

DOGS AND WOMEN ALLOWED

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To Dad

For letting Hackett, Love, Bashit, Rough and Bushrod come to life again.

Although they never really left us now did they?

Just like you, always there somewhere.

Of all the hazards, fear is the worst.

– Sam Snead



CHAPTER 1

‘Righto. Ball washers sorted. Let me see what’s next.’ Peckers Wood’s President Harry Bashit peered over his specs at the other men in the golf club’s main study, taking in what he’d be faced with the coming year. Standing to his left: Ben Chipperfield, the soon to be appointed Golf Club Captain. A handsome, dark skinned, twenty-something oozing confidence, Ben’s hands hung loosely in his trouser pockets. His sharp shaven dark skin was in stark contrast to the bright polo necked shirt under the seemingly casually thrown over jumper, emphasizing the broad square shoulders, pulled backwards. Trying hard to look casually indifferent, but today overdoing it, turning the usual compelling attraction into annoying cock sureness, causing a niggle of foreboding to creep up the President’s spine.

Bashit turned his head slightly, focusing on his Secretary Reggie Rough. Colourless, is what came to mind when zooming in on the pasty blob in front of him. Blond hair, wax like face with the beige sports jacket and slacks blended in. Huddled in one of the floral-patterned chintz chairs, Rough resembled a mound of pale-yellow mashed potato shoved to the far side of an abandoned plate, rejected, with no other destiny than to be scraped onto a heap of leftovers, ready for a passel of vicious hungry pigs to feed on.

Poor chap. Bashit shook his head internally, wishfully thinking the surge of adrenaline caused by the exciting new responsibility might light some fire in his young Secretary's balls. Perhaps he should order his old crony Lieutenant Retired Bushrod to slap these boys into shape, push them around a bit before the season really started. Bashit quickly dismissed the idea, noticing Bushrod theatrically pulling a dog hair from his sleeve, the corners of his fleshy lips pulled down, a look of intense horror in his beady eyes.

Good grief. Bloody drama queen.

The President zeroed in on the task ahead of him, knowing he had built up the tension to an almost unbearable level. But he just couldn't resist prolonging the obvious agony a little longer by slowly feeding the last bit of the apple cake to his dog Percy, wickedly wallowing in the misery his extended intermezzo was causing the others.

But the fun had to end. Time to move on. 'Ben Chipperfield.' His clipped voice whipped through the heavy atmosphere. 'Congratulations. Club Captain it is.'

A collective sigh of relief rippled through the study. Bashit wiped his hand on his crisp linen napkin, and smiled – ever so slightly - before he reached towards his old fountain pen waiting for him on the desk's cracked green leather top. 'When I figure out where to sign this retched thing, that is.'

The two younger men exchanged a quick look. 'It's right-hand side, bottom. Sir,' said Reggie Rough, pointing towards the piece of paper.

'Don't just sit there, Roughie!' Bashit thundered, using the nickname for his Secretary that had stuck with him since boarding school. 'I didn't appoint you to just dangle and hover.'

Roughie stumbled towards him. 'Please allow me to assist you,' he said, turning the page and pointing at the dotted line, the tremble in his voice synchronizing perfectly to his shaking index finger.

‘Right,’ President Bashit grumbled. ‘Good show.’

The fountain pen flowed over the paper while the bold signature appeared, slowly but surely. ‘Fetch my stick, Bushrod,’ the President ordered, making the club’s treasurer stand to attention, ‘so I can stand up while I shake young Chipperfield’s hand.’

Ben stood and grabbed the old palm that was stretched out to him. ‘Thank you very much, President Bashit. I am so proud.’

‘So you should be. Just make certain I won’t regret signing that piece of paper. Make Peckers Wood Golf Club proud by getting that Best Regional Team’s Medal back where it belongs. Here. In our prize cabinet.’ Bashit pointed towards his chest and stabbed it a couple of times before he continued. ‘Charmers was useless during his year, and coming in second was bloody unworthy to our reputation.’ Bashit warmed his hands by the blazing fire, feeling a shiver pulsate through his body. ‘Rather chilly today.’ He looked towards his fellow board members and the newly appointed Club Captain, wiping sweat from their foreheads. ‘Are you alright, boys? You seem flustered.’

‘We’re fine, sir. Just a tad warm in here, that’s all.’ Roughie felt the drops trickling down his tight collar, his neck so bloated from the heat that his tie felt like a noose, making it near impossible to swallow the rising bile, thinking it must be a hundred degrees in the President’s study. ‘Could we have a word about our next meeting now, sir? The one with Mrs Van Dycke and Miss Hackett?’ he asked surreptitiously, now perspiring heavily. ‘It seems a little complicated, the whole issue.’

‘Complicated?’ Bushrod piped. ‘Bloody nuisance you mean.’

The President ignored the Treasurer’s comment, leaned on his walking stick and hobbled towards the window. This side of the room had the best view of the club house, showing the golf club’s first tee at its prime, surrounded by white and mauve

hydrangeas, in full bloom, and the fairway, wide with oak trees all the way up to the elevation of the green. At the moment, this idyllic scene was obscured by that young Hackett girl. As she bent down to tee up her ball, the back of her long slim legs beamed towards him. Her bottom stuck out while she was taking her stance, and under that tight top, her bosom showed itself in her back swing, disappearing in her follow through. Bashit sighed and shook his head. How different from the picture his father would have seen before him.

A deep breath filled his lungs, and he exhaled, forcing himself to remain calm. Looking back at bygone times wasn't the answer, so he might as well be open to this whole palaver. 'What are your thoughts about these ladies playing the course so much lately?'

Roughie mopped his brow again, trying to buy time to find a right response that wouldn't ignite the President's temper into a raging fire. 'Well, can't say I'm overly thrilled by the whole idea.' He paused again slightly, thinking he actually hadn't given it much thought. 'But what choice do we have? It is what it is, nowadays.' As Roughie answered, he realized that he hadn't encountered enough women on the course to actually say anything plausible about it. 'We might as well try and make the best of it?'

The words came out cautiously while he slowly joined the President at the window, halting a good foot behind him. Together they watched Philly Hackett walk towards the green, pick up her ball and set off towards the car park.

'At least we don't allow them in our quarters.' Bushrod snorted. 'Do you know there are clubs where they roam all over the entire club house, by themselves?'

Good Lord. Perish the thought. President Bashit shook his head and turned his eyes to the first fairway again, following the young woman walking back towards the car park. 'How is our candidate Lady Captain, Miss Hackett doing, Chipperfield? I

gather you and her are getting on quite nicely?’ President Bashit suddenly spun round and stared at Ben, who quickly averted his eyes. ‘I heard some rumours about you two being more than friends. Whatever that means this day and age.’

‘Yes, President. That is one item Roughie and I wanted to talk to you about.’ Ben said, guardedly. ‘Sorry you had to hear it on the grapevine.’ The embarrassment briskly disappeared, and the familiar arrogance was back. ‘But please let me point out that my relationship with Miss Hackett will in no way cloud my judgment on the first Lady Captain’s future accomplishments,’ he assured the President, holding his head up high. ‘So, I thought it might be wise to talk about strategy, about what we expect from such a position?’

