

Something Cool From Red Hot Chapter One

I share my ball's flight
As it lifts off from the tee,
First only in my mind's eye,
Then I look up to see:
Have I earned the right,
Gained the expertise
To make this shot at life
What it was meant to be?

Jim Monroe's town car passed between the stone gateposts of Running Brook Country Club and came under the canopy of live oaks that lined the curving driveway. Dappled light and shadow played over the tawny road, paved with the same bricks used to build the clubhouse whose golden facade and red-tile roof only now came into view. The drive opened onto the members' lot, three acres of flagstones, which had been cleared from the fairways and mined from the old quarry on fifteen. On spring Saturdays like this one, the lot was nearly full of late-model luxury cars, mostly leased and mostly imported. Jim Monroe didn't mind that his eight-year-old Lincoln was a dull gray box amid aerodynamic teardrops of pearl, jade and gold. He was looking forward to playing golf with an old friend and client at the best course in Milam, Texas. He had grown up, a printer's son, in the Round Lake subdivision, and now he was president of his own advertising agency. The sight of Running Brook's hacienda-style clubhouse reminded him of just how far he had come.

Jerry Kaminski was already standing at the pro shop counter, stretching a new glove onto his gigantic hand. Jerry was Operations VP for the Red Hot Grill, Monroe Advertising's largest account. Jerry was a tall, red-faced man whose girth suggested he regularly sampled every unhealthy item on the Red Hot menu. Unconscious of his flabby neck, he occupied the small room with the cocky stance of a former athlete, and he nodded down at Jim without seeming glad to see him. Jerry flexed his hand to loosen the glove's elastic fingers, and then lifted a plastic drinking glass to sip a thick, red liquid. Tomato juice? No, it had to be a Bloody Mary.

"Starting a little early, Jerry?" Jim asked. He didn't have to check his watch. It was barely eight o'clock.

"Just a little drink to help me relax," Jerry winked, and ate half a kolache in a single bite. As Jerry chewed, his freckles stretched across his cheekbones. "You know how I slice when I play too aggressive, Jimbo."

"Hey, please don't call me Jimbo," Jim reminded Jerry for the hundredth time.

"Sorry, Jimbo. I mean Jim," Jerry chuckled like a growling dog, and Jim wondered why he was trying so hard to goad him. "At the end of the day," Jerry concluded, "I'll be calling you 'loser'."

"Come on, Jerry," Jim sighed. "Let's load our bags in a cart," Jim said. Determined not to let anything spoil their day, he waved Jerry to the terrace. "I'll let Jack know we're here."

Jack O'Hanion had been head pro at Running Brook until Parkinson's disease robbed him of the most natural swing Jim Monroe had ever seen. Now Jack ran the clubhouse on weekends so other men could play the game he loved more than anything.

"Hello, Jack," Jim said and when he touched the older man's shoulder, it twitched. Jack was six-foot-three and powerfully built, and as he turned, his elbow jabbed Jim's ribs with surprising sharpness. Jim stepped back, wincing with pain.

Jack's face was creased with wrinkles, but his hair was thick and dyed jet-black. "Excuse me. You caught me off guard," Jack grunted and forced a smile, but when he recognized Jim, it faded quickly.

"We're here for our twosome," Jim whispered hoarsely and rubbed the aching bruise on his chest. Recovering his voice, he added, "Would you have one of the kids put a cooler in the cart? Light beer and diet Cokes would be fine."

"Excuse me, Mr. Monroe," Jack said. He cradled his arm across his stomach to control a tremor, and a frown deepened his wrinkles. "I want to show you something. Take just a second. Could you come into my office?"

Jack's narrow office doubled as the stock room for the pro shop. It smelled of fresh plastic. On two walls, metal shelves held bright packages of golf balls, shirts, caps and gloves. An autographed photo of Jack Nicklaus hung on the wall behind a Mediterranean-style desk where a single piece of paper lay centered on the green blotter. As Jack focused on the paper, Jim understood that it was his account statement from the club, three months overdue.

"I hate to bring this up when you're entertaining a client," Jack hesitated and rubbed his forehead with the back of his twisted hand, "but you're behind twelve hundred dollars on your account."

"There must be a mix-up here, Jack," Jim grinned sheepishly and hoped the old guy wouldn't notice how badly he was blushing. "A bureaucratic mix-up," Jim rambled on. "I'll talk to Betty, my bookkeeper. I'm sure I approved the invoice two or three check runs ago."

