

~ Mulligan V: Best Ball ~

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Here's the fifth installment in the adventures of Marty and Lou, two women in their sixties celebrating their newfound love. If you aren't familiar with these characters, you might want to back up to the first story, [Mulligan](#), which was written for the Academy of Bards 2003 Valentine Special. That first story didn't get a numeral, because I didn't expect to keep writing these characters. But the ideas kept coming, so I've tried to write them all down.

This particular story was developed from several scenes that were cut during editing from the upcoming novel, *Mulligan*, available June 2005 from [StarCrossed Productions](#) and other retail outlets. The novel is based on the series, but offers a deeper-and sexier-look into the characters and how their relationship got off the ground.

Don't bother to look for Mulligan VI, because we all know-there is no numeral VI. <g>

August 1980

Louise Stevens and her brothers walked somberly into the bright sunlight in front of the courthouse, stopping to talk privately for the first time since reviewing the papers. The clerk of courts had confirmed what they already concluded about their father's estate-it consisted of little more than the one-story frame house and a few personal effects. Floyd Stevens had never believed in borrowing money, so it was no surprise that he had died without owing a cent. His simple will stated that his property should be divided equally among his three adult children-William, Hiram, and Louise-with Hiram designated as executor.

"I guess the first thing we should do is find a real estate agent who'll take care of selling the house," Hiram said, taking the lead. As an attorney, he had served as executor of countless estates.

"I think we should go together to the house first and start going through the closets and drawers," Louise suggested. "There's no telling how much stuff is in the attic. We should divide that up so we all get things from both Mama and Daddy. I know Mama has some old-"

"I want the house. I don't care what ya'll do with all the junk in it. I just want the house." William hadn't said more than ten words to his siblings all day until that very moment.

"Well ... I think we could probably work out an arrangement," Hiram offered. "We'll need to get it appraised, of course, but I'm certainly willing to sell you my part."

"I don't want to buy it from you. I want you to just let me have it. You can have everything else."

"It doesn't work that way, William. Daddy left it to all three of us," Hiram argued. He and Louise had never gotten on very well with their older brother. Louise wrote it off as their age difference, but Hiram always thought it was jealousy.

"I don't care who he left it to. You have a house, and Louise has a house. I don't have one." William and his wife, Glenda, had lived for over thirty years in a trailer park on the outskirts of Wheeling.

"We have houses because we bought them," the younger brother said stiffly. "Nobody gave either one of us a house."

"No, but Mama and Daddy sent you both to college so you could get a fancy job and buy things like that. Neither one of you knows what it's like to have to really work for a living."

"Aw, you've been beating that drum your whole life. I'm sorry you had such a miserable upbringing, but it's not my fault and it's not Louise's either. You're fifty-eight years old, William. It's time to grow up."

William made a fist and reared back as if to strike. Hiram put up both of his dukes and waited for the blow.

"Stop it! Both of you." Louise looked around the parking lot to see if anyone was watching the childish scene unfold. "You're grown men, for goodness sake. Act like it."

Hiram dropped his fists and straightened his suit jacket. "Let's get out of here, Louise ... before one of us does something he regrets."

Hastily, they walked to Hiram's car and got in. William stared angrily at both of them until they drove away.

"He's really something else," Hiram said, shaking his head. "I can't believe he thinks we ought to just hand over our part because he doesn't have anything. He's the one that had seven kids he couldn't afford."

For as long as she could remember, Louise had been scared half to death of her oldest brother. But something today showed her a different side, and it made her sad to realize that William had nothing to show for his forty years working in the coal mines.

"His life must have been really hard, Hiram."

"I know, Lou. But like I told him, that's not our fault."

"But he's right about Mama and Daddy giving us an education. William never had the same chances we did, because they didn't have much when he was growing up."

Hiram sighed and grudgingly nodded his agreement.

"I'm going to give him my part of the house."

"What?"

"I said I'm going-"

"I heard what you said, but why? The house isn't much, but it's worth at least thirty thousand dollars. That's ten apiece, and it's more than William ever had in his hand at one time."

"But Mama and Daddy gave us that much and more to go to college, if you figure in inflation. William never got a gift like that, and he's been bitter his whole life about it. You said so yourself." Louise could see from her brother's face that her argument was getting through. "I have what I need to get by and be happy. Sure, ten thousand dollars would be nice to put in the bank, but it wouldn't mean as much to me as having a real house would mean to William."

Hiram slowed the car and pulled off into a parking lot. "Judy always said she wanted that oak hall tree."

"And I want the wash stand and the silverware."

"Maybe we just do what William said ... go through the stuff ourselves."

"You think we ought to drive over to William's and tell him?" Louise was pleased that Hiram had come around so easily.