‘Expect? Strategy? From a woman?’ Bushrod’s voice came up again. ‘Not being a pain in the back side. That’s all as far as I’m concerned.’ A deep grunt escaped his throat. ‘Why should we care about what women are up to? Let them be, for goodness sake. As long as they keep to themselves and don’t bother us with their nonsense.’

‘I agree.’ Bashit’s head bent towards his Secretary, who was back in his usual seat, in his usual slumped position. ‘Any input on that strategy, my dear fellow?’

Roughie felt his cheeks go bright red. Input? He never needed to give strategical input before? And now that the subject was on women, he suddenly was being pushed. The sweat started to gush from his pores again. His mouth opened and closed, not finding the words that should come out to add something constructive.

‘Chipperfield? Any input?’ The President’s chin went up, as if he was trying to mimic Ben’s posture.

Ben wiped the back of his hand over his face. ‘Well, I was hoping to put some goals towards the proposed Lady Captain. To see how she goes?’

‘Good lord.’ Bushrod sat down on the Chesterfield reading chair next to the fire place, his movement causing the old leather

to grunt, like a muffled objection to the heavy weight. ‘You two don’t have clue when it comes to handling women, now do you?’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘Hoping women set and achieve goals is nothing more than delayed disappointment. They’re not capable of forward thinking, you know.’

‘They can’t help it.’ The President’s walking stick pointed towards Ben and Roughie. ‘Their heads and brains are smaller than ours,’ Bashit proclaimed, while thumping the expensive silk carpet with his walking stick. ‘But let me tell you, with females, there is one strategy that never fails. It’s the pretend strategy.’ President Bashit’s voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘Just pretend to listen, pretend to involve, give them something trivial to occupy their minds, pretend it’s something hugely important and then just ignore them.’ A wagging finger came towards Ben. ‘Trust me, it prevents a lot of headaches.’

Roughie parted his lips, longing for the courage to speak, but his voice again didn’t want to come.

‘Anything else, Roughie? I see you are, at least, tempted to utter some words?’ President Bashit sat up and flicked through the notes in front of him, trying not to show his rising impatience and resume the business of continuing the meeting in a professional manner. ‘We will deal with this women matter later this afternoon. As for now, Roughie, do you have something positive to share with us, to end this trivia?’

‘No, sir,’ Roughie whispered, trying to get up from his chair, but stumbling on account of his wobbling knees. ‘I think we’ve cleared everything.’ He steadied himself, holding on to the chair’s back, letting the crisp, dry touch of the chintz cool down his burning hands.

‘We have?’ President Bashit turned his papers. ‘I am quite sure incoming correspondence is on the agenda for today.’ He tapped his index finger on the desk. ‘Yes. Here it is.’ He glanced at the trembling man in front of him, feeling the familiar sense

of rising impatience. God, how he hated sloppiness. If only Roughie would sit down, stop hovering and get on with it.

‘Yes. Of course it is. Very well.’ Roughie swallowed, realizing postponing looming trouble would get him nowhere. ‘I think, we have the thank you letter from the widow Spencer-Downe. She really was touched by the little wreath and kind letter we sent, and she would appreciate it if the credit note for the left-over six-month cost could be sent to her urgently. With the actual reimbursement, of course.’

‘Credit note? Reimbursement?’ Bashit inquired, exchanging a quick look with Bushrod.

‘Yes, what’s that supposed to mean?’, Bushrod asked, obviously flabbergasted. ‘Are you saying we have to pay back his remaining fee? On what grounds?’

‘On the grounds he’s unable to play due to circumstances,’ Roughie explained, feeling extremely uncomfortable. ‘The circumstance being, he’s...’, Roughie voice turned into an embarrassed whisper, ‘...well, you know, deceased.’

‘Yes, I think we do realize the poor man is dead, Roughie.’ President Bashit’s face turned an angry shade of red. ‘Bushrod, did you know about this? Is it in our rules?’

‘I haven’t the foggiest, Bashit. Sorry. Haven’t seen or touched the financial rule book in a hundred years,’ replied Bushrod, clearly mystified. ‘But I will look into it.’

‘Good,’ Bashit said. ‘And please, sometime this century, if it’s not too much bother. If we have to reimburse every member that kicks the bucket before the 31st of December over the coming years we’ll be bankrupt before we know it.’ Bashit glanced at his watch and tapped it. ‘Chop chop, there’s more to cover, and I haven’t all day.’

‘Right.’ Roughie slowly released his grip from the chair’s comfortable steadiness and let himself slide back in his seat, trying to ignore the acid that seemed to be burning a hole in his chest. He pulled an envelope out of his inside pocket, and

the piece of stationary inside appeared slowly, sticking to his trembling fingers as he tried to unfold it. He swallowed, cleared his throat and tried to speak. 'It's a letter,' he squeaked.

'Yes. I can see that,' Bashit sighed. 'I'm not visually challenged, Roughie. Who from?'

'Lavender Thorneybush.'

'God Almighty.' President Bashit slumped again and raised his eyes towards the ceiling. 'Don't tell me the damn woman is complaining again? What's she on about now?'

'She's so frightfully nouveau, that Thorneybush hag,' Bushrod sighed dramatically, 'always flaunting their so-called wealth. Absolutely ghastly. Driving that flashy electric car.' He shook his head and tutted. 'And let's face it, she's nothing more than a plumber's daughter, for heaven's sake.'

'Quite.' Ben agreed, as he stood up and walked towards the window facing the first tee.

'At least he pays her fees on time,' President Bashit added, 'which can't be said of all our dear members.' A hard stare went towards Bushrod, who quickly began inspecting his nails.

'Let's have it then. What's in the letter?' Bashit returned to his chair and watched the twitchy Secretary unfold the paper further, his damp fingers nearly dropping it in front of Percy who was snoozing gently and ignoring all the tension.

'It's a...,' Roughie muttered while wiping the unrelenting torrent from his forehead, '...sort of, well, resignation.' He shook his head, making drops fly off his forehead, narrowly missing Bushrod. 'Miss Thorneybush writes she is resigning from the club. Sir.' He passed the printed e-mail to Bashit, his right hand now shaking uncontrollably.

What in earth was Roughie on about? Bashit snatched the paper towards him and started reading. No-one had ever resigned from this golf club. It must be some kind of mistake, he thought, while his eyes moved from left to right, quickly scanning the document in front of him.

‘Is she giving up the game?’ Bushrod asked, sounding muddled.

‘No.’ Roughie slumped back down in his chair and rubbed his head. ‘She’s leaving Peckers Wood for Goodlie Golf. You know, that new club, up the road.’

The study went absolutely still, the only sound coming from Percy, letting out a hardly audible fart while moving his nose towards his backside and sighing contently. Bushrod started flapping his hands violently, shooting a dark look at President Bashit, who ignored him, looking completely lost. An old-fashioned checkered handkerchief appeared from Roughie’s trouser pocket, and he started mopping his brow, moaning softly.