"I don't know about your accounting system, but Guffy told me not to let you play unless you settle your bill. And a twosome, no less," Jack shook his head at Jim's serious breach of golf etiquette. "We're jammed for tee times and you always insist on playing a twosome."

"That puts me in a real pinch, doesn't it, Jack?" Jim pleaded. "I've been a member in good standing for twelve years and... Your boss would turn me away? ... With a client, for chrissakes?"

"Hey, I never said I wouldn't let you play," Jack reassured him, but twisted his mouth uneasily. "Still, if Guffy sees you racking up more charges..."

"Are you worried about a six-pack of beer and a few Cokes?" Jim tried to sound indignant enough to hold his ground, but flexible enough to keep Jack from getting angry. "Do you want a credit card?"

"For the out of pocket expenses, anyway," Jack shrugged and nodded sympathetically. Then his arm twitched again, and he paused for a second until the tremor subsided. "Your client friend. What's his name? Kandinsky?"

"Kaminski."

"Not a member."

"My guest."

"He just bought two driving gloves at thirty-five dollars apiece."

"High roller."

"Charged 'em to your account," Jack said.

"He what?" Jim snapped, as if Jerry himself had just stomped on his toe.

"He charged them—"

"Thanks, Jack. I heard you."

A couple of golf gloves? That's a small investment for a client, he told himself. But his heart raced irrationally. Jack moved toward the door, calling an end to the compulsory interview, and Jim took a deep breath to regain his composure.

Light poured in from the fairway, making the pro shop glow a surrealistic green. As his eyes adjusted to the brightness, Jim decided to give Jack his Amex card. His Visa and MasterCard were close to their limits already, and he didn't want to be embarrassed again. "Go ahead and put the drinks and the gloves on here, Jack," he asserted cheerfully, as he handed him the gold card. "We don't want Guffy breathing down our necks."

"Believe me, Jim, he'll cut you off if you don't settle up this week."

There was no point in worrying about the money for Guffy now. Having evaded Jack and the Running Brook authorities, Jim hoped he wouldn't lose too much on his game with Jerry Kaminski. He only had \$150 in his pocket, barely enough to cover their usual betting scheme.

When Jim made it to the starter's terrace, Jerry was already sitting in the golf cart, testing his grip on a beer can.

"Nice glove," Jim smiled and waited a full ten seconds for Jerry to answer.

"Well, you only live once. Might as well fly first class," Jerry said at last and held up the long narrow box that contained the other glove. "I got you one, too, Pardner. How could I forget my host?"

"I hope you got me a medium," Jim grumbled and tried to remain calm. "Not a goddamn triple extra large like yours."

"I know your size, Little Big Guy. My hands were that big when I was twelve years old. And look what else I found." He held up two sleeves of Titlelist balls. "In case we lose a few. What took you so long in there?"

"Jack's an old pro here. He was telling me the story of his two holes in one at the 1968 members tournament, when he shot the 59 that still holds the club record. That's five strokes better than Nicklaus shot when he played here."

"Must be torture for him," Jerry said, slurped his beer and shook his head with empathy, "watching all us duffers play when he could've been another frickin' Jack Nicklaus."

Jim's wife Mary Ellen thought Jerry was crude and overbearing, so she refused to be around him. But he could see Jerry's strengths. He was a client, after all. And just when you concluded that he was a complete jerk, Jerry would say something disarmingly sympathetic. And to give credit where it was due, Jerry had sold the Red Hot management team on Jim's latest ad campaign, which featured man-on-the-street interviews with people leaving the restaurants. "You could be our next satisfied customer," the announcer declared, promising fifteen seconds of fame to diners who praised the food. When Jim presented the idea, Red Hot's management thought it was corny, but Jerry convinced them to try it, and the campaign increased their sales by over thirty percent.

"Same bet as usual?" Jerry proposed as Jim steered the cart to the first tee.

"Why not?" Jim replied on reflex. They usually bet five dollars a hole on the front nine and ten dollars a hole on the back nine, plus twenty-five dollars for the round. Theoretically, the most Jim could lose was \$160. But if the game was close, or the score was lopsided for either player, the side bets could accumulate and a round could wind up costing him five hundred dollars.

