s just...” Tricia sighed. “Since Paula stomped all over your heart, you’ve been kinda...cool. Aloof. I’m just saying, just because you’re still feeling numb about everything, don’t let that get in the way of other stuff.”

The truth in Tricia’s words was hard to deny, so she didn’t bother trying. “Okay. Understood.”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“I do.” Adrienne exhaled slowly. “Look, it’s getting late. I’d better get some sleep. Say hi to David for me.”

“I will. And hey, good luck with the project. I hope it all works out.”

“Thanks. I’ll call whenever I can, but you know how these things go.”

Tricia’s laugh was gentle. “I do. Don’t worry. If I think it’s been too long between calls, I’ll bombard you with text messages until you have no choice but to contact me to shut me up.”

Adrienne rolled her eyes. “Yes, that sounds exactly the sort of thing you’d do.”

Tricia was still laughing as she said good-bye and hung up.

\* \* \*

The alarm startled Adrienne awake at six. She’d been in a deeper sleep than she would have imagined, given how unsettled she was when she’d got into bed the night before. The call with Tricia had played on her mind as she’d gone through her going-to-bed routine, in particular Tricia’s comment about her being aloof and cool.

As she moisturized after her shower, she did something rare: She actually looked at her own body. Since Paula had left her for someone so much younger, she’d avoided looking at herself too closely, afraid of what she’d see.

Objectively, it wasn’t that bad, was it? Her face was reasonably smooth and soft, only a few wrinkles around her eyes and the corners of her mouth really giving her age away. Her naturally light-brown skin helped, of course, and for the thousandth time she thanked her mother for her French-Moroccan genes.

Her hair was...well, just her hair. It never grew the way she wanted it to and needed daily taming with a variety of products. There was a little grey, and it had been tempting—*very* tempting—to cover that up after Paula left. Adrienne became obsessed for a short time with the age of Paula's new partner and doing her utmost to make herself look as young as possible. Her mind had concluded—with twisted logic, she now realized—that if she made herself look younger, then Paula would want her again and come back.

Her glance swept downward, albeit briefly. Just long enough to take in a body that was...okay. Her breasts were still pretty firm and not yet pointing at her feet, which was a relief. Her overall shape wasn't, obviously, as trim and tight as it had been twenty years ago, but she could live with it.

*Would anyone find this attractive enough to want to make love to it?* Would she *want* anyone to make love to it?

The thought still didn't appeal, but she could also acknowledge that her hurt was dissipating over time. Just like everyone said it would. The only times it still really stuck like a knife in her belly was when someone in her social circle—the social circle she had shared with Paula until recently—let slip something about Paula and *that woman* being seen out and about. It might have been Adrienne's imagination—Tricia kept telling her it was, anyway—but she thought such little slips were intentional. That the comments always held an unspoken "Oh, and she's *gorgeous*, and hasn't Paula done well for herself, trading you in for something younger and brighter and perkier?"

Adrienne shook out the tightness that had enveloped her body and stepped into the bedroom to dress. Time to start the day. *The* day, when hopefully she'd be able to work her charm on Morgan Spencer's manager and give her already good project a boost up into a *great* project.

She walked into the office an hour later, feeling determined to make the most of her day.

Jenny said nothing as she walked past her desk but came trotting in two minutes later with Adrienne's morning coffee and a plate holding a croissant and a small cup of fruit salad.

"Thank you, Jenny."

“So what’s the plan for this morning?” Jenny stood expectantly in front of Adrienne’s desk, her hands clasped behind her back. Her spiky hair was today tipped with bright purple, and the shirt she wore matched the color.

“Nice hair.” Adrienne smirked, and Jenny grinned. “Okay, this morning, we’re aiming big.” She scribbled on a Post-It note and handed it over to the puzzled-looking Jenny. “Get me the number for this guy.”

Jenny took the piece of paper and glanced at it. “Who is he?”

Adrienne smiled, her skin buzzing with the anticipation of what the day might bring. “That’s Morgan Spencer’s manager.”