‘Did you know about Goodlie, Bushrod? Isn’t it more your neck of the woods, where they are?’ Ben asked carefully.

‘I heard rumours,’ Bushrod said, nodding slowly. ‘But I never thought they were serious about developing an actual championship course.’

A loud cackle escaped Bashit. Championship? Goodlie? His large, purple nose crumpled up in disgust while contemplating on the ridiculousness. ‘Bloody nerve they have, calling themselves a golf club at all! I heard they greased the palm of some local politician and got their hands on a couple of acres of farmland. Chased a bulldozer over it, stuck 18 flags in the ground and now announce themselves the region’s best golf experience!’

The President rolled his eyes thinking of the drawings one of his Rotary friends managed to show him of that monstrosity of a club house they were planning to build. Modern architecture they called it. Absolutely abysmal. They must have bribed the whole council to get planning permission. He threw the letter on his desk in an annoyed flick of his wrist.

‘Really? What a naughty thing to do,’ Roughie said carefully, while he pulled a dog biscuit out of his trouser pocket and slowly coached Percy towards him, trying for some postponement so he could compose himself. He glanced back at the printed

e-mail, carefully drew it towards him and read on carefully. 'It says here they will have 18 holes championship, 9 holes par 3, a driving range, pitch & putt course, a special section for lessons, tennis court, a swimming pool and a wellness area.' He put the letter in his lap and stared at Bashit. 'Quite impressive, if I may say so, President.' His last words came out in an embarrassed whisper.

Ben nodded, his dark face looking glum as he addressed the group of men. 'I think we need to take this seriously. What if more members decide Goodlie is the better option?' He turned towards Bushrod, who suddenly resembled a dying fish, his mouth opening and closing again, the colour of his face slowly changing from dark pink to a steely grey.

'I beg your pardon, Chipperfield,' the Treasurer hissed. 'What on earth makes you say that? How could anything be a better option to Peckers Wood?' Bushrod sat up straight, unfolded his knees and pulled his shoulders backwards. 'Complete and utter nonsense, President. There is nothing better than our fine institution. And I say that as a proud board member. We have nothing to worry about. So the Thorneybush woman is leaving? Well, good riddance I say.'

Roughie picked the letter up and squinted. 'Another thing worth mentioning, perhaps. Lav, Miss Thorneybush, will be Goodlie's Lady Captain. It says here she has quite a section already. And that it is a wonderful opportunity for her, one she would never have gotten here.'

'Quite right,' Bushrod exclaimed, his voice more authoritarian than ever. 'Over my dead body. Someone like her? Here? Lady Captain? Not a chance.' He stared at the President. 'Frankly, I'm having second thoughts about that whole, to be quite honest, rather silly Lady Captain initiative. Being a Peckers Wood representative is a humongous task that comes with huge responsibility. Saying I'm not quite certain ladies are up to that is an understatement, if I'm rather frank.'

Bushrod was about to set off in a torrent, but was cut off by a thundering ‘Silence!’ from Bashit who was now standing behind his desk, his hands firmly planted on the leather upholstery. ‘We are running out of time, and I have had enough of this women subject. We will end this meeting now, and we are not reconsidering the position of Lady Captain.’ He paused for a second before speaking again in a whisper. ‘Females are moody creatures, and I do not wish to light a spark under them, thank you very much.’ Another pause followed. ‘Especially in this current brave new world we find ourselves in.’ Bashit resumed in a grave voice. He sat down again, slowly, and inhaled deeply before eyeing the other two men. ‘And I gave my word to Anthony Hackett that I would initiate this and so we will. It’s a minor thing, we won’t be paying too much attention to this whole sheep headed initiative anyway. It will probably have solved itself before the year is over.’

‘Alright, Bashit,’ Bushrod grumbled. ‘But remember... we’ve been perfectly fine for more than two centuries. Our good members won’t be amused if this lady nonsense turns into, heaven forbid, us being forced into...*changes*.’ His voice quivered, whispering the last word.

The President stared at his Treasurer, sighed inwardly and waved towards the door. ‘Let me handle this. Roughie, Chipperfield, the two ladies should be here in 10 minutes. Go and arrange some more refreshments, will you?’

The two older men waited for the heavy panelled door to close behind the two younger ones sent off to sort out the housekeeper Miss Snuggs for some more tea. The President limped to the far back end of the study, followed by the Treasurer and Percy, the lurcher still munching on the treat his master had tossed towards him.

Bushrod picked up a pair of binoculars from the President’s desk. ‘Your dog might think he has something tough to chew on,’ Bushrod said slowly, while pushing away Percy’s head with an irritated shove, pulling the heavy curtain aside and resting

the President's antique binoculars on his nose. 'But what about us? I mean, look at them.'

The Treasurer squinted through the old glass and concentrated on the scene in the car park left of the first fairway. Two identical looking, slightly plump dark haired young women in matching navy trousers and pink pullovers, took brown leather golf bags out of the boot of a battered Jaguar and threw them on two tired looking trolleys. A small, tan and black scrawny terrier with one lopsided ear pulled towards two other women, walking in front of them. Both were thin, one with her black hair pulled backwards in a severe bun, wearing black slacks and a bright red top with matching shoes, their shine showing they were carefully polished; the other one, now bending down, kissing the dog while her bright orange curls cascaded over her face. Starting to stand up straight again, she tossed her pony tail back, facing him, revealing her body. His heart skipped a beat. Her eyes seemed to look right through him as the others also turned in his direction.

'Good Lord. Look.' President Bashit's face crumpled up in disgust. 'Now Wonder Woman shows up.' He snatched the binoculars from Bushrod who grabbed the heavy curtain for support and fell towards his old friend, only just regaining his posture.

Bashit sighed dramatically and aimed towards the car park. What in earth were they up to? Chatter boxing. Trust women to dillydally and waste precious playing time. He put the binoculars down and shook his head. At least young Miss Hackett and her friends seemed to like dogs. He looked down at the large loving droopy eyes that were staring at him.

'No good will come of this, Bashit. They will want things. Have opinions. Things *we* do not want. Opinions *we* do not share. Believe me.' Bushrod released the curtain and staggered back to his chair, the defeated look on his face matching the slump of his usually straight back.

The President joined him, trying to ignore the ominous dread he felt rising in his gut while he thought of Anthony Hackett's letter in his left top drawer.



CHAPTER 2

17th of May, 2022

Dear Harry,

How much I enjoyed our nine holes together. Wonderful to be out on the course again. *Extremely* impressed by your excellent handling of that nifty new fairway wood, must try one myself soon as my long iron shots are the saddest ones imaginable.

My sincere apologies that I again bothered you with my ramblings about Dorothy and the funny spells she has suffered ever since Philly left for university and threatened she might start her career up north. Quite the nightmare it's been, putting up with the wife's never-ending gloom and despair over the last year.