"Yeah, but you better be the one that goes in. He's liable to shoot me on sight."

July 2005

"Here you go, sweetie." Louise counted out five quarters and dropped them into Marty's open palm.

Marty leaned out the car window and handed the coins to the attendant. "Do I get a sticker or something?"

"Excuse me?" the attendant said.

"Sorry ... just a joke. Never mind."

"What was that all about?" Louise asked. "Settle down, Petie. It's okay." She guided the Boston terrier back into her lap.

"I just thought I ought to get a prize or something, like a sticker that said "I survived the West Virginia Turnpike.""

Louise shook her head in dismay. "I can't believe how much you're like Rhonda sometimes. It's uncanny."

"Why? What'd I do?"

"She pulled up to that window once and held out her hand like she was the one who was supposed to get the money."

Marty laughed. "I would have loved to have seen that."

"The man in the toll booth was not amused."

"Aw, that's because nobody has a sense of humor these days."

Louise's eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. "That's exactly what she said!"

"Stop! You're creeping me out."

Louise suddenly grew concerned. "Does that really bother you, honey? When I compare you to Rhonda like that?"

"Pffft! Of course not. Why should I mind being compared to someone you loved?" She winked at Louise and got a smile in return. "Calling her name out during sex is a whole different matter."

Louise squirmed. "I've never done that ... have I?"

Marty burst out laughing, causing Louise to chuckle with relief.

"You want to stop for a bite to eat?" Marty asked. She was always up for a snack.

"I'm not hungry. Besides, Judy's cooking a special dinner tonight for us, so I don't want to spoil my appetite. It's only three more hours."

Marty turned her head to hide her disappointment, her mouth watering at the thought of those honey-roasted peanuts ... sitting on the shelf in that store they had just passed ... begging to be eaten. But she grudgingly admitted to herself that traveling with Louise was good for her, since she couldn't sneak away to the vending machines like she did at work.

"I think you'll like Judy. She was in my class in high school. She and Hiram started dating when we were juniors."

"Hiram's older, right?"

"One year exactly. We have the same birthday."

"That's amazing." Marty reached for her bottle of water and took a swig.

"Not really. Nine months backwards was Daddy's birthday."

Spew! "You should have warned me!"

"Sorry." Louise quickly wiped the water off the dashboard.

"What about your other brother? When's his birthday?"

"Sometime in December. But he was born back when Mama and Daddy first got married. Hiram didn't come along for another seventeen years."

"That must have been like two families."

"In a way it was. We never saw much of William growing up. He went to work in the mines just like Daddy, and he moved out on his own before I was ever born."

"You don't talk about him much."

"We weren't very close. To tell you the truth, he always scared me a little. He was usually gruff, and he didn't want much to do with Hiram or me. Then as we got older, our lives were so different. William never had very much, but Hiram and I both got to go to college and get good jobs."

"Are you going to see William while you're here?"

"I usually drop by and say hello. You don't have to come with me, though. He's eighty-two now, and Hiram says he's not doing very well."

"I don't mind. I'll do whatever you want." Marty's stomach rumbled loudly. "Did William know about you and Rhonda?"

"Lord, no." Louise reached into a bag at her feet and presented Marty with an apple. "The only reason we even told Hiram was because we needed his legal advice on buying a house together."

"I hope Hiram and Judy like me."

"Of course they'll like you. Why wouldn't they?"

"You didn't like me the first time we met."

Louise frowned. "You're right. Maybe they won't either."

"Lou! Now you've got me all nervous. What if we get there and they don't like me?"

"Then we'll get back in the car and leave, sweetheart. Simple as that." Louise reached for Marty's free hand and intertwined their fingers. "But it's not going to happen. They'll love you because I love you. And Hiram will love you even more because you're a golf pro."

Hiram Stevens rocked steadily in his chair on the wide front porch. The odor of pot roast wafted through the window from the dining room, making his mouth water. Louise and her new friend were due any time now, and they would all sit down to eat a big meal and hear tales of Florida and the North Carolina mountains.

"Any sign yet?" Judy called.

"Nope."

She emerged from the house and took a seat on the swing. "You reckon we'll like this new woman?"

"We better. Lou made it sound like it was permanent."

"I was a little surprised, if you want to know the truth. I always figured she wasn't really like that ... you know? She went out with boys back in high school."

"I know. But Lou said she always knew something was wrong back then. She just didn't know what it was until she and Rhonda fell in love with each other."

A silver Mercury Sable pulled to the curb in front of the house.

"There they are," Hiram announced, standing up and thrusting his hands into his pockets as he watched his sister and the new woman get out of the car.

Judy stood beside him and took his arm. "Well, she's not as pretty as Rhonda," she whispered.