“Morgan...” Jenny bit her lip. “You want Morgan Spencer for the doc, don’t you?”

“Yep.”

Jenny grinned widely. “Nice.” She exited Adrienne’s office at speed. Twenty minutes later, she returned. “I may have just sold my first child, but here it is. He’s expecting your call this morning.”

Adrienne took the proffered piece of paper. “I knew I could count on you.”

Jenny tilted her head. “You could easily have done this yourself, couldn’t you?”

“I could. But you need your name out there too, and as long as you weren’t unbelievably cheeky or rude, you probably just made a new ally.”

“I wasn’t. And I did. Turns out his executive assistant went to the same college as me, although he graduated a couple years before me.”

Adrienne nodded. “Remember, it’s not—”

“What you know. It’s who you know.” Jenny beamed. “I get it. Thanks.”

“Good. Now leave me in peace so I can set this up.”

Jenny mock saluted and dashed out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

*God, she’ll wear me out before I’ve got her fully trained. But it’ll be worth it.*

Inhaling deeply, Adrienne sat up straighter in her chair and reached for the phone.

“Hi,” she said. “This is Adrienne Wyatt calling for Hilton Stewart.”

“One moment, please, Ms. Wyatt.”

Silently thanking Jenny for her prep, Adrienne patiently waited for Hilton to join the call.

“Ms. Wyatt,” he said, his voice a little nasally in a fashion that told her it was always that way and not due to him having a cold or the flu.

“Please, call me Adrienne,” she said. “And thank you for taking my call, Mr. Stewart.”

“That’s no problem. And please, call me Hilton. So what can I do for you?”

“Well, I think it’s more a case of what we can do for each other, Hilton,” Adrienne began smoothly. “As you know, I work for TC Productions, and we’re currently making a documentary, commissioned by ESPN, about the women’s majors this year.”

“Yes, I definitely heard something about that happening.” There was a chuckle in his tone.

“Of course. So I have a proposal for you and your client Morgan Spencer, which I think will only increase her already high profile and probably improve her ability to maintain or even improve on her current sponsorship position.” It was bold, but it was how she felt after pulling herself out of her introspection at the start of her day, and she knew she could sell it.

There was a slight pause. “Hm, okay, I’m listening.”

*And hooked*, Adrienne thought with a triumphant smile.



## Chapter 3

JAB, JAB, UPPER CUT.

Body punches—one, two, three, then right hook.

The punchbag swung crazily on its chain. Morgan blinked the sweat out of her eyes before delivering a final one-two to the center of the bag. She stepped back, her tired arms dropping to her sides.

A door slammed somewhere behind her, and she sighed. Her private time was over. She'd had no trouble waking early to get into the hotel's fitness suite before six so that she was its only occupant; she'd hardly slept all night. Anger and hurt had kept her brain wide awake—at one point, she'd even been tempted to drive back out to her parents' house and have it out with her father. Common sense had eventually prevailed and kept her tucked beneath the sheets even as her body tossed and turned.

She hadn't, after all that she'd said to her mom, called Jack yet. A quick text message to say "Congrats, Big Bro" had gone unanswered, but that was fine with Morgan. Good for him, going out to celebrate the win. She hoped he had an it-was-so-worth-it hangover this morning.

Grinning at the thought, she peeled off the gloves, stowed them on the equipment rack, and then picked up her water bottle and drained it. The shower she stepped into five minutes later was a welcome relief from her workout, which had perhaps been slightly more strenuous than usual. It was amazing what frustration could make a woman do.

She ate a light breakfast in her room before checking out and loading up the rental car. Having convinced her sponsors to give her twenty-four hours of freedom before she needed to be on a plane for the next tournament, she made the most of the drive back to the airport. Her flight wasn't until three,

so she meandered more backroads, drifting through small towns with cute centers where everyone seemed to know each other as they passed on the street. She'd never had "real" life like that. Growing up in her dad's shadow had meant that nothing was normal or what she imagined normal to be.

