

ONE LAST LESSON - CHAPTER ONE

His heavy work boots stamped on a branch with vindictive venom. A few days back, he tripped over it and scratched the side of his face on an overhanging bramble; it hurt like hell and left a long, raw scar but today he was ready and ducked just in time.

Lost from sight now, Meg would be bounding across the fairway and chasing an imaginary rabbit, but at least she wouldn't be disturbing any golfers as they were a fair-weather bunch at this place and the cold, dank mist that hung over lower parts of the course like giant bundles of cotton wool, would put them off for a few hours at least.

Mike Ferris once played there until unceremoniously booted out after an argument with Fred Kingston, the club secretary. Ferris's house backed onto the course and golfers often came tramping across his garden looking for their balls. Kingston, the officious prat, was adamant they were doing nothing wrong but in the fight that followed he ended up in hospital with a broken nose, cracked cheekbone and severe concussion.

If the little sod had been a bit more forgiving when he finally woke up, he might have realized that the invectives he spat out with such venom were provocative to a man like him and played a large part in what followed. He didn't go as far as to say it was his own bloody fault, but it didn't stop him thinking as much.

Patched-up and repaired, Kingston was eager to press charges but held back by the actions of the club chairman, who was wary of having the police snooping around, just in case they took a closer look at his relationship with the pretty young blonde in the golf store as she was only fifteen. Ferris knew he wasn't the smartest card in the deck when it came to making important decisions but if the

choice was either to leave the club or face a jail sentence, even he could see it was a no-brainer.

He pushed his way through the overhanging branches and stood for a moment on the smooth, close-cut grass of the green and gulped in a deep lungful of cold, damp air, a welcome change from the pungent, almost perfumed smell of rotting wood and decaying leaves that hung over the forest for most of the winter. On the left, about twenty feet away and seemingly innocuous and benign, lay the eighteenth hole. On a clear day, it provided excellent views of nearby hills and woods from its elevated position, but down a steep slope and around a sharp dogleg, was the eighteenth tee.

The number of times he would be playing well for it all to go tits-up at this one. Get the flight of the ball wrong, and it would end up lodged in one of the thick copses of trees that lay on either side of the narrow fairway or even worse, if it hit the slope too sharply, it would come rolling back down the hill to mock him. For good golfers, it was a demanding challenge and with patience and perseverance, it could eventually be mastered; but for him, it was frustrating and maddening in equal measure and a good excuse to dump the golf bag in the back of the cart and head back to the clubhouse and the succour of a couple of double whiskies and the understanding ear of the barman.

He stopped and looked around for Meg. Usually, she could be found rooting around the bushes that lay close to the hole but hearing nothing but the dawn chorus of starlings, thrushes and blackbirds, he set off down the slope. Visibility around the green was clear but as soon as he was half way down the hill, he was cloaked in the mist that seemed determined to hug the bottom, like giant pillows held there by invisible threads.

Where the ground levelled out, he stopped and cupped his hands. 'Meg! Meg!' His voice sounded flat and hollow and didn't seem to carry any distance, but he was sure he heard the Springer Spaniel's distinctive bark in reply. He knew

sounds in fog could be deceptive and with visibility down to only a few yards, the dog could be anywhere, but he was confident the bark came from the left. He walked to the edge of the fairway and after a moment's hesitation, pushed his way into a dense clump of ash, birch, brambles and rhododendrons that was known as Hallam's Wood, after a well-respected councillor who once lived close by.

The dog was in a small clearing beside an over-grown rhododendron bush and he could see where she had been pawing the ground, around the plant's base. He stomped angrily towards her, his head full of punishments the stupid dog would suffer for her disobedience. Suddenly he stopped and his mouth fell open as if emitting a silent scream. The dog's paw was resting on a slender, human arm.