Hiram broke into a huge grin. "Maybe not, but she's got my little sister smiling again."

Louise closed the door to the guest room and pulled Marty into a hug. "Hiram and Judy seem to like you. I thought they would."

Marty returned the squeeze and rested her head on Louise's shoulder. "They're really nice. I can't get over how much you and your brother look alike."

"Everybody says that, but I just don't see it."

"Oh, yeah. Both of you have the same wiry build, and the same smile ... not to mention that silver hair."

"Maybe a little." Louise pulled away and started to get undressed. "I hope you didn't mind sitting with us and going through all those photo albums."

"Of course not. How come you never told me you were so cute when you were little? I was ready to swipe some of those while Judy wasn't looking."

Louise laughed. "I have all those pictures at home in the attic. I got them when Daddy died and made copies for Hiram. I even made a few for William."

"I noticed William wasn't in many."

"Like I said, he didn't come around very much." Louise pulled her gown over her head and let it fall. Then she removed the floral bedspread, folded it, and stowed it in the closet. Finally, she placed Petie's blanket at the foot of the bed and lifted him up. "Here you go, sweetie." He twirled and sank in a heap, exhausted from the drive up from North Carolina.

"I'm worn out too, boy." Marty gave him a scratch before climbing into bed on her side.

"Am I going to get to see a whole bunch of little Marty pictures when I get to Michigan?"

"You better believe it! Mom has a ton of Betty and me when we were growing up."

"That'll be something. I bet you were cute too."

"I was adorable ... just like I am now."

Louise chuckled and moved toward the center of the double bed. They were accustomed to sleeping in a queen-sized bed, but neither objected to the close quarters.

"How old were you when Betty was killed?"

"Fifteen. Betty was seventeen."

"That's so tragic. It must have been horrible."

"It was. Mom wouldn't let me get in a car with my friends for over a year."

"I bet it's sad for her to look at pictures now."

"It used to be. But then one day-it would have been Betty's twenty-fifth birthday-she took out a school picture and set it on top of the TV with all the others. It was still there the last time I was home."

"How long has it been?"

"Hmmm ... three years."

"You shouldn't stay away so long, Marty. Things can happen so fast and before you know it, you don't have any more chances to see the people that mean something to you."

"I know." Marty snuggled close and wrapped her arm around Louise's waist. "That's why I'm never letting you out of my sight."

Louise let out a contented sigh and snuggled into the embrace.

"And this is the last stop on the tour, where I went to high school," Louise said, bringing her car to a stop.

"It's a vacant lot."

"I know that. They tore down the old building back in 1973. It was condemned by the fire department. They built one big high school for the whole county and closed down all the little ones."

Marty looked at her watch. "That's all of the tour? It's only ten-thirty. And you didn't even show me where you got your first kiss."

Louise pointed to a tall stand of weeds that had grown up around a discarded tire. "It was right over in there somewhere ... just outside where the gymnasium used to be."

Marty closed her eyes and started to hum. "I'm feeling this wave of maniacal jealousy. Who was he?" she demanded playfully.

"I don't even remember. Henry or Harvey something. It was at the senior prom and somebody had spiked the punchbowl. All I remember is gin breath."

"You were a senior in high school before your first kiss?"

Louise looked at her indignantly. "What's wrong with that?"

Marty chuckled. "Nothing, I guess. I was an early bloomer."

"I'm afraid to ask."

"Fifteen."

"When you had your first kiss? That's not all that early."

"Mmmm ... not my first kiss."

"Marty Beck!"

"I was curious!"

"We were all curious. But some of us exercised self-control."

"That's always been one of my problems," Marty conceded. "How far is it to Greensburg from here?"

"About an hour and a half. Why?"

"Let's go. I want to see where you taught school and where you and Rhonda lived."

Louise shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Marty. It's hard to go back there now ... after that school board meeting."

"But that's what this whole trip was for-so we could show each other the important people and places in our lives. You talk about Greensburg a lot. I'd like to see some of the places that meant something to you."

Louise finally nodded. "Okay."

Marty took her hand. "If it gets hard for you, Lou, just remember that I'm right here."

Ninety minutes later, they pulled into the vast, nearly-vacant parking lot of Westfield High School.

"This place is huge!" Marty said. "I never pictured you in a school this size."

"We had over two thousand students."

"I want to see more. Where did you used to park?"

"Why on earth do you want to know all this stuff?"

"You see me go to work every day, Lou. I'm just trying to imagine what a day was like for you."

Louise shook her head in resignation and drove slowly through the lot to the corner nearest the entrance to the school. "I always parked right in here somewhere. The sooner you got here, the closer you could get to the building. Rhonda and I always came early, especially when the weather was bad, so we wouldn't get stuck way out in the lot."