*Jeez, you're getting maudlin in your old age.*

Smiling ruefully at herself, she swung the car onto the interstate, the one stretch of highway she had to drive in order to get to the airport. With reluctance, some twenty minutes later, she pulled the car into its allotted slot in the parking lot. A porter loaded up a trolley for her, and soon she was checked in, her bags trundling down the belt, her carry-on slung over her shoulder.

The flight out to the West Coast was much the same as any other flight she took most weeks: long and boring, even in business class. And then there she was, checking in to yet another hotel after the sponsor's car had collected her from LAX. At least this room had a view and a balcony that overlooked the hotel's extensive pool area.

She flopped down on the bed, pulled her phone from her pocket, and dialed her brother.

"Hey, Sis!"

He sounded hoarse, and she grinned. "Heavy night?"

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, something like that."

"Congrats. I haven't seen any of it yet, but I bet you were awesome."

"I was. Obviously." He cleared his throat. "Bummed for you."

"Meh. You win some, you lose some."

"Yeah, but..."

"I know."

"Did you still go to the folks' after?"

"Yeah."

"Regret it?"

"Hell yeah."

They both laughed, but it sounded hollow.

"Sorry. I wish he was—"

"Hey, nothing for you to apologize for. He is who he is. Nothing any of us can do to change that."

She didn't add what she wanted to add, which was that Jack *could* actually try harder on that score, in her humble opinion. Whenever they

were together as a family, and her father talked nonstop about Jack and his success, her brother never thought to jump in and deflect some of that attention to Morgan. Usually, her mother pulled that heavy load alone. However, there was no point getting into that now and definitely not on the phone.

“How was Mom?” Jack asked after a moment.

“Good. Really good. Made me tuna casserole.”

“Hah, of course she did! Man, I miss her tuna casserole.”

“Then you should get home more. You know she’d love that.”

“I know, but it’s so hard to find time. This tour’s a killer, especially if I want to push for the one hundred.”

Especially for a guy who was thirty-three already and up against the much younger and fitter men, those new faces that joined the tour almost every week.

“I know, I know.”

“So where are you now?”

“L.A. Got a smaller tournament in Anaheim starting Thursday.”

She heard sounds of many people in the background and Jack’s muffled, “*Yeah, just a sec!*” He came back on the line. “Well, look, good luck, okay? I gotta run.”

“Yeah, okay. Speak soon,” she said, but the line was already dead.

She threw the phone onto the bed and lay back, gazing up at the nondescript ceiling. As calls went with her brother, that was about as good as it got, so she couldn’t complain. But the tense knot in her stomach told her otherwise, and she sighed.

Jack wasn’t a bad guy, not really. But he’d allowed himself to get sucked into their father’s view of the world, and whether he’d ever admit it or not, he also treated Morgan’s sport and her achievements as somehow *less than*. Jack *was* a pretty good tennis player, she knew that. But *she* was an exceptional golfer whose gender negated everything she’d accomplished in the eyes of her father and, to a lesser extent, her brother.

The joke of it was, after naming his son, his firstborn, after one of, if not *the* best golfers of all time, Jack Nicklaus, her brother had shown zero interest in following in their father’s footsteps. Morgan had, loving the game from the minute she could hold one of Jack’s discarded small plastic clubs, but that had never been good enough for Gordy Spencer. Jack was

aware, she knew that, but she wished he would try a little harder. She also knew there probably wasn't much point. Her father was old school, one of those misogynists who didn't even know he was doing it, it was so ingrained. And the fact that he did it to his daughter didn't register at all.

She forced herself up to a sitting position and glanced at the time on her phone: 6:30 p.m. Food, that was what she needed now. And then a very early night to make up for the one before.

Her phone buzzed in her hand.

*Hey! You here yet? Need dinner? I'm in the Calypso bar (dumb name), and they have fried shrimp!!!*

She smiled. Charlie McKinnon. Yeah, dinner with Charlie was just what she needed. Morgan jumped up and quickly pulled off the clothes she'd been in all day. A short shower freshened her up, then she tied back her hair, dressed in some casual attire, and left her room.