But times have changed for the better, now that my darling daughter decided to move back to the village as soon as she got her degree and started her new position. And, again, as I mentioned before, not only her career opportunities, but also Philly's warm feelings about being able to play a course like Peckers Wood with her dearest friends were of great service to her return. The young ladies seem to regard their time on our fairways and greens as an invaluable part of their happy young existence.

Dear Dorothy has since, thank God, made a remarkable recovery and is back to her chirpy old self. She picked her feather duster up the moment Philly moved into the High Street flat she shares with Prudence Love, and the wife instantly turned the dark hovel our crumbling old cottage was becoming into the lively shack it used to be before our bairn left.

So grateful you grasped I desperately want to hang on to this reappeared cheerfulness and need to cling to every opportunity to keep my daughter near to my other half.

So, my dearest and oldest friend, I am forever in your debt now that you finally agreed to formalize matters and now create this Lady Captain occasion I suggested to you. Knowing my offspring, she will grab this with both hands, get stuck in and will never want to leave Peckers Wood (and thus us) ever again.

Yours sincerely,
your faithful friend Anthony Hackett

P.S. Philly and Dorothy have been yakking about PW needing a Lady Captain for as long as I can remember. Are like Cheshire Cats ever since I told them your plans. The wife's happy, our child is happy, so I'm happy. Thank you so much. You *are* a life saver.

CHAPTER 3

200 yards to the entrance. Please drive slowly.

Philly's hands felt clammy on her steering wheel. She tried to ignore the tingling feeling in her stomach and threw her hair backwards. Tilting her chin upwards somehow made her feel more confident. Her yellow sports car nearly seemed to drive itself, curling into the familiar turns towards her destination. She pushed the back of her head into the neck rest and looked up. The watery yellow blob above her was trying to get some warmth towards her, but was defeated by cumulus clouds blocking the light in the sky, looking like giant cotton balls rolling over a bright blue surface. Her car's engine rumbled, the low roar sounding like a long troubled growl after being pushed to its limits, the ominous sound intensifying the apprehension flowing through her veins.

150 yards to the entrance. Please drive slowly.

Her foot hit the brake, making time for a quick pause at the familiar gap adjacent to the bushes running along the 15th where her father used to hide the car and sneak her in at dawn every Sunday. Philly stopped, closed her eyes for a couple of seconds, trying to ignore the frenzied butterflies

that were now dancing up and down in her gut. She forced her mind back to her childhood, concentrating on just two sounds: the woodpeckers drumming their midday song and the ‘swoosh’ of her clubs. Her eyes opened and became fixed on the mirror, checking her face and reassuring herself she looked okay, before turning back towards the road. The final familiar bend came into view, towards the lane leading up to the gate. The thick may thorn hedge nearly hid the coloured sign post on the left.

100 yards to the entrance, please drive slowly.

The cast iron gate appeared and opened, two ancient oak trees on each side towering over it, their dark branches touching each other in the middle but not obscuring the elegant building at the far end with its distinctive, paired chimneys and large wooden door. Philly shifted gears and maneuvered her car to the far end of the car park. She checked her mobile for time, deciding she could just squeeze in a couple of holes before her friends would arrive.

Her friends.

She stepped out of her car and pulled her gear out of the boot, suddenly feeling sick, as a wave of insecurity flashed through her, unwillingly forcing her to contemplate what could happen if this whole thing went pear shaped.

Her friends would be fucked. She would be fucked.

What if she didn’t make it? What if Bashit just laughed and threw her out? What had they, she, been thinking? Her right hand held on to her golf bag for support, her left hand clutched her stomach, trying to calm it but failing, no matter how she pushed and stroked the strained area above her belly button. She inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled, letting the air out through her mouth, slowly, suddenly noticing her mobile buzzing in her front trouser pocket. She pulled it out and concentrated on what popped up in front of her.

Mum, it said, revealing her mother's smiling face. She tapped, waiting for the message to pop up.

Hi darling

Tiger Woods says your will can move mountains.

Good luck. X Mum.

Her thumb moved over the screen, absorbing the words in front of her. Tiger was right. She walked boldly towards the first tee, as her stomach calmed down, and her will fired up.



CHAPTER 4

Playing a couple of holes had done Philly good, relaxed her a little. Her bag was now safely strapped on her back, as she strolled the shortcut towards the ninth, following the path along the pine trees towards the far end of the car park leading towards the club house. Her eyes followed the familiar roof lines and the mixture of stone, brick and wood in its Georgian symmetry. The roses in front of it were in full bloom, in all sorts of shapes and shades, seemingly smiling at her, reflecting the afternoon's sun like multi-coloured Christmas lights, illuminating the copper plate in front of the heavy door.

Peckers Wood Golf Club

since 1806

Members only

Trespassers will be prosecuted

Her gaze moved towards the reserved parking spaces on the right. Ben Chipperfield's car shined proudly in the middle with its nose nearly touching the gold and green sign saying 'Club Captain Only' in bold curving letters. She quivered slightly with a feeling of lust mixed with pride. The casual flirting and occasional sex between herself and the club's most eligible

bachelor during the last year had turned into something more sustainable with them both agreeing on being exclusive, which suited her more than fine.

Philly pulled her eyes away and peered towards the clock standing alongside the first tee. If Pru and the Bangers arrived on schedule, there would just be enough time to go over the afternoon's big event. She couldn't believe it was actually happening. Her mother had rung her like what seemed a million times over the last week, wishing her luck and telling her over and over how proud she was of her.

Lady Captain. Being of service to the Lady Section. At the prestigious and so stunningly beautiful Peckers Wood Golf Club.

But it wasn't in the bag yet. A short gush of wind caught the flag on the 18th green at the other side of the car park, causing it to flap, its cloth making a ticking sound on the pole. One, two, three, four. Philly counted to the rhythm. One tick for each stroke on each hole. One beat for every pound in her chest.

She shivered for a moment, despite feeling the warmth radiating off the cobble stones beneath her, and turned towards the sound of a car heading her way. Philly had known the two Banger sisters for more than 20 years, since kindergarten. The inseparable pair sat behind the front window of their ancient green Jaguar, both with the usual large grins on their pretty tanned faces. As always, they were accompanied by Maggie, with her little paws resting on the dashboard, her body quivering as Birdie Banger snapped on the blue leash and carefully placed her beside the car.

Philly stepped towards them, bent down to stroke her little friend, her coat's soft touch under her fingertips calming her. Maggie stretched and licked her face, wagging her tail fiercely.

'Good grief, Freckles. That is so horrid.' Philly's best friend Prudence Love suddenly appeared from behind the bushes, calling her by the same nickname she had been using since they

were six years old. ‘Don’t you dare kiss me now.’ She carefully pulled white plugs out of her ears and a finger moved to Maggie. ‘She just cleaned her lady parts with that tongue before she decided to smooch you.’

‘Thanks for that thought, Pru.’ Philly hugged herself, unconsciously, suddenly feeling uneasy, as if the car park’s atmosphere wasn’t quite right somehow. As if something, or someone, was watching her.