But this would be a small price to pay to keep Jerry happy. Jim's agency needed Red Hot's million dollars in media billing that was sure to at least double when the restaurant chain expanded to the Dallas – Fort Worth metroplex next year. As he steered the cart, Jim guessed it

was a good time to mention the new campaign he, Ivan and Nancy had been developing. “We’ve got some new ideas for you, Jerry. We think they’re really exciting. A whole new direction.”

“We don’t need a new direction,” Jerry chuckled. “We know exactly where we’re going.”

“Sometimes change is good,” Jim suggested. “It creates excitement.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jerry said, but Jim knew he didn’t mean it. Jerry wanted to concentrate on playing golf.

When they rolled up to the first tee box, a foursome of women had gathered at the red tees to begin their round. A short, blond woman in white shorts and spiked shoes that looked too big for her teed off while the others waited. She chopped at the ball as if she were cutting weeds, and it dribbled out onto the fairway, barely traveling a hundred yards.

“Look at that!” Jerry grumbled. “When did they start letting women play on Saturdays? We’ll be here all day!”

Then a tall redhead in lavender madras shorts and a pink visor stepped up, teed her ball, then made a few practice swings with her driver. Jim could tell she was a natural player. Although he didn’t think he’d ever seen this woman before, he recognized her relaxed, confident movements, and the playful grin she gave her friends as she nodded down the fairway. Jim felt he had met her somewhere.

“Watch this gal,” Jim told Jerry. “I bet she can really hit.”

The woman’s swing was fluid and swift, and her drive flew high and straight for two hundred yards, stopping just before the rough at the turn in the dogleg. Her three friends cheered, applauded, and then the group climbed into their two carts and meandered off to find their scattered golf balls.

“See what I mean,” Jim said, wondering where he might have met this woman before. “She knows how to play!”

“If that’s what you call it!” Jerry complained and stepped from the cart to the grass beside the white tee markers, where he swung his driver repeatedly. In the morning light the pattern on his golf shirt looked like the scales on a fish, and his plaid pants reminded Jim of a tablecloth at a country diner.

“Go ahead, Wordsmith. Take the initiative,” Jerry said and tugged at the wide brim of his straw fedora. “Try and take my money.”

Jim didn’t mind setting the pace for the game, but he had to wait a few minutes for the women to take their second shots and clear the fairway. The delay seemed like a good opportunity to tell Jerry more about the new campaign. “We call it Something Cool from Red Hot,” Jim said. “A complete new menu of lighter, healthier selections. Perfect for fitness-conscious young couples and their kids.”

“And I suppose you’ve researched this idea?” Jerry grumbled.

“Jerry, you know me. I research every idea.”

“Well, our research says that bullshit will work in California, but not here.”

“Believe it or not, Jerry, fitness is a national obsession.”

“And so is golf. It looks all clear to me,” he said and pointed his club toward the open fairway. “Go ahead and hit, will ya?”

When he’d made sure the women had played through, Jim bent down to tee the ball, and he remembered his father’s advice: relax, don’t look up, follow through. With those three points in mind, he hit a high, straight drive, a hundred and eighty yards, to line up with the turn in the dogleg. Ed Monroe had worked part time at the driving range on Jack Rabbit Road, where he had coached Jim early on Saturday mornings before the customers (members at Running Brook

and Live Oak and Loblolly) arrived for practice. His dad could drive the ball as straight as a string, but he could only afford to play infrequently on public courses. And now he was dying of cancer.

“That will do,” Jim said as he saw the white speck of his ball come to rest on the rise in the fairway. “I’ll keep that one.”

“Okay for beginners,” Jerry said as he flexed his new glove and planted his feet in a wide stance beside his ball. “But that little redhead hit it farther than you did!” Jerry went into his backswing then uncorked a colossal drive that rose into the air and soared over the trees, across the dogleg toward the green. Jim had to admit it was a beautiful sight, but when their cart reached Jim’s ball, they could see the white pinpoint of Jerry’s ball in the center of the sand trap in front of the green. There was a shoulder-high ridge guarding the hole, and Jerry was a weak player with his wedge.

“Nice drive, Jerry,” Jim sighed with relief. “You missed the green by ten feet.”

“Go ahead. Play your shot, Jimbo,” Jerry grumbled. “I’ve only begun to fight.”

One hundred and forty yards from the hole, Jim played a nine iron. With a relaxed swing he hit a high, straight shot that bounced onto the green and came to rest within twenty feet of the pin. A conservative game usually paid off, Jim thought, especially when you aren’t strong enough to knock the ball over the trees. There was a time when he believed he was talented enough to do anything in advertising, but accounts were slipping through his fingers like sand: first Korkey’s department stores, then Adventure Kayaks, and Southwest Furniture.