"Shit, you look *tired!*" were Charlie's first words when Morgan sidled up to her at the bar.

"Gee, thanks, honey."

Charlie laughed and pulled her into a tight hug. "You know I'll never lie to you."

"True." Morgan sat on the stool next to Charlie's and pointed at the plate of fried shrimp in front of her. "Any good?"

Charlie shrugged, her mouth quirking up at one corner. "It isn't *bad*, but I've definitely had better."

"Then I'll pass. Besides, I'm not sure I could handle fried food today."

Charlie wiped her hands on a napkin, took a quick sip of her soda, then looked at Morgan with a serious expression. "What's up?"

Charlie was the one person Morgan had confided some of her family secrets to—not all of them but enough hints that Charlie would know what Morgan meant when she said, "Spent the evening with the folks last night. It was the usual."

"Ah." Charlie frowned. "Sorry."

Morgan shrugged, then placed her order with the bartender for a Cobb salad and a Perrier before turning back to her friend. "I knew going in it was likely. Jack won yesterday."

"Yeah, I saw." Charlie patted Morgan's arm.

“Hey, what’s this I hear about you getting snippy with some reporter yesterday?”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “Idiot. Asked me if I was aware that people were calling me the female Tiger Woods.”

“Seriously? That again?”

“I know!” Charlie laughed. “I may have been a little sharp when I told him that actually, I am the golfing equivalent of Serena Williams, thank you very much.”

Morgan laughed and gave her friend a mini fist bump. She knew Charlie, being one of the few black women playing golf, was sick of being compared to Tiger Woods, so she could well imagine how her response to the reporter would have been delivered.

Charlie finished her fried shrimp. “Want to talk about that putt?”

Morgan groaned and dropped her head into her hands. “You were watching.”

“Of course I was! Just because I couldn’t play didn’t mean I wasn’t there in spirit.”

“How is the knee?”

“Don’t deflect!” Charlie scowled at her. “And it’s fine, actually. It was the right move to not play last week. But I’m itching to get out there this week, so watch your ass. I’m coming for you!”

Morgan laughed and squeezed Charlie’s arm affectionately. “I’ll be so far ahead of you, you won’t see me.”

Charlie huffed. “Probably true.” She laughed. “Anyway, you’re still deflecting. That putt?”

“Yeah, I know,” Morgan said soberly. “It was there and then...and then it wasn’t.”

“Did you twitch? I bet Harry said you’d twitch.”

“He did. But I don’t think I did twitch. I think I just read it wrong. Or I didn’t listen to his read on it.” She shook her head. “I don’t think I twitched.”

Morgan’s “twitch” was something the press had started talking about after she’d failed to win the previous two majors, and it bugged her. They all thought she couldn’t take the pressure of winning the big ones, of finally getting a major on the board, so they thought she’d developed a nervous twitch that was the reason she’d missed those key shots.

“So who’s our toughest competition this week, huh?”

Grateful for the slide away from the previous topic, Morgan dived wholeheartedly into a conversation about their rivals on the tour. When her food arrived, she stabbed eagerly at it with her fork, alternating mouthfuls of food with her thoughts on which women were there to be beaten this weekend. Before she knew it, she and Charlie had blown two hours at the bar, and with satisfaction, Morgan realized she’d shaken off everything she’d brought with her from the trip back east. Being with Charlie could usually do that for her, and once again, she was so grateful for their friendship.

“Okay, next subject,” Charlie said with a wicked grin. She swirled her drink. “Any hot chickies out there for you at the moment?”

“Hot chickies?” Morgan asked incredulously. “What are you, fifteen?”

Charlie snorted into her drink. “Okay, so what do you prefer—hot babes? Hot mamas?”

“Women, Charlie, they’re just women. Just like you and me.”