"See? That's what I mean about learning things about each other. Now I know why you lay out your clothes every night and set the coffee maker. I bet you got in the habit of doing things like that just in case the weather was bad and you had to leave early."

"I never really thought about any of that before, but you're probably right."

"Where was your room?"

"Let's see ... for the first thirteen years, I was in that classroom all the way at the end." Louise leaned into Marty's lap and pointed to a room on the second floor. "And for the last twenty-seven, I was there, right over the office." This time, she pointed to a room directly above them.

Marty propped her elbows on the open window and rested her chin on her arms. "That's really something, Lou. Forty years of your life inside that building."

Louise smiled for the first time. "Hard to believe, isn't it? That place is full of memories."

"Don't you miss it?"

"Not like I did when I first left."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I have you now. There's nowhere else I'd rather be than where you are."

Marty turned back and grinned. "Let's go see your house."

On the way to her old neighborhood, Louise pointed out some of her usual stops, the grocery, the bank, a few of her favorite restaurants. Marty seemed fascinated by what Louise would have described as mundane.

"Here it is." Louise pulled up in front of a two-story gray house. Children's toys filled the front yard and a swing set was visible at the end of the driveway. "The new owners have painted it and closed in the front porch. They must have put in air conditioning because you couldn't live in that house in the summer without the breeze from the porch."

"What color was it when you lived here?"

"We always had it white with red shutters."

"Which one was your bedroom?"

"The gable on the left was the one we shared. After Rhonda died, I moved over to the other side."

"How long did you live here?"

"Thirty-two years."

"Wow." Marty took one last look at the house. "Now I want to see where you lived when you lost your virginity."

Louise sighed heavily. "You can't be serious."

"I am." Marty leaned back and waited. "Come on, let's go."

Shaking her head in dismay, Louise started the car again and drove another fifteen minutes to a part of town filled with row after row of rundown apartment buildings, all roughly the same size and shape.

"I can't picture you living in a place like this, Lou."

"It was forty years ago. My building was new then, and most of these places weren't even here." She drove slowly so she could study the subtle differences between the buildings. "I won't swear to it, but I think it was that one right there ... the third window from the left was our kitchen. The next window was the living room. It had two bedrooms but they were on the other side."

"So I don't get to see the bedroom, huh?"

"I'll wait here if you want to go knock on the door," Louise answered sarcastically.

"Is that the end of the tour?"

"I'm afraid so. Why don't we grab a quick bite to eat and head on back to Wheeling? Hiram's taking the afternoon off so he can show you his swing. Judy said he was so excited about getting some real professional advice."

"I hope I can help him."

"Honey, I really appreciate you being willing to do this. It means so much to him and to me too."

"It's no big deal."

"I know, but this was supposed to be your vacation away from golf, and then he asked if you'd play with him."

"You know I don't mind. Besides, he's family, and family is special."

Louise grinned and grasped Marty's hand. "That's right."

Louise peeked out into the back yard again. "What in the world could they be doing out there? It's almost ten o'clock."

Hiram had turned on the back porch lights so he could continue to practice his swing with Marty. The ball catcher-a billowy target enclosed inside a large net-allowed him to hit his drives full-force. From time to time, Marty would step forward and make a correction in his stance or his grip, but mostly she just watched.

"He does this every Friday night to loosen up for Saturday. That's when he plays at the club with his friends." Judy came to join her at the window. "Marty sure is being patient with him."

"She's always pretty easy-going. That's one of the things I really like about her."

"Did you see the look on Hiram's face when she agreed to play with him at the club tomorrow? I haven't seen him that excited since Alicia was born."

Louise chuckled and looked back through the window one last time. "I think I'm going to go on to bed. No telling how long they'll be out there."

Twenty minutes later, Marty entered their bedroom.

"Well?"

"He's ... okay. He's picked up a lot of bad habits over the years, but he's willing to work on fixing them."

"Did he offer to have you move in?"

Marty laughed. "Practically. He wants us to stay another week. He even said he'd take the week off. But I told him we had to go up to Michigan and see my mom."

"You're really sweet to help him, honey."

"Hiram's a nice guy. I can see why you're so close to him."

"He's always been there for me."

"Just like a big brother should," Marty said as she got ready for bed. "Speaking of big brothers, are you going to see William tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I think I'll go while you two are playing golf. I called over there right after supper and Glenda said anytime was all right. I dread it, though."

"How come?"

Louise laid down the book she had been reading and settled into bed. "I just hate to see him so sick. And I guess a part of me knows that I probably won't ever see him again." A tear leaked out of the corner of her eye and she pushed it away with her hand.