‘What’s the matter?’, Pru asked. ‘Nervous?’ She looked at her friend giving an encouraging nod. ‘We do understand. Having you as a Lady Captain is a huge step forward for us. It’s going to be so wonderful.’

‘Nervous? No. I mean, yes, a bit, to be honest.’ Philly shivered again and turned towards the clubhouse. ‘But I just had the uncanny notion someone was looking me over. From up there.’

The four of them now stared towards the window Philly was pointing out, clearly noticing a curtain being pushed quickly towards the middle, trying but failing to block a figure behind it, holding binoculars. Maggie shook herself and started to yap, tugging her leash towards the direction the girls were staring at.

A quick glance was exchanged by the Banger sisters, eyebrows raised.

‘Yuk. A peeping Tom.’ Bogey Banger crumpled her nose. ‘Some old dirty little man.’

‘Oh, my God,’ her sister Birdie guffawed. ‘Getting off on Philly’s backside. Our future Lady Captain, showing off her bottom French kissing Maggie.’ She slapped her sister on her shoulder while they fell onto the bonnet of their car and slid off simultaneously, collapsing in heaps of wheezing giggles.

‘Goodness gracious me. You two. Stop it,’ Pru hissed, sounding embarrassed. ‘Remember where you are.’ She pulled the Banger sisters up and pushed them towards the side of their car, making certain they stayed upwards. ‘Varilla the Gorilla at six o’clock. Pack it in.’ Philly saw Pru indicate towards car park.

‘O super. Is that bitch Thorneybush with her?’ Birdie asked, her giggle suddenly disappeared as she looked over her shoulder, trying not to stare at the stocky figure coming towards them.

‘Nope,’ replied Philly, shaking her head, feeling annoyance creeping up. ‘All by herself now. And what the fuck is she wearing? There must be a million moths huddling in that outfit.’

Varilla Van Dycke’s hand was up in a wave as she came towards them, her thick calves wobbling under her tweed skirt as she picked up speed.

‘Ah, Philomena, Prudence,’ she said, dragging out Philly and Pru’s full names, making them sound ridiculous. ‘Here you are. Good. I wanted a word.’ Varilla turned to the Bangers, who were trying desperately not to laugh but failing. ‘What’s so funny?’ she asked, her small pig-like eyes narrowing.

‘Nothing,’ they replied in unison. Pru shot the sisters a dark look, her brown eyes nearly black with warning. ‘We were just changing our shoes and getting ready to play a few holes, Varilla, that’s all. What is it you wanted to discuss?’

Varilla took a deep breath and pushed her chest out. ‘I think we can safely assume that I will be appointed Lady Captain within a couple of hours, and I thought it a good idea to be bold and daring right from the start. Show Bashit what I am made of.’ She stared at the Bangers who started to wheeze again.

‘Did she say hairing, darling?’ Birdie nudged Bogey, who fell forward laughing, clutching Maggie and trying to muffle her coughing sounds into the little dog’s coat.

‘Hahaha. Bold and hairing. That doesn’t make sense,’ Birdie squeaked, while dropping her face next to her sister’s.

Varilla snorted and turned her attention back to Philly. ‘But as I am all for democratic leadership, I thought I would just brush my idea past you.’

‘Brush!’, the Bangers sisters squeaked together, now sliding off the car again in hopeless uncontrolled laughter.

‘Varilla,’ Philly said, trying to ignore the Bangers while looking down at the short, square figure in front of her, ‘you’re not there yet, now are you? Aren’t you just a little presumptuous?’ She stepped backwards sensing Pru behind her looking furious, her usually pale white face now flushed with red blotches. ‘But, please, enlighten us, knock us for six with your brilliant plan.’

‘Yes. I see.’ Varilla’s chest came forward again. ‘But I want to hear your idea too. Assuming you have one, that is.’ Her voice went up a notch, and she flicked her head back. ‘President Bashit will expect you come up with cutting edge suggestions, during our meeting. If, in the very unlikely event, you will be appointed, he can get a feel for your leadership and creativity.’ A short finger waved at the group. ‘Much needed, for the future Lady Captain.’

Philly and Pru exchanged a nervous glance. ‘Fuck,’ Philly whispered towards Pru. ‘I didn’t prepare for that. Now what?’

‘Be silent,’ Pru whispered back through clenched teeth. ‘Something will come to us.’

‘God I hope so. I feel screwed already.’ Philly suddenly wanted to slap Varilla in the face but composed herself, gesturing towards her friends, making them listen to her adversary, who was clearly enjoying the misery oozing out of Philly’s pores.

Four pairs of eyes focused on Varilla, who took a massive breath. ‘I will demand preferred times for the Ladies Section on Sundays.’ She blurted out. ‘Try and better that! Ha!’ The small eyes were pitch black now, eyeing the other women, one by one, with deep contempt. ‘Imagine us gals. Being able to tee off before lunch, just like the men.’

A long silence followed. Her friends were gawping at Varilla, their mouths wide open. Preferred times? Teeing off with the men? Philly couldn’t believe what she just heard. She tried to catch her breath. ‘You will never pull that off,’ she piped.

‘I will pull it off. I am sure of it. Positive. Deadly positive.’ Varilla tried not to look smug but failed. ‘And when I will,

I will not only step into history as the first Peckers Wood Lady Captain, but as the one that showed the rest how things are done around here.’ She stepped back towards the Philly’s car and crossed her arms in front of her. ‘I am dying to hear your suggestion, Miss Hackkett. Assuming you have one, that is.’

Birdie shot a look at Philly, now looking despairing and took a large stride forward, dramatically clearing her throat. ‘Well, Varilla. To tell the truth, Philly was just asking us how we might feel about finally having a Ladies Room. So we don’t need to change here in the car park, or in the kitchen’s loo.’

‘I was?’, Philly mouthed, exasperated.

‘Yes. You were,’ Birdie mouthed back.

Varilla grabbed her sides and pretended to double up in mock laughter. ‘That is truly hilarious. Bashit, the club, spending money on us? Forget it. Lav and I have asked him a million times.’ She stepped away from the car and pushed her face in front of Philly’s. ‘Can’t wait for his reaction to this, what do you call it, joke? He’ll be quite shocked, realizing that someone clearly as mad as a bag of ferrets is actually competing with me for the Captaincy.’ Varilla pulled away and started walking towards the driving range, leaving a stunned group of women behind her. ‘See you at five sharp, Philly.’ Varilla’s voice rang out over the car park. ‘Can’t wait to see the look on board member’s faces when you share your brilliant plan.’

The gravel under Philly’s feet crunched as she spun round to the Bangers. ‘What the fuck? You bloody nitwits! Do have any idea in what position you have put me? Put us?’ Her hands flew to her face and she groaned. ‘Oh my God. Bashit will go ballistic.’

‘Yes, he probably will,’ Birdie replied with a grin. ‘But when the stupid berk figures out he has no other option as to grant our wishes...’ They balled their fists and started to move them up and down, again crying with laughter, and then moving their hands up to their eyes, pretending to gaze through a binocular.

Pru shook her head in wonder. ‘Goodness gracious. You two are something else.’