“Hey, speak for yourself!” Charlie poked a finger into her own chest. “I, for one, am definitely a hot babe.”

Morgan laughed and wrapped an arm around Charlie’s shoulders. “Yes, Charlie, yes, you are.” She rolled her eyes. “But no, there are no women out there for me at the moment.” Her voice fell. “And you know I can’t. Not yet. Not after...”

Charlie kissed Morgan on the cheek. “I know. I just...” She sighed. “Sorry, I just want you to meet that *one*, you know? That one who gets how wonderful you are and totally worships you as the goddess that you are.”

“Goddess?” Morgan quirked an eyebrow. “Are you sure that’s just soda you’re drinking?”

Chuckling, Charlie pushed a fist into Morgan’s bicep. “You know what I mean.”

Morgan shook her head. “What about you? Any hot hunks on your horizon?”

Charlie’s eyes went wide. “You did *not* just say ‘hot hunks’ to me.”

Morgan laughed so hard her sides ached.

\* \* \*

“You’re late,” Harry said, looking stern, his hands on his hips, Morgan’s bag at his feet.

Morgan glanced at her watch. "It's 7:59 a.m. I'm early."

Harry rolled his eyes, then broke into laughter a moment later. "So how you doing? You seem pretty perky."

"I don't do perky," she replied with a growl, then grinned as he tutted. "I'm good. Ran into Charlie last night."

"Hey, how is Mac?"

"The same." Morgan smirked. "She said to tell you that you read that last putt wrong and I should fire you."

Harry glared at her. "She did *not!*"

Morgan shrugged. "What can I say? She's a smart cookie."

"Whatever," he muttered, turning away from her and picking up the bag. "Come on, we've got stuff to do."

She sighed. Yeah, he was right. The tournament this week wasn't as significant as the Open last week, but she knew all eyes would still be on her, wondering if she'd lost it, if she would crumple even further under the pressure everyone thought she was experiencing. It was funny—she'd chosen to play this one because she thought it would be a relaxing change straight off the back of a major. Now she wasn't so sure.

"Let's start on the green," Harry called over his shoulder, and she sighed again.

*I knew he was gonna say that.*

She followed him onto the area where various practice putting greens were set up. There were three other golfers already there, and she cast a quick glance around to see who. Laurie Schweitzer, of course. Currently world number two and still one of the most ambitious—*i.e.*, *hard*, *callous*, Morgan thought with a wry smile—women on the tour, even after being near the top for twelve years. So Park, who was quiet, serious, and had the best drive on the women's tour right now. And Lotte Karlsson, one of the older players on the tour but still able to hit the top ten on a regular basis. Only Laurie failed to acknowledge Morgan's presence, but that was no real loss.

"Bitch," Harry muttered. He wiped the putter on a fresh towel before passing it to Morgan.

"Now, now, play nice, Harry." Morgan threw him a smile.

"I will if she will."

Morgan chuckled. On the outside, Harry looked like a gruff old bear—tall, solidly built, and with a manner of speaking that most people would take as rude. But Morgan knew better; no one had ever had her back more than him, and the insult he'd directed at Laurie was purely in support of Morgan.

Harry dropped a ball at her feet. "Are we going to talk about it?"

Morgan looked up at him. There was no judgement or disappointment in his face. Quietly, making sure that Laurie especially didn't hear, she said, "I didn't twitch. I swear. I think I just read it wrong. There was more of a slope than I anticipated."

He nodded, but before he could speak, she rushed on.

"But the problem wasn't the putt. It was the second shot."

His smile was slow but warm. "Good girl. Yes, it was. By hitting *that* into the rough, you never gave yourself a chance of getting close to the pin." He shrugged. "Sure, a ten-foot putt should be a piece of cake for someone as good as you, but you just added more pressure into an already high-pressure situation." He stepped back. "I just wanted to be sure about the twitch. Now I know what we need to focus on. And it ain't actually your putting."