Marty sat on the bed facing her. "Remember what you told me about seeing my mom?"

Louise nodded.

"You have to do this, because there may not be any other chances. All of us wanted one last chance-you wanted it with Rhonda, I wanted it with Betty. This is your chance with William."

"This looks like a nice place," Marty said as Hiram pulled up to the club drop at the Eagle Oaks Golf and Country Club. They had passed several of the fairways on the way to the clubhouse, and she knew from experience that a course like this one was expensive to maintain. Hiram probably paid a pretty penny in membership dues.

"It's the best around. Lou and Rhonda used to like playing here." He looked at her tentatively, as if wanting to say more, but not sure he should.

Marty sensed what was on his mind and welcomed the chance to lay his worries to rest. She liked Hiram, and appreciated his protective streak when it came to Louise. "Something else you want to say, Hiram?"

"Just ... Lou's been through a whole lot." He got out and walked to the back of the SUV and opened the rear gate. Marty came around to meet him.

"I know all about Rhonda, and what Lou went through when she died. Every day, I feel lucky that your sister was brave enough to try to be happy again, and all I want to do is make sure that she is." Marty lugged her clubs to the drop and waited while Hiram did the same. She was pleased to see his easy smile as he digested what she had said.

"A man worries about his little sister, you know ... no matter how old he gets."

"I'm glad you do, Hiram. But you don't ever have to worry about me. Like I said, all I want to do is make her happy."

"From the looks of things, I'd say you were doing a pretty good job. Just don't ever stop."

"I don't intend to," Marty answered with a grin. "Now that we've got all that settled, why don't we head out to the driving range first?"

"Sure thing."

Hiram led her into the pro shop, where she scouted the displays while he went to get tokens for the ball machine. Immediately, she confirmed her earlier assessment-this was definitely an upscale club. Hardly anything on the women's racks was under a hundred bucks. Even the items on the sale table were higher than the first-rate apparel back at Pine Island.

"How are you doing, Hiram?"

Marty looked up to see Louise's brother greet a couple of men just coming into the pro shop. Both were in their early to mid-fifties, dressed in expensive golf duds.

"Norm, Carl." He nodded politely to each.

"You playing today?" It was Norm who asked. He was a burly man with a bulbous nose that made Marty think of her ex-husband.

"Just hitting some range balls," Hiram answered meekly.

"Too bad. Carl and I could use a few extra bucks this week. You know how the wives are about spending our money." Norm chuckled and nudged his friend, who laughed along.

Hiram glanced sheepishly over at Marty and back at the two men. "Sorry, guys. Not today."

"Aw, come on, Hiram," Carl goaded. "Maybe it's your lucky day."

Marty caught his eye again and shot him a quick wink, hoping he would pick up on her idea. She didn't even know these jerks, and already she wanted to kick their asses.

"I don't know, guys. I'm here with my sister's friend. We just came out to hit some balls."

"That's good, Hiram," Carl said. "Practice makes perfect. Isn't that what they say?" Again, the two men laughed at Hiram's expense.

"I've been working a little with a golf pro too, so I wanted to try out a few things. I might not be as easy to whip as I was last time we played."

That's it, Hiram. Suck 'em in. Nice and easy.

"Money talks, Stevens. There's an ATM right outside." Norm gestured with his thumb toward the door. "All we need is a fourth."

Hiram looked around as if in search of a playing partner. "I don't know, fellows. I promised Marty I'd go hit with her." He looked back at Marty and waved her over. "Marty, these are a couple of my colleagues, Norm and Carl."

"How do you do?" She walked over and shook hands with each, smiling demurely. She turned to Hiram. "If you want to play with your friends, I can take the car and head on home. Just call when you want somebody to come back for you."

"No, that's no way to treat company," he said. "Some other time, fellows."

That's too subtle, Hiram. "What if ...? I could be your partner. Then you wouldn't miss out on a chance to play with your friends."

Norm snorted. "Yeah, Hiram. Why don't you let Marty be your partner? You don't want to be rude to your guest."

"I play in a lot of foursomes with the women at my club down in Florida. Sometimes we team up and count whatever score is the lowest on each hole," she suggested. "What if we did that?"

Hiram shrugged. "I-I guess. Is that all right with you guys?"

"Sure!" Norm slapped his shoulder. "Best ball. Ten dollars a hole."

Hiram pulled out his wallet and peeked inside. "All I've got is twenties. I better see if I can get some change."

"Twenty dollars a hole, then!" Norm roared.

Hiram shrugged. "I better hit the ATM ... just in case."

Marty followed him outside as he fished for his bank card. "Are these guys any good?"

"High eighties, usually."