Aside from Red Hot Grill, the agency only had two sizable accounts left. Cactus Flower Jewelers ran bursts of ads before sentimental holidays, which meant good media commissions, but its owner, Mitch McCloud, squandered his cash on get-rich-quick schemes and overweight girlfriends, so he always paid the agency late. The Goliad Savings account would have been steady if it weren’t for persistent rumors that Goliad was about to be bought by a giant bank from out of state. And the only new prospect on the horizon was the Alamo HMO account, which would be pitched by four other agencies. Looking at Jim’s dwindling business, his accountant and lawyer, Ken Goodman, had convinced him to sell the agency. After twelve years as his own boss, he would probably have to work for someone else.

As Jim expected, Jerry’s first shot from the sand trap was too hard and too high. After rising into the air, it skipped on the edge of the green and dribbled down the incline on the far side. Jerry made a respectable chip shot next and got onto the green, but the ball rolled quickly past the hole and left him with a forty-foot putt.

Jim’s 20-foot attempt flirted with the edge of the cup but didn’t fall. He tapped for par from a foot away. Jerry suffered the embarrassment of three-putting, winding up with a double-bogey after such a long drive.

“I’m my own worst enemy!” Jerry bellowed in frustration, and the barrel around his midsection quaked with unhappy laughter. “You didn’t win that hole, I gave it away! It’s pitiful!”

Pitiful or not, Jerry pulled his money clip from his plaid pants, extracted a five dollar bill, and thrust it into Jim’s face, almost knocking off his prescription sunglasses.

“Don’t lose my money, Spin Doctor,” Jerry winked. “I’ll get it back next hole.”

“Keep the fiver this time, Jerry,” Jim said. “I need a favor.”

“What’s that?”

“I was hoping I could use you for a reference with Alamo HMO. We’re pitching their account.”

“That’s surprising. I thought you only went after discount jewelry stores and pawn shops,” Jerry laughed.

“I go after every account that’s available, Jerry. Milam isn’t a very big town. Can I use you as a reference?”

“Sure.”

“And what will you tell them?”

“That you guys have been my agency for five years and you never intentionally screwed me.”

“What about all our great work?”

“Oh, yeah, that too,” Jerry shrugged and held the five dollar bill out to Jim. “A bet’s a bet,” he said. “Take it now. I’ll win it back.”

The front nine, however, belonged to Jim Monroe. With steady, methodical play, he won seven out of nine holes, despite Jerry’s impressive drives.

As he outplayed his client, Jim considered muffing a few shots for customer relations, but he kept thinking of his father. He could see his dad in his ink-stained khakis, Army surplus sweatshirt and discount store spikes, setting his stance at the driving range, bending his knees, sitting back on his narrow hips, then swinging quick and smooth to drive the ball high and straight to the 250-yard marker as easily as casting a line into the water.

On the ninth hole, Jim made a chip shot that bounced off the pin and made it ring like a bell. The sound reminded him of the wind chimes on his mother’s back porch. She had phoned him the night before, sounding frantic. No, his father wasn’t having another crisis. She wanted to invite his family over to Sunday dinner. And maybe, she wondered, maybe Jim could convince his brother Bill to join them, too. Bill hadn’t seen their parents in two months. Strange behavior for most Presbyterian ministers, but this was par for the course for Bill.

After Jim collected Jerry’s money on the ninth green, he was ahead by \$30, but it would be hard to keep such a narrow lead with the higher bets on the back nine, and he had a vague feeling of dread. He felt he had already used up his best shots for the day.

He steered the cart onto the flagstone path to the fairway window at the pro shop so he could buy another six-pack of beer and use the men’s room. Like a defensive end at half time, Jerry hobbled into the locker room on noisy spikes. Jim nestled the beer into the cooler of ice, taking enough time so he wouldn’t have to stand next to Jerry at the urinal. In a minute, as Jerry waited in the cart, Jim splashed water on his face, looked at his sunburned ears and bald head in the mirror, and quickly replaced his hat. In the hall outside the locker rooms, he brushed past a young woman in a tennis dress. Her long tan legs were lovely, her neck was fresh and smooth, and her brown hair was held up in an elaborate braid. She looked like a model or an actress. Now why wasn’t he spending the morning with her? This girl reminded Jim of someone, too, and he blushed when he realized that she was Tiffany, one of his daughter’s friends from high school.