She smiled in gratitude. Harry had been her caddy for years now, and she wouldn't trade him for anyone because he was way more than a caddy. She deliberately paid him the extra to accompany her on training sessions and practice rounds because he was more coach than mere bag carrier.

Exhaling slowly, she rolled her shoulders a few times, then pushed the ball around with the putter until it sat true on the cropped grass.

"Don't do that," Harry griped. "Play it from wherever it lands."

"Yes, boss." She grinned up at him, and he wagged a finger at her before stepping back.

She practiced putting—short, medium, and long—for about half an hour. Even though they'd both agreed that her putting wasn't really at fault for the loss of the Open, Harry knew it calmed her to start the day on the green rather than going straight into a round, and putting practice could never hurt.

They trotted down the rough pathway that led to the first tee; her first practice round tee-off time was nine, and she arrived in plenty of time to see So Park hit an immaculate drive straight down the middle of the fairway.



“Nice.”

Morgan whistled, and Park flashed her a pleased grin before striding off down the fairway, her playing partner, another Korean whom Morgan didn't recognize, walking alongside her, chatting animatedly. Morgan, as usual, would play her practice round alone. She knew some of the press highlighted that as yet more evidence of her icy persona, but she couldn't care less about what the press thought. For her, practice was something she needed to concentrate on and always had, and she really didn't need the presence of another player alongside her disrupting that concentration.

Morgan retrieved first her cap, then her glove from the bag and pulled them both on. She watched the Koreans disappear down the fairway, but she wasn't really seeing them. Instead, she assessed the breeze on her face, judging its direction and strength, and took in the lack of cloud, the already warm sun on her upturned face.

When both the Koreans had played their second shots, Morgan finally turned back to face Harry.

“All right, Spencer.” He handed her the driver. “Show 'em what you got.”

She took the club and leaned on it to place her ball on the tee.

“Remember, it dog legs to the left, but the wind today is from the right, so aim farther right than you'd think to draw it back in.”

“Sure.” She swung the club a few times, loving how that always felt at the start of a day, and feeling, somewhere deep in her muscles and bones and sinews and tendons, that today was going to be a *good* day.

She stepped up, addressed the ball, then, moments later, sent it arcing into the sky into a perfect landing roughly 270 yards down the fairway.

“That'll do.” Harry winked as he took back the driver. “That'll do.”

\* \* \*

“Fourteen and fifteen were the toughest, I think,” Morgan said as she strolled up to where Harry finished packing the bag. She pulled off her cap and the tie around her ponytail and shook her hair out, running her fingers through it to ease out the tangles.

“Yeah, but you nearly made a mess of six too. That big bunker's right at your driving distance—you'll need to be way more accurate with the tee shot.”

“True.” She gulped from her water; the day was hot, the sun beating down relentlessly from the clear blue sky.

“Lunch?” Harry asked, hauling the bag up onto his shoulder.

“Love to.”

She followed Harry down the path that led from the eighteenth green to the impressive clubhouse. The building had been recently redeveloped, the owners keen to get a top tournament on their books and willing to spend the money to make that happen. It was modern and airy and boasted four eating areas, one of which they headed toward once Harry had secured her bag in the trunk of his car.

They’d barely made it to the door when a voice called, “Morgan!”

Morgan spun around, and her mouth dropped open. “Hilton? What the—?”

Hilton Stewart, her manager, stood in the lobby between two of the eating areas, looking as sharp as ever in one of his Armani suits, a wide smile on his ridiculously handsome face. It was such a shame he was very happily married to his wife of twenty years, or Morgan could see herself engineering a meeting between him and Charlie.

“And it’s lovely to see you too,” he said as he walked over, his long legs making the distance in only three strides.

“Well, sorry, but you being here is such a shock. Did I miss an e-mail or something?” She grinned sheepishly as she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

“No,” he said, drawing out the word, which made it sound even more comical with his naturally nasal tone. Anyone else hearing that sound would mistake it for him whining, but she knew better. “Can’t I just drop in to see my favorite client? Perhaps treat her to lunch?” He waved a hand in the direction of the smartest restaurant area.