"You can put your card away, then. We won't be needing any money." Marty chuckled evilly. "I hate to badmouth your friends, but these guys are a couple of jerks."

"Oh, they're not my friends. Norm and Carl work at one of the big law firms downtown. They're always bragging about business and how much money they're raking in."

"Let's take them down a notch, shall we?" Marty hadn't had this much fun on the course in twenty years.

Louise pulled up in front of the house she had grown up in. The small yard had been mowed recently, apparent from the dried grass that clumped in rows. She remembered how she used to envy Hiram, who was given fifty cents a week to take care of the yard. She earned her allowance with housework, but she would rather have been working outside too.

From the curb, she could see the window fans on the first floor going full speed. That house was like an oven in the summertime, she recalled, much like the old house she and Rhonda had owned in Greensburg.

Louise drew a deep breath and got out of her car, scooping up the carton of fruit preserves she had brought from North Carolina as a gift to William and his wife. After Hiram had told her that their older brother wasn't well, she began to worry about how she would react at seeing him.

Before she reached the porch, the front door opened. A frail woman stood behind the wooden screen door and waited for her to approach. Without even a greeting, the woman opened the door and motioned her in. Louise knew from experience that this was about as hospitable as Glenda Stevens could manage.

"How are you, Glenda?" She made a motion to hug her older sister-in-law, but Glenda shied away. Louise settled for a pat on the shoulder.

"We're all right, I guess." She took the carton of preserves without another word and shuffled down a hallway that led to what had been Louise's parents' bedroom. The room was dark, lit only by the television and a small sliver of daylight peeking out from behind the dingy brown curtains. "William, look who's here."

Louise inhaled the dank odor of the room as she entered, taking in the pitiful sight of her ailing brother. He was seated in an old vinyl recliner, a plastic tube pouring oxygen into his lungs through his nose. His shirt and pants were covered with food stains from his latest meal, the remains of which sat on a tray at his side.

"William? It's me, Louise."

"I can see that," he said softly, not in his usual gruff tone.

"How are you?"

"How do ... I look?" He paused in the midst of his sentence to draw a breath.

"Not so good."

Glenda collected the tray and left immediately for another part of the house. From the looks of things, this visit by her husband's sister would provide a much-needed break from her caretaking role.

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

"Just ... can't breathe very well." William Stevens had outlived most of his cohort, many of whom were claimed by lung ailments similar to the one that plagued him now.

"I've been visiting Hiram and Judy. I'm really glad Glenda said it was okay to come."

William grunted and grappled for the remote control that was buried in his chair cushion. After a long moment, he found the button he was looking for and muted the TV.

As she waited for her brother to finish his task, Louise looked around the room. On the bookshelf behind his chair were several framed photographs, mostly pictures of the grandchildren ... and probably a few great-grandchildren. An old black and white photo caught her eye. It was one she had seen at Hiram's a couple of nights ago, a picture of the adult William with his two siblings, both toddlers. Louise was deeply moved to think that it meant something to her brother to have a reminder of his family, especially considering the distance they had maintained over the years.

"I can ... hear you better now."

"Did Hiram tell you that I moved to Florida a couple of years ago?"

He nodded. "Said you ... retired."

"That's right. That's one of the reasons I haven't been to see you as often as I used to. It's a long way to drive."

"Hiram comes ... about once a month."

"That's what he told me. You know, he's retiring this year. How old were you when you quit work?" She just wanted to make conversation, anything to get her brother to talk.

"Sixty-five ... on my birthday. That was the ... company rule."

"Goodness, that was seventeen years ago. What have you been doing with yourself all this time?"

William gave a faint laugh. "Sitting in this chair ... mostly." He peered over the arm to check the gauge on his oxygen tank. Apparently satisfied, he leaned back.

"It's awfully hot down in Florida right now. A friend of mine has a house in the mountains of North Carolina and I've stayed up there for the past two summers."

"Do you still ... live with that ... woman?" he rasped.

Louise was jolted by the question. William had met Rhonda only once or twice, and she didn't recall ever telling him that they lived together. "No, she died almost four years ago."

William grunted. "Sorry. I ... liked her. She was ... nice."

"Thank you ... thank you for saying that. She meant a lot to me."

He nodded and looked at his shaky hands. "I could see that ... when you were with her."

Louise couldn't think what to say. Her brother's words had stunned her into silence.

"I bet I won't ... be here the next time you come ... to Wheeling."

Louise's eyes began to mist. "I hope that isn't true."

"It comes ... for everybody, Louise." He shifted in his chair, being careful to stretch the plastic tube so as not to impede the oxygen flow. "S'pose I should say ... thank you ... for the house."

"You're welcome." Louise smiled despite the tears that continued to build. "Hiram and I both were glad to see the house kept in the family."