“Hi, Mr. Monroe,” she called to him as he stumbled back to his cart.

“Good morning, Tiffany,” he said brightly, in the singsong voice he had used when he’d coached their third-grade softball team. Caroline was smarter and more outgoing, but Tiffany was more popular, and clearly the leader of their group. Her beauty made the other girls feel insecure. Sure, life can be unfair sometimes, Jim had assured his daughter, but capable people like you always succeed in the end.

On the cart, Jerry was already drinking another beer. “Let’s play some golf!” Jerry growled happily and grinned toward Tiffany as she walked to her car. “Nice looking girl, huh?”

Looks like a flight attendant I met once. We were stuck in a snowstorm at the Minneapolis airport. I had her convinced I played for the Green Bay Packers. We shared the last available room at the airport Hilton. I bonked her. Standing up. In the shower. A week later I tried to do that with my wife, and I threw my back out.”

“That girl’s seventeen years old,” Jim scolded him.

“If she’s old enough to drive,” Jerry winked, “she’s old enough to bonk.”

When they reached the tenth tee, the tall redhead was getting ready to drive. Jim liked looking at her. He guessed she was around forty, and although she was flushed, and traces of perspiration showed through her white sleeveless T-shirt, Jim could tell she had plenty of energy left. She bent her knees as she lined up her clubface to the ball, her back swing was smooth, and her quick swing launched another textbook drive. When she smiled in satisfaction, Jim understood why she fascinated him. She could have been Mavis Wilcox come back from the grave. His dad had given Mavis golf lessons, and they were lovers, but Jim hadn’t guessed it at the time. He could just see that his father had more fun with Mavis than he’d ever had with Jim’s mom. And Mavis was the first woman who’d flirted with him. She had teased him sweetly, he had believed she’d let him in on the world’s biggest secret, and he guessed it had something to do with sex.

When Jerry teed off from ten, he nailed a drive that took a prodigious bounce and landed on the green within striking distance of an eagle. Unable to concentrate, Jim sliced his drive into the trees, took a penalty, and then put his second ball into a bunker.

“Looks like your streak’s over, Jimbo,” Jerry laughed deeply. “Looks like ol’ Jerry’s gonna whoop yer ass.”

“How can I focus on golf,” Jim said and turned to business to regain his composure, “when I’m thinking about the ‘Something Cool from Red Hot’ campaign?”

“What new campaign?” Jerry barked at him with surprising irritation. “I haven’t authorized a new campaign!”

“We consider it an investment, Jerry,” Jim said. “What’s the fastest-growing sector of people who dine at mid-priced restaurants?”

“Come on, Monroe. Give me a break. We’re playing golf.”

“Two-income families with kids. Right?”

“A blinding flash of the obvious,” Jerry gulped down half a can of beer as the electric cart hummed over a wooden bridge.

“You have to change your menu, Jerry. Healthier food. Salads. Low-fat entrees. Low-sodium selections. Well presented foods that look fresh and light.”

Jerry belched intentionally then nodded, “You’ve pitched this idea before. If I took your advice, we’d be like every other restaurant in Middle Class, Texas. The Red Hot Grill stands for big portions of food that ranch hands would love. We’ve got a strong niche, and you know it.”

“I think you should change direction. Especially when you expand into the Metroplex.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Jerry sighed, finished drinking his beer, and crushed the empty can against his thigh. “But I’ll never admit it.”

“You’re the ideal client, Kaminski,” Jim said. “You really appreciate creativity. You cherish it like a precious jewel.”

“Let’s see how creative you are with a wedge, Ad-Guy.”

Jim stepped over the edge of the trap and waded through the sand to his ball. His shot would have to hop over a three-foot lip then surmount a small hill to the long, sloping green and

the pin forty yards away. He took three practice swings, whiffing up clouds of sand. When he finally addressed the ball, he concentrated on hitting beneath it, and it jumped nicely, bit on the grassy hill above the green, then rolled toward the pin, coming to rest ten feet closer than Jerry's ball.

"Nice shot, Jimbo," Jerry laughed. "Too bad you're two strokes behind."