Philly started to pace, feeling the nerves that were now seriously causing her stomach to turn. Her hand pressed hard on her abdomen, trying to calm it down. But fireballs were shooting holes in her stomach, as some kind of forewarning for the penetrating bullets from the firing squad she was obviously facing.

‘Don’t you dare get your knickers in a twist now,’ Pru said, grabbing Philly’s shoulders and shaking her friend carefully. ‘You will make a professional appearance at the meeting.’

‘Of course she will,’ Birdie assured her.

The two sisters stepped forward, dragged Philly towards them and gave her a big wet kiss. ‘Good luck, Captain. Knock ‘m dead,’ Bogey whispered. ‘If anyone can pull this off, it’s you.’

‘Just be certain you ask for the Ladies Room, Philly,’ Birdie Banger said, suddenly sounding serious.



CHAPTER 5

The walk from the car park to the club house seemed much shorter than usual. Philly had tried to postpone the agony, but Varilla had leapt past her with an unusual spring in her step. She tried to swallow the bile in her throat, closing her eyes for a moment, getting her thoughts aligned. Why hadn't she seen this coming? Why didn't she think of a plan, a strategy to present during this meeting she had been wanting ever since she was a child? Why, for fuck's sake, had she allowed Varilla to get the better of her?

Because, Miss Hackett, you assumed this opportunity would fly your way by itself with no effort from your part whatsoever. Not good enough, young lady. Not. Good. Enough.

A voice from the past rang through her head, causing her to relive that embarrassing moment in her secondary school's cold office after she came second in the annual debating contest. Being forced to listen to the obvious disappointment, feeling the shame hearing the head mistress tut about. How on earth was she going to tell her parents? Did she realize how disenchanting this would make them feel?

She had never come in second ever again.

And she certainly didn't intend to get beaten by that fat cow today. Or tomorrow. Or any day. Philly squared her shoulders, shook her hair back and stepped forward to catch up with the short woman in front of her.

The main door was open, leaving no time to hover. The two women stepped into the great hall with the large white marble statue of a male golfer in the middle, his club in mid-follow through pointing towards Bashit's den - the club house's beating heart. Varilla's sharp knock on the President's study entrance exuded confidence, making Philly stand up straight as she stepped over the threshold, after hearing Bashit's voice ordering them to enter.

She heard the dark oak door close behind her, sounding ominous, suddenly making her feel like an alien in this dark ancient man cave smelling of smoke, polish and Scotch. She shivered, despite the heat coming from the roaring fire, and tried to pull herself together by zooming in on the tiny holes woodworm had left in the dark panelling next to her.

One, two, three, four. Times two makes eight. Add four make twelve. She added the little dots up slowly, trying to synchronize her crazed heartbeat to her slow counting rhythm. The holes started to swim in front of her eyes, forcing her to focus on the row of black and white photographs showing a very young Bashit caddying for his father while playing with a famous St Andrew's board member.

I will not come second.

'Miss Hackett, Mrs Van Dycke.'

The clear voice snapped Philly back to the present and she turned her attention to the President, his sharp blue eyes were staring right at her. She really just wanted to throw up, preferably over Varilla standing next to her looking annoyingly sure of herself. But it was time to face the music.

President Bashit pulled himself up on his stick and beamed towards the two women. 'Please do sit down,' he said, pointing towards the two dark green club chairs in front of the desk. 'I trust you found your way comfortably here to my quarters?'

Varilla Van Dycke sat down and nodded vigorously. 'Yes, sir. Of course. I took the route you instructed.' She turned towards

Philly. ‘So I could be absolutely positive that I wouldn’t be in anybody’s way, risking members becoming uncomfortable. And I escorted Miss Hackkett, so she wouldn’t get lost.’

The sharp upper-class voice cut through the study, accompanied by a condescending look towards Philly, making the room’s awkward atmosphere even worse. Varilla rearranged herself in the chair, crossed her stocky legs and pulled the ancient tweed skirt over her knees, causing the others to stare at the long black hairs on her legs, stuck upwards under her brown stockings. Philly sneaked a look at Ben, who turned away, his expression giving away he was trying not to giggle.

‘And President Bashit, thank you for this meeting. I am so looking forward to this new chapter,’ Varilla said, while stroking the tweed pattern covering her upper legs. She swallowed, cleared her throat and stared at the baffled looking Bashit opposite her. ‘I would like to take this opportunity to speak by quoting Dwight. D. Eisenhower.’

‘You would, would you?’ Bashit pulled up an eyebrow. ‘Well, Mrs Van Dycke, don’t let us stop you, off you go then.’

‘Thank you, President.’ Varilla smiled and rattled on. ‘He once said, *“without integrity, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office.”*’ She gulped for air and continued. *“Honesty and integrity are two important ingredients which make a good leader. How can you expect your followers to be honest when you lack these qualities yourself?”*’ She blurted out, paused and stared hard at Lieutenant Retired Bushrod. ‘Especially on the golf course. Leadership. So important when being Captain. So important for Peckers Wood, the fine institution I love with all my heart.’ The last word was emphasized by a dramatic flutter of Varilla’s eyelids, her right hand clutched to her chest.

‘Good lord.’ Bashit quickly looked at Bushrod who suddenly dropped his face in a large blue handkerchief and started wheezing, loudly. Ben had turned away and was now busy inspecting the watercolours at the back of the study, clearly too

embarrassed to face the group. Roughie had escaped, mumbling something about having to find Miss Snuggs for more tea and biscuits.

Philly started to feel better, sensing the effect Varilla's drama was causing. Her heartbeat slowed down a little and a flutter of careful excitement crept up her spine.

'Miss Hackkett? Any thoughts from your side?,' Bashit asked, clearly exasperated. 'Tell me, what's our club's appeal to you? Why are you here?'

Philly straightened herself, encouraged by her new found confidence. 'I adore the game, Mr President,' she said, concentrating hard to keep a normal pace to her words. 'And not only the game itself, but everything that comes with it, my friends, the fun we have, the competitiveness, how we learn, become better people by respecting rules and etiquette, and to be able to enjoy the beautiful surroundings. I just can't imagine my life without it, and I wish my good fortune on everyone. And I hope I can contribute in a meaningful way. To be of service to the club's future and its members.' A quick glance went towards Ben, who nodded to encourage her to speak further. 'It would be my wish that as many people as possible can enjoy the benefits of the game and of club life.'

'Well, well, Miss Hackkett. How noble of you. But you do realize most of us had to wait for ages to become members? We still have long waiting lists and harrowing selection procedures. Peckers Wood is a place for the happy few, and many members wish to keep it that way.' A long sigh escaped Bashit. 'Anything else?,' he asked, clearly indicating he had heard enough.

'Well, maybe it's a good idea if we listened to your thoughts first? Before getting ahead of ourselves? Maybe you would like to inform us on the votes?,' Philly suggested, turning her head sideways to Varilla, who tried to dismiss her with a mocking look.