“Oh.” Her eyes were wide as she turned toward Harry. “I was just about to—”

“No problem.” Harry held up his hands. “You two talk business. I’ll amuse myself until you’re done.”

“Sorry, Harry. And thank you.” Hilton shook his hand. “It is rather important.”

Harry saluted and ambled off to the counter where they dispensed burgers, which made Morgan chuckle. Of course that’s where he would

head. She was jealous—no doubt Hilton would now buy her a lunch that barely covered the plate it was presented on and she'd be craving something more substantial within two hours of eating it.

“Shall we?” Hilton motioned toward the restaurant with his head.

They took a quiet table near a large picture window that overlooked the ornamental gardens and both ordered water to drink.

“So what gives?” she asked after a few sips.

Hilton meshed his fingers together and leaned forward. “Well, I’ve had an interesting proposition that I want to run past you. And I’ll be honest, I’ll be really disappointed if you don’t agree to it.”

Wow, that wasn’t like Hilton. Normally he was much more conciliatory and open. She tried hard not to bristle at the way he’d spoken, but her shoulders tensed. “Okay, what is it?”

“You might have heard about the documentary ESPN commissioned about the women’s game?”

She nodded.

“I got a call yesterday from the producer. She wants to up the ante on how they’re going to approach their story of the majors.” He leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “She wants to make you the feature player. Follow you for the final three this season, have exclusive access to your training and practice, and a couple of sit-down interviews somewhere away from golf. Perhaps at your home.”

Before he’d even finished speaking, Morgan’s shoulders were so tight it was a wonder bones weren’t popping out of their sockets.

“No. Absolutely no!”

He held up a hand. “Wait just a second, please. Think about it. This puts you front and center in the first major documentary about your sport in years. It’ll be broadcast in every country where ESPN has a presence. It will put your name out there in a way that just isn’t happening at the moment.”

“Because I’m not winning majors,” she snapped bitterly. “Is that it?”

He sighed and blinked a couple of times before responding. “I will admit, that is not helping my cause, no.”

“And just what *is* your cause, huh?” Her fists clenched against her thighs.

Hilton gazed at her for a moment. “To get you the best exposure, the best publicity, and most of all, the best sponsorship deals.” He sipped from

his glass. “And by you doing this film, I’ll be able to get the likes of S Pro interested at last.”

S Pro was one of the largest manufacturers of sports goods in the world, right up there with Nike and Adidas. Having them as a sponsor would certainly be a coup.

“No, you won’t.” Morgan’s voice was tight. “Only me winning a major will make that happen.”

He blinked as he looked at her. “You know I met with S Pro two months ago, yes?”

“You said you were going to, but you never really said how it went. I assumed badly precisely because of that silence.”

“Morgan, it is not your lack of major wins that worries S Pro.” He leaned forward again. “I haven’t bothered telling you this before because I’ve been trying to work out the best way to resolve it.” His expression gentled. “The problem they have is how...cold you are.”

Morgan flinched. “Cold?” She hated the catch in her voice.

“Their word, not mine. Your nickname has stuck. Ice. And, rightly or wrongly, no one wants to put money behind a woman who doesn’t want to talk to anyone. Sunday was a case in point—that press conference you gave?” He shook his head. “You gave everyone in that room and watching on TV the impression that you didn’t give a shit about what had just happened. You’d just lost the US Open, but there was no emotion. No fire.” He held up a hand when she made to interrupt. “I know that isn’t you. So does Harry. But that’s the trouble, *no one else does.*” He pressed a hand into the pristine white tablecloth to emphasize the point.

Morgan slumped back in her chair, closing her eyes against the irritation that every one of his words stirred.

“The resolution to that,” he continued, his tone so gentle it caused her to open her eyes and stare at him, “is to do something like this film. Open up. Let other people see what a wonderful person you are.” He paused. “And finally step out of your father’s shadow and be *you.*”

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# THE LONG SHOT

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