Jerry putted for his eagle, and Jim, in his misery, finished the hole with a double bogey. Jim replaced the flag and looked up to the hill that bordered on the club. On its summit was the Alamo HMO headquarters building. It was a low, sprawling complex of limestone, bare timbers and glass, with a parking garage that had been carved out of the natural rock of the hillside. Surely, this was the head office of a company with plenty of money for advertising. Jim's agency was scheduled to present a proposal to Alamo in less than two weeks, but they had hardly started work on the campaign.

"Look at that building!" Jim said. "That's the headquarters for Alamo HMO."

"Yeah," Jerry shrugged. "So what?"

"I need you to be a really good reference for them, Jerry," he reminded him. "It could be an important account for us."

"You know I'll be a good reference for you, Jimbo," Jerry said. "But right now you owe me ten bucks for this hole."

"Can't I run a tab on this, Jerry?" Jim groaned. "I'm running low on cash."

"Come on. I saw that wad you're carrying. It's thick enough to choke a horse."

"A colt maybe," Jim laughed unhappily. "A prematurely foaled pony. You enjoy taking my money, don't you?"

"Sure. You've enjoyed taking mine, haven't you? Every chance you get."

"At Red Hot?" Jim asked, hurt by Jerry's tone. "That's different. I deliver a valuable service..."

"I do, too," Jerry chuckled and slapped Jim's shoulder, too roughly. "I'm giving you golf lessons."

"Then how come my game's getting worse?" Jim asked, stung that Jerry had accused him of taking advantage of their friendship.

"Ten bucks please," Jerry held out his left hand, encased in the new glove that Jim had paid for.

Jim peeled the ten from his money clip and thought of his son, Eddie. When Eddie turned 15, he started consuming ten and twenty dollar bills like a koala bear eating eucalyptus leaves. He needed money for movies, pizza, CDs, paintball outings and video games. Maybe Jim had spoiled Eddie. Having grown up without money, Jim wanted his own son to enjoy life. But the kid was an indifferent student with no discernible ambitions. Jim believed he had failed Eddie by not helping him find his inner compass, the true interest that would make him want to succeed.

He didn't have much success of his own on the back nine. He hit four drives into the rough, and missed three easy putts. As Jim paid Jerry after seventeen, he counted just \$95 left in his money clip. If he bogeyed the last hole, didn't get close to the pin, then lost the match (a foregone conclusion), he wouldn't have enough cash to cover his losses. This gloomy prospect made him go to the cooler for a beer. There were only two cans left, so he handed one to Jerry and kept one for himself. That would be a Bloody Mary and nine beers for Jerry that morning, and he was still hitting the ball like John Daly.

“Do you remember my first wife?” Jerry asked and his eyes flared with irritation. Jim called to mind the tall brunette woman with the gap between her front teeth. Too quiet for Jerry. And too smart.

“Sure, I remember her. Karen.”

“She always said I was too materialistic. I valued money more than our relationship. That’s why she cheated on me with the pompous asshole who ran the bookstore. Well, she married a software millionaire in Austin. A guy with his own airplane. I wonder if he cares more about their relationship than all his goddamned money.”

“You’re doing okay yourself, Jerry,” Jim teased him. “Chrissy is just as materialistic as you are. You’ll stay married as long as your money holds out.”

“This is no laughing matter!” Jerry scolded him with beer-induced righteousness. “You’re joking about my personal life! Why are you being so fucking sarcastic?”

“Come on, Jerry. I’ve known you a long time. Sarcasm is how we communicate.”

“I have never made a crack like that about *your* wife,” Jerry growled.

“Relax. Take your shot.”

“Chrissy’s been acting weird lately, anyway” Jerry confided, but he could just as easily be talking to himself. “It’s like she’s got something on her mind. Karen acted the same way for six months before I found out she was screwing that skinny fuck with the beard.”

“Let’s finish up,” Jim said uneasily. Jerry was not in his best form right now. Vulnerability made him mean. “There are people behind us.”

“One more hole,” Jerry paused and shivered with some deep uneven breaths as his face grew a few shades redder. Then he took off his Greg Norman hat and wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead with the back of his glove. “Why don’t we raise the stakes?”

“Again?”

“Yeah. An even hundred for the hole.”

“Does that include the 25 bucks for the round? The bogey penalty, too?”

“Sure thing, Oh Great Pretender. A whole new ballgame. A hundred bucks, winner take all. A dramatic finish. What do you say?”

“I don’t have a hundred bucks left, Jerry. I only have 95 dollars.”

