

CHAPTER ONE

I found out later it was just about the time I spanked an eight-iron to the edge of the number twelve green at the Bob Hope Classic that someone plunged an ordinary table knife into her heart. Six times. That was after whoever the killer was beat her bloody with a Krups cappuccino machine. Her naked body was discovered lying in her own gore in the kitchen of her moderately expensive Santa Monica beachfront apartment, and the medical examiner later determined she'd had rough sex, or been forcibly raped, shortly before she was killed.

It takes a very angry or very psychotic human being to kill another of his species up close with a knife. Try shoving your ginsu into an uncooked chicken if you don't believe me. Gristle and bone are tough and unyielding. So how much angrier, or psychotic, does a person have to be to do that with a dinner knife? A round-nosed, unsharpened, serrated-edged, stainless-steel dinner knife.

Six times.

That, my friend, is rage.

She was a pretty girl, an erstwhile actress and part-time waitress, who was better at rising through the social strata of the movie industry on the arms of various important men than she was at learning her craft and landing roles. Girls like her are cannon fodder for that business, like Russian

peasants at the siege of Leningrad getting crushed by German Panzers. And yet somehow, year after year, more and more keep running to the front. Thousands of eager little beavers, maybe hundreds of thousands for all I know, 99.999 percent of whom never make a dime as actresses. I guess they keep coming because every once in a while, a Gwyneth or Julia or Halle manages to rise above the clamoring fray and live a fairy-tale life of money, magazine covers, gossip columns, mansions, and equally famous boyfriends/husbands/lovers.

Come to think of it, in terms of the odds against making it big and being a household name, it's not that much different from my line of work.

She was a pretty girl with an appealing little laugh, a nice little story of making her way from Bumpkin, Illinois, or someplace, all the way to Hollywood, and an earnest little head full of dreams.

Dreams.

The crack cocaine of the unaccomplished.

She was a pretty girl who, like dozens of others that same day around this sometimes violent nation of ours, was in a position to be murdered primarily *because* she was a pretty girl. Occupational hazard.

And while I was trying to close a two-stroke deficit to make the cut on a Friday afternoon on a typical Southern California winter day so crisp and clear it actually hurt your eyes to look up and watch the flight of the ball against the blue, someone who was very, very angry with this particular pretty girl plunged an ordinary dinner knife into her pretty chest. Six times.

Her name was Holly Ann Cramer.

I didn't know her well, although I ran into her a few times at various parties in the Los Angeles area. Holly would've been a remarkable beauty anywhere on earth except Hollywood. She was, there, just another exquisite tulip in the vast fields of Holland. Sandy blond hair. Slim hips, full

lips, perky tips. Brown eyes still unguarded and friendly, which was more a reflection of her limited time in LaLaLand than any realization of her limited chances of success. I recall her being nice to stand near. She smelled like summer.

Had she not been dating a guy I knew, I might've even made an effort to connect. But Los Angeles is Holland and the tulips are aplenty, and I've never been one to try to horn in on another guy's squeeze. Not that I even could've in this case. The guy she was dating happened to be the current Savior of the City, a multimillionaire stud-puppy athlete who was supposed to bring the hapless L.A. Dodgers back to their formerly formidable winning ways.

I first met Joniel Baker at a pro-am charity tournament. I was the pro, he was the am. Although that day it would've been hard to know the difference. Joniel is one of these natural athletes you really just have to hate. He's gifted at all sports, period. Took up golf three years ago and already has a gorgeous, effortless, loopy swing similar to the one he used to get on base two hundred times last season. There are guys on the tour who would kill for a swing like that. He's a long-ball hitter with good extension and only a little wild off the tee at times. Easy, consistent iron play. If not for his heavy hands around the greens he would be a scratch player.

As it was, we won the tourney handily, grinned while we took a half-million-dollar check from the tournament sponsor, and handed it over to the nice lady from the Red Cross, and pocketed five grand each from a side bet with Phil Mickelson and his clarinet-playing amateur partner. Which really, really bugged Lefty.

Over beers at his enviable estate near San Diego he challenged Joniel to a double-or-nothing free-throw shootout on his home all-weather composite-surfaced basketball court he was so damn proud of, and Joniel sank fifty-two in a row to take another five k from our host. Phil plays everything like he plays golf: with full-out balls-to-the-wall confidence. As a result, up until the last few years he famously lost tournaments he should've won, but he always looked like he had a lot of fun doing it. Still, who in their right mind would go up against a former collegiate

two-sporter in a game of horse? If Joniel had a few more inches coming out of UNLV, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, he would've been drafted by the NBA, too. But God love him, Lefty thinks he can beat anybody if he just tries hard enough, so he talks trash with Joniel and convinces him to have a shoot-out. What a wonderful lunatic. Ten grand is nothing to the Masters champ these days, but his pretty wife, Amy, didn't look exactly overjoyed.