He glanced toward the corner. "You know, I ... was born right here ... in this room."

Louise nodded. She and Hiram were born in the local hospital, but she had always been fascinated with the idea of her mother giving birth to William at home. "I'm glad you got to live here again ... that you got to come back." *That you'll probably die in this room as well.* "William, I ..."

She looked up to see his eyes also clouded with tears and she fought to keep her composure for what she needed to say.

"I wish we'd had a chance to get to know each other better all those years ago. I was always afraid of you, you know."

William chuckled softly. "Yeah. But I was ... proud of you. And Hiram too. I used to ... tell the boys at ... the mines about you ..."

He finished with a coughing spell that caused Louise to jump up and offer him water. She suddenly felt guilty for the burden her visit was placing on his struggle to breathe. "I guess I should be going soon. I'm really glad I got to see you."

"I ... appreciate you coming by. Take care of ... yourself, Louise."

"I will. You take care of yourself too." She stood and picked up her pocketbook.

"One more thing ..." He looked right at her, the tears now trickling down his cheeks. "Be happy."

"I will." She bent to kiss him on the forehead and pat his hand in farewell. After one last look-probably the very last look-she left, fighting back a sob as she called goodbye to Glenda.

Be happy, he said. Life and health were just too precious to waste.

The foursome approached the first tee, where Norm and Carl eagerly hopped out of the cart. They were probably already counting their money, Marty thought. On the short ride from the clubhouse, she had explained to Hiram that hustling was an art. You couldn't spring your trap too early, or they might find a way to elevate their game and overcome your advantage. But you couldn't wait too long, because you didn't want them to get too much confidence-confident golfers played better.

"Just remember, if we drop these first couple of holes, it's no big deal. Besides, if you can swing the way you were swinging last night, you might just hold your own."

"I doubt that." He got out of the cart and pulled his driver out of the bag.

"Confidence, Hiram."

He nodded and approached the tee.

"Why don't you take honors, Hiram ... since you might not get another chance today?" Carl laughed at his joke.

The first hole was a straightforward par four, with a wide, relatively flat fairway. Hiram teed up his ball and took a few practice swings. Marty watched from the cart, biting her tongue not to shout out advice. Finally he connected, his shot carrying almost 250 yards, but fading slightly to come to rest on the edge of the fairway.

"Good shot, Hiram!" she called.

"Not bad, Stevens," Norm said. "Now sit back and watch how a pro does it."

Marty nearly choked on the golf tee she held between her teeth. She watched as Norm wildly crushed his drive, sending it twenty yards past Hiram's, but into the high grass of the rough.

Likewise, Carl gave it everything he had, his ball landing in the rough on the opposite side. As of right now, Hiram had the best ball.

Marty got out of the cart and reached for her driver. "If you guys want, I'll play from the back tees too. It might be quicker if we don't have to drive up every hole."

Norm smiled at her with a look that told her she was about to be patronized. "I don't think it matters all that much. If you hit from back here, we'll just have to stop for you to hit again. We might as well go on up so you can get a better score."

"Whatever you think." Marty decided right then that she would make her move on the fourth hole and not the fifth. She wanted this asshole's money bad.

They stopped at the ladies' tee and Marty got out. She could hear Norm and Carl snickering from their cart and was on the verge of abandoning all pretenses when Hiram called to her.

"Come on, Marty. Just do your best. It'll be okay."

Nice touch, Hiram. For someone like Marty, it took all the concentration she could muster to hit a bad shot intentionally. She choked up on her club to cut the distance and opened her grip just a bit. The result was a wicked slice that ended up in the rough on the right.

"Darn."

"It's okay. You'll get it next time," Hiram yelled.

She climbed into the cart and they shot off down the fairway. "Have you decided which club you're going to use?" she asked quietly, so Norm and Carl wouldn't hear.

"It looks like I'm about a hundred yards out. Nine-iron?"

"Not if you follow through like I showed you last night. A wedge ought to do it."

Marty hopped out and hit another errant shot, one that put her close to where Carl's shot had landed.

Norm got out of his cart and approached Hiram. "Why don't you ride with Carl, Marty? You're both going to the same side."

Marty grabbed her three-iron, knowing a wedge was what she needed. She mumbled a last piece of advice to Hiram. "Remember to follow through so you're wrapping the club all the way around your shoulder."

"So what do you do down in Florida?" Carl asked.

It was a genuine attempt to be friendly, Marty decided. "Sweat a lot," she answered with a chuckle. An unwritten rule of hustling was you weren't allowed to lie. She changed the subject quickly, though, figuring that Carl would probably rather talk about himself. "What about you? You must do something important like Hiram."