“You’re still in the game, Big Guy. Your ninety-five against my hundred. The playoff hole.”

The eighteenth hole descended a gradual slope parallel to a row of houses that extended to the clubhouse. Jim associated the hole with the ache in his right elbow and with the 19th hole bar, where they served draft beer in tall glasses with narrow waists, like women in movies from the 1940s.

At the tee, Jim was disappointed that the ladies’ foursome had already played to the green and would finish their round before he could get another look at the redhead who looked like Mavis Wilcox, the woman who nearly ruined his parents’ marriage. Jerry coughed to bring Jim back to the game and nodded for him to drive first. So Jim imagined himself as a young boy on the driving range, getting tips from his dad as Mavis watched them. The illusion might have been complete if it weren’t for the pain in his elbow. He angled his feet (weight to the right), moved his wrists ahead of the ball, slowly set his back swing and hit a nice, straight drive two hundred thirty yards down the center of the fairway.

“Very pretty shot, Spin Doctor,” Jerry said and squinted into the distance to see where Jim’s ball had landed. Then he teed his own ball and nailed it fifty yards farther on the fly. Only then did Jim remember that Jerry almost always birdied eighteen at Running Brook.

Jim's second shot with a five iron bounced dangerously close to the pond at the right of the green but took a good hop and came to rest in the grass 40 feet from the hole. With luck he could sink it in two more strokes. He might just beat Jerry today, after all. He felt energized but could not ignore his stiff elbow, his cramped lower back, and the bruise on his ribs. Jerry's second shot, with a wedge, was too long, and it hopped over the green to the fringe of the cart path.

"Tough luck, Jerry," Jim said happily. The Random Gods of Golf had finally nodded in his favor, it seemed. "I'll let you get on before I putt."

Then the incredible happened. Jerry hit a perfect shot with a pitching wedge. The ball hopped onto the green, bit when it landed, then rolled inexorably, straight into the hole. Jim felt he had been punched in the diaphragm. It took him ten seconds to catch his breath and make sense of Jerry's gloating celebration.

"Hot damn! Did you see that shot? Was that great, or what? Was that shot worth a hundred bucks, Jimbo? I'd damn sure say it was!"

"Don't call me, Jimbo," Jim said and took up his putter to attempt a forty-footer that would give him a tie. He had never made a shot like it before. How hard should he hit the ball to push it through three feet of grass to the green? And supposing he could control a 40-foot putt, where should he aim, and how would it break as it rolled across the imperceptible inclines of the putting surface? He knelt in front of the ball, combed the grass, and removed a leaf, an acorn and a toothpick-sized twig. His heart throbbed in his throat now as he squatted on the green, trying to discern the pathway to the hole. He felt sure he had already lost the match, but Jerry's shot had been as impossible as this one. Didn't he deserve some good luck, too? In the end he decided to aim just left of the cup, believing the slope would carry the ball to the right. He remembered to keep his wrists and elbows stiff as he swung the putter through the ball, which swam quickly through the blades of grass and squirted with a little hop onto the green. The ball rolled steady and straight, then just as he'd expected, it broke toward the hole. But it slowed gradually until it stopped, a foot in front of the cup. In any other situation, this would have been a brilliant putt, but today it had cost him \$95, and he felt disgusted with himself. He held his breath and swept the ball into the hole with a long stroke, completing his round at 87 against Jerry's 77.

"Wo! What a game!" Jerry hooted in self-satisfaction. "The best hundred bucks I ever won."

"Ninety-five," Jim groaned as he slid his hand into his pocket, retrieved his money clip, pulled out the whole wad of cash and slapped it into Jerry's bare right hand.

"Thanks," Jerry said enthusiastically. "I'll buy the drinks."

"Generous of you, Kaminski, since I'm broke," Jim said and planned to have one quick beer with Jerry before he went home for lunch with his wife. Mary Ellen might scold him for gambling, but she would make him feel better by touching his shoulder just once.

Following Jerry into the bar, Jim saw Mark Woodnickel as he signed his bill for Nick the bartender. Mark had been Jim's college roommate, and now he was general manager of Channel 59.

"Hi, Jim. How was your round?" Mark asked. He smiled at Jim with the blank expression that had always bugged him. He squinted through his thick glasses.

"Played to my handicap," Jim said and hoped he could break away quickly. Monroe advertising owed Channel 59 more than \$87,000, and he didn't want to discuss it with Jerry around.