Back in the desert oasis called La Quinta, about a hundred and fifty miles away from where Holly lay sprawled on the Saltillo tile with a knife protruding from her chest and every last wisp of dignity and light and promise and dreams vanishing to wherever such things go, I chipped in from a foot off the green for a birdie three. Six more holes to make one more birdie and live to play another day and maybe even finish in the real money, although that was something I refuse to let enter my mind during a match. Nothing dims your focus like thoughts of winning. You tighten up, start to overthink every shot, and the putts . . . God, the putts . . . like some force field surrounds the cup. I don't know how the other guys do it, but when I feel those *I'm-playing-great-today-jeez-what-if-this-is-it?* thoughts start to well up from my gut, I pull out the big guns. The really big guns.

Pamela Anderson's breasts.

I picture those impossibly round, impossibly high, impossibly fake globes, and my heart rate lowers, my hands steady, and my mind empties of extraneous crap like wondering if I'm going to win, and how much money would that be after taxes and my caddie Kenny's cut, and who'll interview me on the Golf Channel. Works every time.

Try it. I bet you just glazed over for a second and thought about her enormous breasts, even if you're a woman. Know why? Because we've all seen them. It's a fact. Every single person in the Western world has at some time or another seen Pamela Anderson's tits. And maybe because they're so familiar to me, pictorially speaking, of course, they act as a sort of hypnotic talisman, or sacred religious relic, or . . . juvenile erotic distraction. Probably the last.

The thirteenth hole was a downhill par-three with a tricky little swale just behind the cup that, if you hit the slightest bit long, would take your ball and run it all the way down to a bitch of a bunker. I know: That's what happened to me here the day before. I had asked Kenny for my eight-iron; he squinted the way he does when he's not sure that's the right club, but he couldn't argue with the distance. I smacked an easy, smooth, pretty little shot that landed four feet short of the flag, bounced past it, and ended up a good twenty yards away in a steep-sided sand trap. I walked away with a miserable double bogey.

I'm not by any means the biggest guy on tour, just a hair over six feet, but like most of the younger generation of players, I work hard at conditioning. That pays off in distance, with every club in the bag. Most of the time that's a good thing. Sometimes, I have to remind myself to dial it back a bit. So this time, lesson learned, I reached for the nine, aimed a little left of the green, swung a little firmer than usual, and let the club face cut through the ball. It started left then floated in a wide curve and plopped on the fringe in front of the green, slowly rolling to a stop seven feet from the cup. I smelled my birdie.

Oh, if it were only so easy.

I two-putted, of course. Then got a bogey on number fourteen, birdied the fifteenth to put me back just below the expected cut line, and made a tidy pair of recovery shots from the trees and a greenside bunker on the sixteenth to save par.

The seventeenth was a dogleg left par-five, 581 yards, with a water hazard in play to the right. It set up well for my swing, and knowing that, I tried to uncork a long drive.

Within a split second of contact, the crucial data imparted by ball meeting club face had traveled up the shaft to my fingertips and from there to my suddenly not-so-happy brain. I watched as the little white pill took off straight, then swooped wide left and buried itself among the top reaches of the lovely palm trees massed along the friendly green shores of the fairway. Golf is such a forgiving game.

A communal gasp rose from the modest gallery that surrounded the tee box, and I'm pretty sure I heard John Daly, who was playing in my group, snicker. Like he's never sent one on a tour of the real estate. In the history of professional golf there has never been a guy who's blown more chances, on the course and off. I resisted the urge to shoot him a glance and tried instead to affect a nonchalant raise of the eyebrows. That was really hard to do at that particular moment. Instead, I probably looked like I was about to strangle a Taiwanese orphan.

Kenny took the driver from my hands.

Take a breath, Huckleberry. You're fine.

Okay, yes, that's really my name. So my dad was obviously a big Mark Twain fan. That or he was a sadist. He deliberately didn't give me a middle name so I had few options growing up except to run or fight. Huckleberry Doyle. A schoolyard bully's wet dream of a name. Kenny and my dad always use the full thing. Pretty much everyone else just calls me Huck. If you haven't heard of me, well, it's probably because I'm one of many professional golfers who makes an adequate living playing the game we love, but who has yet to win a major tournament. I came out of college as the next big thing, U.S. Amateur Champion, ready to take the golf world by storm. Didn't quite happen that way. I had a few good showings at minor tournaments early in my career and even a posted top-ten finish at the PGA Championship two years ago, but in reality I'm what they call a *scuffler*. I'm usually found in the bottom half of the pack, picking up some show-up money and freebies, driving around in the courtesy cars, living the outwardly glamorous life of a professional golfer, but secretly making barely enough to keep my tour card. It's the small tournaments that put money in the bank for us. Like a pool-hall hustler trying for a title, for some reason we have a better chance to clean up as long as the big stakes aren't on the table.

I have no idea why Kenny stays with me. His income is tied to mine.