'Yes.' President Bashit pushed his glasses further up his nose. 'Excellent suggestion.' He took a deep breath that seemed to

stay in his chest forever before he began eyeing the notes in front of him and stared at the two women for a few seconds before he began. 'As you know, to become appointed Captain at this club, one needs at least 60% of the votes.' The papers ruffled in his hands. 'And, as far as I know, we've never had to check towards this rule during the Peckers Wood's long history because the vote for Captain has, as it should be, always been unanimous.'

'Hear, hear,' Varilla said, flashing her long teeth at everyone.

'That is...,' Bashit's words came out slowly with the emphasis on the last word, dragging it out, '...up till now. Alas your section, all the seven ladies we have on our membership list, didn't seem able to come together on the subject. The fact of the matter is, that you, Mrs Van Dycke, managed to get one vote in your favour.'

'What?,' Varilla gasped and jumped up, making Percy crawl under the desk and shiver. 'This can't be right.' Her face turned from bright pink to deep purple. 'I demand an explanation!'

Bashit ignored her outburst and addressed Philly, who was trying to remain calm and not leap up and cheer. 'And Miss Hackkett, you, got four.'

'What a bloody sham. You need to call for a recount!' Varilla was now sobbing, her head in her hands.

Bashit pressed on, unresponsive to Varilla's tantrum. 'Your one vote, apparently came from Miss Thorneybush, which I will now declare invalid,' the President said with his voice becoming louder with each word, 'because she felt the need to bugger off to ghastly Goodlie!' He shouted the last two words, causing the group to jump and cringe at the same time.

Bashit gave Varilla a hard stare during which she sat up carefully. 'Well, Ladies. The rules are explicit. Miss Hackkett. Congratulations on your new position. Lady Captain.'

Bashit stretched his right arm out, waited for Philly to stand up and reach towards him. He shook her hand while his bright blue eyes bore into hers. The silence that followed was

overwhelming. No-one dared to speak, even Percy remained motionless. Breaking the tension, Bashit pulled back and waved a finger in the air. ‘But, Mrs Van Dycke. Life isn’t over. As your friend Eisenhower used to say, “for every obstacle there is a solution. Persistence is the key! The biggest mistake is giving up!”’

His mischievous grin at the end of his speech made Philly smile, despite the flutters that were building up in her stomach again. ‘Hear, hear,’ she quietly concurred while sitting down.

‘I do understand this isn’t what you were hoping for, Mrs Van Dycke. But you have a second shot, you know. For next year.’ Bashit pulled himself up, wobbled a little, found his balance and moved towards the other end of his desk, leaned on the side and bent over slightly. He crossed his arms over his chest, closed his eyes, as if deep in thought, opened them again and glared at Varilla, before deliberately turning to Philly. ‘This is a major responsibility, for any representative of this wonderful institution. Empathy, sportsmanship, management skills, profound financial insight, excellent social skills. Being a true ambassador for Peckers Wood. With its future in mind. Club before self. Those sorts of things.’ Bashit opened his eyes. ‘Even for the women. Are you with me, Miss Hackkett?’

Philly nodded, attempting to look in charge, trying to take it all in. Was this really happening? Was she really on the verge of becoming Peckers Wood’s first Lady Captain? ‘Absolutely, President Bashit,’ she said clearly. ‘I am deeply honoured.’ Hearing herself speaking here, in this room with its history, she nearly burst with pride.

‘Good.’ Bashit pointed towards Ben. ‘Chipperfield. Please read the Club Captain’s responsibilities out loud. So we all understand what we await concerning your position.’

Ben pulled his mobile from his pocket, tapped, scrolled, cleared his voice and eloquently stated the outlines about what was expected of him in terms of leading and organizing events,

ensuring safe and enjoyable play, upholding rules, etiquette and traditions, being Peckers Wood's public face, chairing committee meetings, organizing prize givings, club occasions, providing the board with reports and be the playing Captain to the premier men's scratch league team.

'Well put. Thank you.' Bashit paused dramatically and addressed Philly. 'I have the fullest confidence that young Chipperfield will have everything under control. So you, Miss Hackkett, can concentrate on keeping your Lady section, containing all six lady members, on the straight and narrow.'

'Hear, hear,' Ben said, giving Philly a reassuring nod.

'But, before I end this meeting,' Bashit continued in a somewhat friendlier tone. 'I am sure you both had some kind of request or topic for coming year you wanted to share with us? Something special for the ladies? Like a new mat, for the driving range? A pink one, perhaps?' Bashit added a little wink to let Philly know he was quite aware of the female colour preferences.

Philly stared at him, not knowing how to react, other than nodding slowly. Had she understood correctly, had Bashit really said what he said? Her mouth started to fall open, ready for her to retort, but she controlled herself, seeing Ben shake his head ever so slightly.

'Good.' Bashit pointed at Varilla. 'As the result of this meeting might have come as a disappointment for Mrs Van Dycke, I will do my best to make the grapes a little less sour by making certain both your requests are met.' Bashit's smile nearly looked genuine. 'What can I do for you both, Mrs Van Dycke, Miss Hackkett?,' he asked in his sweetest voice.

CHAPTER 6

Her armpits were starting to get moist, and her mouth felt as if she was trying to suck water from a spoonful of dust. Witnessing Varilla making an utter fool of herself caused Philly to want to crawl under the President's desk and hide forever with vicarious shame. Why did the stupid woman go on about these damn starting times? Didn't she pick up on the throbbing veins in Bashit's neck and the froth that was starting to build up in the corners of his grey lips? Or the way the piercing eyes were narrowing with every argument Varilla added to make her case?

'Well?,' Varilla asked defiantly, 'when can we start Sunday mornings?'

Oh my God, Philly thought, watching Bashit inhale and stare at Ben, who intervened quickly, obviously sensing looming disaster.

'Varilla, we will have to discuss it with our starting times committee,' Ben said sternly. 'That's how it works.'

'Okay. Fine.' Varilla slumped back in her chair and sulked. 'But I won't be fobbed off, you know. I will be on your case right after the meeting. Don't you forget it.'

Bashit's eyes spread wide open revealing his emotion of utter contempt, and Bushrod looked as if he were about to combust.

‘What about our Lady Captain. Any request?’ Ben asked carefully, turning to Philly, obviously wanting to quickly steer the attention away from Varilla.

Philly tried to collect herself while her thoughts raced to her friends, probably now waiting for her in the car park, eager to find out what triumph she had come up with. She just couldn’t disappoint them. ‘I would like a proper Ladies Room,’ she blurted out, noticing her armpits getting sweatier by the second. ‘So we don’t need to change in the car park, can retreat after our game and not bother Miss Snuggs in the kitchen every time we need the loo.’

A death-like silence enveloped the room, followed by a thundering stumping noise.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Bushrod suddenly was on his feet, charging towards her. ‘Kitchen not good enough for you? Retreat after a game?’ he thundered. ‘Whatever next? Lounging on the men’s bar’s terrace, sipping a cognac? Smoking one of our cigars?’ He shook his head in despair and sat down, shaking his head. ‘Bloody nerve.’