“Well, I broke 90 today. Pretty good for me.”

“That *is* good for you,” Jim said and patted his shoulder. “Well, gotta go. Can’t keep the client waiting.”

“Let’s get together this week, Jim.”

“Sure. Sure thing.”

“We need to catch up on a few things. I’ve got a proposition for you.”

“Great. I’ll call you. Thanks, Mark.”

As Thickpenny left, Jim turned to Nick to order beers for him and Jerry. Nick opened a tab without a question. Apparently, he hadn’t spoken to Jack O’Hanion.

They took their tall hourglass beers to a table on the terrace. The beer was refreshingly cold, and Jim was already willing to chalk up the losing round to the cause of customer relations.

“What a game, Lord Jim,” Jerry said as he licked beer foam from his lip and looked out at men in striped shirts putting on the practice green. “We’ve had quite a few good rounds. I’m going to miss our matches, guy.”

Jim imagined the unthinkable. “You’re giving up golf?”

“No, way,” Jerry turned his head and looked off the edge of the terrace, focusing on nothing. “We’ve hired a new ad agency,” Jerry called out, as if to the men in the distance.

“You what?” Jim moaned and his stomach knotted in panic.

“With our plans to expand into the Metroplex, the executive committee decided to hire a bigger agency. From Dallas,” Jerry continued, smiling inappropriately. “Don’t take it personally, Jim. This is strictly a business decision. Management thinks we’re ready to move up to the next level. We thought Monroe Advertising would be stretched too thin.”

“Did you ever think of *asking* me?” Jim wanted to scream, but all he could do was whisper. It was as if his friend were strangling him. He grinned in pain and struggled to speak. “I’m about to close a deal with the Wentworth Group from Houston,” he said. “After our merger, we’ll more than triple in size. I haven’t been able to tell you because negotiations are at a sensitive stage. After all the work we’ve done for Red Hot, I think we deserve a chance to keep—”

“The Wentworth Group, you say? Out of Houston?”

“That’s right, Jerry. They’re the fifth largest agency in Texas.”

Jerry’s lips sputtered dismissively. “Well, we already talked to them. We didn’t like their style. They act like they’re from California. And watch out for that Miles Wentworth dude. Did you see the moustache he wears on his lower lip? If you ask me, he’s as queer as a three-dollar bill. That’s why we’re going with those old boys from Dallas.”

“Please, give me a chance!” Jim’s panic broke through in a pitiful yelp that he would remember later with embarrassment.

“Decision’s made, Jimbo,” Jerry nodded so emphatically that his whole body rocked. “I’d look like a jerk if I tried to change their minds now.”

“Jerry, you’re not having a problem looking like a jerk,” Jim pointed out.

“No need to take it personally, guy. Like I say, it’s only business.”

“Why did you wait to tell me till now? You took my whole morning ...my ninety-five bucks?”

“Figured you’d be in the right frame of mind. After a round of golf.”

“After a round of golf with my best friend in the business,” Jim said bitterly. “Surely we’ve got room to maneuver here. Can’t I make a pitch to your executive committee to prove how much money I’ve made for you guys?”

“I’m sorry, Pal. I really understand where you’re coming from, but it’s a done deal,” Jerry shrugged and stood up from the table, fixing his eyes on his half-drunk beer as if debating whether to finish it. “I’ll have Jolene call you about transferring our materials.”

“Jerry,” Jim begged, realizing that losing the Red Hot account could kill the Wentworth deal and might even drive him into bankruptcy. “Don’t you think I deserve a chance to compete for this business?”

“I gotta go,” Jerry said. “If you want another drink, put it on my tab.”

“It’s my tab, Jerry. You’re not a member.”

“Uh. Right,” Jerry mumbled and tossed money onto the iron table. “Here’s ten bucks for the drinks.”

Jerry moved faster than he had since he’d played defensive end at Texas Tech, and he was out of sight before Jim’s shock could give way to anger. Left behind, Jim Monroe was too stunned to speak or stand up, and dizziness blurred his view of the bright lawn that sloped down to the first tee. He tried, but failed to shout insults to chase Kaminski from the club: Mouth-breather! Redneck! Moron! Through his tears, he saw shapes in pastel clothing rise from white-box golf carts to begin their games. His rage plunged into a feeling of helplessness as he realized that he’d just played his last round at Running Brook. He didn’t belong here any more. No, it was time to get his clubs and head home.