I managed a slight smile.

That thing looked like it had someplace else it wanted to go.

He flashed the barest of winks as he brushed by me, which, in the spare, nothing-wasted lexicon of Kennyspeak, meant, *Don't sweat it: It's not as bad as it looks.*

After five years of this weird partnership that is golfer and caddie, I have learned to trust this man implicitly, most of the time without question. Most of the time, he's right. But when we've disagreed and I've gone with my club selection or putting line or whatever, his average rises to about 100 percent. The tactical mistakes I've made in tournaments came from disregarding his advice. Oh, I hit crappy shots, and miss putts, and shank and scull and chili-dip as much as most other pros, but those things are part of the operational aspects of this battle against psyche and physics we call golf. Ken Czwikowski can't hit a golf ball straight to save his life, but he is a master tactician when it comes to reading distances, the roll of a green, the lift of the wind. He's like the guy from that movie *The Matrix*, Neo, who sees the glowing green binary code streaming down, the underlying structure of the world, how things really *are*, not just how they seem.

If I could bring myself to listen to him *all* the time, hey, I'd be a pretty damn good golfer.

But I'd be lacking a Y chromosome.

This time . . . he was right again, of course. When we rounded the bend I could see my little white Titleist Pro-V1 with the red dot on it lying in the second cut just off the fairway. Somehow the ball had sailed through the gauntlet of palm fronds and tree trunks, inexplicably missing them all, and took a shortcut to the Promised Land. By eliminating a big swath of middle fairway this was the equivalent of a 370-yard drive. I was 211 yards from that big, open, flat green that made this hole the most birdied on the course, and with a solid second shot, I could be looking at putting for eagle.

Pamela Anderson. Pamela Anderson. Pamela Anderson.

We had to wait for Daly and the others who hadn't driven as far to hit their second shots, which I'll admit gave me no small amount of pleasure.

Then Kenny sidles up, tosses a few strands of grass in the air, and watches them float away.

Steady five knots maybe, helping wind.

He consults his notebook, the holy Talmud, which contains all his accumulated knowledge of the golf course. In the week prior to the tournament he walked every inch of La Quinta, measuring distances from fairway bunkers or distinctive trees, marking down how the greens are contoured. Like a lot of veteran caddies, Kenny likes to have all his thoughts and notes and memories from past rounds at hand, so instead of starting a fresh book each year, he keeps adding on to the original one. Damn thing must weigh five pounds with all the new pages over the years.

Deuce and a quarter to the pin, give or take. Not much roll from the sides. Slight movement maybe toward the back of the green, but not a lot. Pretty flat.

Translation: We were looking at a fairly attractive landing zone.

Drop it in front and let it run a bit?

Kenny nodded and put his hand on the seven-iron. I had been thinking about hitting a six and started to reach for it, but this was one of those times when I actually had enough sense to pay attention. Two-hundred-plus yards is a long way to hit a seven-iron, but with a solid strike, the wind coming from behind us, and a good roll, I can make the distance.

Then it struck me, Kenny was also thinking eagle.

Damn. Kenny almost *never* thinks eagle. He's the guy in the stirrups who's usually telling me, *Whoa there, big fella . . . get the safe birdie.*

My gut tightened up. My heart missed a beat. I had to step away from the ball, pretend I was scanning the treetops for signs of nefarious winds, and take yet another little mental walk with the silicone twins. I can't remem-

ber the last time I had to do that twice in one tournament, much less twice on one hole.

How're the girls?

Kenny was smiling at me. He knows all my tricks.

Getting sunburned from all the attention today. You thinking what I'm thinking?

I'm not thinking nothing but watching you swing a club and hit a ball like you've done a hundred million times before.

The golf course was absolutely silent. A few spectators had wandered up close and were standing quietly, waiting for my shot. I reached down and plucked a few more strands of grass and tossed them in the air. They lollygagged past me exactly the same way Kenny's had. I took the seven from his outstretched hand and tried to be glib.

How about steak tonight? Feel like a good porterhouse or something?

Sounds good, Huckleberry.

He heaved the big bag onto his shoulder and moved away. I stood behind the ball, pictured my easy swing and the flight path of the ball arching toward the green. I imagined a little door about six feet in front of me that would be the target zone I'd hit through. In my mind's eye I saw the ball roll up onto the green and stop three feet from the hole.

Then I stepped up and tried to replicate everything I'd just seen.

It happened almost exactly as I imagined it would. We got our eagle.

It was one of those precious few thrilling moments in the life of a tour player that makes one think it's actually possible to be really good at this game. I was flying. Full of confidence. Bring on the world. I had this tournament in the bag.

Until the next hole.

I was so damn fired up I plopped my drive on the eighteenth smack into the middle of the pond. Chipped over the green. Two-putted for a double bogey.

We finished one over the cut line, which meant Kenny and I were going home early this weekend.

Such is golf.