Ben and Roughie exchanged a quick glance and looked away, obvious embarrassment oozing from their faces. Varilla’s expression had turned from grumpy to horrified. Her hand was over her mouth, her body still, as if frozen in shock.

Purple blotches had raced up Philly’s neck, now creeping up to her cheeks, making her face burn. She turned to Ben for support, but he was facing the floor, hands behind his back. Her eyes were drawn to President Bashit, noticing him grab his stick and slowly rise, looking demented, inhaling sharply through his blue veined nose before clearly stating the meeting was over and that he would come back with his reaction in his own time. That the ladies were dismissed, ordering Roughie to show them out with an annoyed flick of his wrist and at the same time shooting a warning look at his Treasurer.

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The thick carpets in the hallways were like springs under Philly's feet, so eager she was to escape the club house and its awkwardness. She jumped over the entrance's threshold and banged the door behind her, pausing for a second under the rose arch to breathe in some fresh air, noticing Varilla slipping out after her, not acknowledging her presence, evidently longing solitude and not wanting further embarrassment. Philly's hands covered her face. Ben hadn't even congratulated her. And she thought he would be so proud of her. Philly sighed, feeling a niggle of disappointment. But in all fairness, the study exploded before he had the chance. As expected.

God, she should have known better, she told herself, letting a low groan escape her. 'What on earth are we going to do?,' she whispered while shaking her head slowly. She hadn't even started and already made things worse.

A familiar sound of yakking came towards her. Maggie. Philly opened her eyes and watched her friends hopscotching down the path, following the little dog running in front of them. Pru reached her first and congratulated her with a peck on her head. Bogey stepped towards Philly and hugged her, her soft body and strong arms oozing comfort. 'Amazing job. Captain!'

Philly nodded carefully. 'Not quite certain how this meeting went though.' She stared at her feet. 'Not entirely sure I nailed the Ladies Room request. Bashit and Bushrod weren't overly enthusiastic about the idea.' She giggled, letting the nervous tension out. 'And Varilla's preferred times bummed as well.'

'Serves her right. Very silly idea from the start,' Bogey said.

'Never mind the Ladies Room. That will sort itself out,' Birdie added, putting her arms around the two of them and squeezing them tighter together. 'Philly? Go and see your Mum and Dad. Make them both prouder than proud, drive home, let beautiful Ben congratulate you with a good old bonk and all will be bright and beautiful tomorrow.'

Philly nodded slowly, taking her friend's advice in, trying to calm down. 'Where are you off to?', she asked, watching the Bangers getting ready to leave.

'Nipping by our utterly yummy Caddy Master to pick up some new balls,' Birdie replied with a mischievous grin on her face.

'Ow. Splendid. Always worth the trouble,' Philly smiled. 'Lucky you. And then what?'

'Home,' Bogey said. 'We need to catch up on some emails, and Maggie has a backlog on her socials, her followers are so impatient.' She raised her eyes. 'And we're going to sell Granny's old coin collection online. Decided to swap them for cryptocurrency. Coins aren't any good to us. Can't buy anything with them.' She shook her head. 'And Granny loved doing cryptograms.'

'Yes,' Birdie nodded. 'Definitely.'

'My goodness. Poor Granny.' Pru shook her head in wonder and gave Philly a questioning look, who returned the same expression, fighting a giggle bubbling up from her stomach. As if Granny Banger didn't leave those two with enough dosh already.

'Right. I'm off to Mum and Dad,' Philly said, rummaging for her car keys. 'What about you, any plans? Want to join me?,' she asked Pru.

'No thanks, I need a run.' Pru looked away and twisted her earplugs in. 'To let some steam off. See you when I see you.' She glanced at the Bangers, turned on her heel and ran towards the car park.

The tight winding road from the club to her parents forced her to go slow, navigating the turns and making sure her brake was under her foot. Philly leaned into the neck rest, trying to relive the afternoon, the thought of the maniacal Bushrod and the probably consequential laughter in the men's bar made her

heart race, pumping blood towards her head, building up hot flashes that flew to her cheeks.

Her hands gripped the wheel, and the car turned to the side of her parent's cottage. The sight of the medieval facade instantly relaxed her muscles and dropped her heart rate to a normal level. She stepped out of her car, walked to the iron fence with the tired piece of string that had been there forever, and followed the path towards the French doors at the back of the cottage facing the back of the garden, with the putting green in full view.

She held back for a moment, enjoying the fuzzy feeling the scenery gave her. That lovely patch of grass where she and her father had spent hours and hours, perfecting grips, distance and ball speed. Where she had invited her friends to come over and play. Where they had long conversations while her father had challenged them on so many levels.

That seemingly endless, carefree life. Without her self-inflicted heavy work schedule, eager to be the best business controller her boss could ever have.

Philly snapped back to the present, tripping over an uneven flagstone, making her pause just long enough to give her a few moments to take in the flower beds which oozed of her mother's odd touch in gardening. The poppies and corn flowers in the unkempt border, kept smiling at her through the wafer-thin petals. Fat, hairy bumble bees were flying from one flower to the other, giving off their soothing buzzing sound. The smell of honey, nearly tangible, again took her back to the days when Mum let her pick the wild flowers and arrange them in one of the many vases that she kept in the pottery shed. Where she could watch her grandfather and Dad have a putting match on the green. Where she had tried Dad's new putter. Where she had felt the thrill of the best feeling in the whole wide world for the first time.

She smiled to herself despite the afternoon's shame rising again in her stomach and walked towards the kitchen window.

She stopped in front of it, seeing her parents together. Rays of early evening sun had re-appeared, filtering through the dense foliage and into the kitchen, seeming to illuminate the faded coppery grey on her father's head, nearly making it look like it did when she was a little girl. Bright fiery orange it once was, with specks of gold, like her own, but now it seemed faded, even in this light.

As her father bent his head towards his plate, Philly could clearly make out the last auburn-coloured strands between the grey, falling forward as his head moved along to the movement of his right fingertip, slowly sliding through the leftover gravy on his plate.

She turned her attention to her mother standing behind the kitchen sink and nodding towards her father. He was clearly concentrating on something in front of him, causing her mother to smile and toss the dishcloth she had been using towards the range. Her eyes went soft, as she cocked her head and stepped towards her husband. Carefully, she touched his left cheek and bent over his shoulder, her right cheek now very slowly moving towards her husband's left temple, her right hand cupping his right shoulder, squeezing it gently. The greying copper head moved under her mother's touch.

Philly watched, seeing the tip of her father's finger having now left the plate, covered with congealed, glistening gravy and sticky tomato ketchup. He pointed it towards Sniggles, their dog, who licked it gratefully.

That familiar fingertip. The one that used to push Philly's curls behind her ear when she snoozed against her father while watching telly, the one that waved at her when being told off for doing something stupid or pointed at her mother before tipping his lips with it, when the two of them, father and daughter, shared something private. Their special secrets about their clandestine outings, like squeezing through the rhododendron bushes at Peckers Wood and unseen by anyone