"I'm a tax attorney. Norm and I are both partners at the largest firm in Wheeling. I'll never forget the feeling that day my name went up on the door ..."

Marty gave her best imitation of an interested smile as she contemplated how to snag the sand trap with her next shot. Hiram had already hit his second shot, a beauty that landed on the green about twelve feet from the hole. Norm's shot went over the back of the green, prompting a loud curse.

Hiram eventually won the hole with a par, beating out Carl's bogey. Norm finished with a double bogey, while Marty logged a four-over-par eight. But since they were playing best ball, neither Norm's nor Marty's score mattered.

The second hole was another par four, which was a draw, since Hiram and Norm both had bogeys. Marty once again shot an eight, while Carl gave up after hitting into the water twice.

As they approached the third tee, Norm made his fatal mistake. "Marty, maybe you ought to do what Carl did on that last one. Go ahead and pick your ball up after a couple of shots. These guys behind us are catching up."

Norm and Carl's grace period was officially over, she decided. This hole was a par three, a straight shot over a lake. The ladies' tee was only a few feet away from the men's and Marty walked over and teed up her shot while they hit theirs.

Hiram's ball caught the water just short of the green and he groaned. Norm hit into the sand trap to the right, but he was satisfied with merely clearing the lake. Carl managed to hit the green on the fly, but his ball rolled off the back.

Marty turned her back to the men and grinned. She was tempted to pick up a few strands of grass and toss them into the air to assess the breeze, but she wasn't quite ready to tip her hand. With a solid stroke of her seven-iron, she sent the ball in a high arc. It cleared the water nicely and landed with a soft thud on the green, coming to rest about six feet from the hole.

"Wow! Did you see that?" She danced around the tee in exaggerated celebration. "That's what I love about this game. Once in awhile, you hit a shot that's just perfect."

Norm looked over at Carl and muttered. "Sometimes I'd rather be lucky than good."

Hiram walked over to the cart to retrieve a new ball, which he was required to hit from the edge of the lake farthest from the hole. "Are we done playing with them?"

"Oh, yeah," Marty answered with a grin. "Let's have some fun."

Marty sank her putt for birdie, easily winning the hole by two strokes. Number Four was a par-five dogleg right. She had honors, but since she was hitting from the closer tees, she would have to hit last.

All three men hit their tee shots down the middle of the fairway, giving each a straight shot toward the green. Marty played her tee shot to fade right, so that it cleared the dogleg and turned the corner. That should leave her within range of reaching the green on her next shot.

"Woo-hoo! That's two in a row. I tell you, I'm starting to feel it."

Carl shook his head in wonder. "Don't worry, Norm. Luck like that can't last."

The men hit their second shots, with Hiram and Carl coming well short of the green, but in the middle of the fairway. Norm's ball was in the woods, probably lost.

Marty pulled out a fairway wood and lined up her shot. This time, when she was sure that Norm and Carl were watching, she tossed a few sprigs of grass into the air, noting the slight right-to-left breeze. With a mighty stroke, she sent the ball straight ahead, where it rolled onto the green.

The color drained from Norm's face and he turned to Hiram. "You say Marty is a friend of your sister's?"

"Yeah." Hiram could no longer hide his grin. "And get this-she's a golf pro."

"I wish I had a picture of those guys' faces when Marty hit that ball on the green at Four," Hiram said, still laughing.

"I can't believe you two!" Louise was secretly thrilled that Hiram and Marty had enjoyed such a romp. Her brother was rarely one to cut loose and have fun.

"The picture I wanted was when they handed you all that money and you folded it up and stuffed it in the 'Fight Lou Gehrig's Disease' jar. That was priceless," Marty said.

"Yeah ... I betcha both of them went home and wrote it down so they could take it off their taxes."

"You're probably right."

"How much did you two make?" Judy asked.

"Three hundred and forty bucks," Hiram answered. "We won every hole but one."

"That's right. As soon as they figured out they'd been snookered, they fell apart."

"You know, I feel kind of bad about it, though," Hiram said. Then he broke into a grin. "But it sure felt good to kick their asses."

"Hiram!" Judy frowned in disgust at her husband's language as he and Marty slapped a high five.

"Don't feel bad," Marty said. "You think they'd feel bad if they had taken your money?"

"Probably not."

"And they practically begged us to play. Besides, I kept everybody's score." Marty reached into her hip pocket. "It so happens you beat both of them on twelve holes, lost two, and tied on four. Oh, and just so you know, Norm cheated all day, moving his ball around to get a better lie. And on Sixteen, he conveniently forgot to count his first try at getting out of the sand trap."

"You're kidding!"

"You better watch him if you play with him again. But what I wanted to tell you is that even if I hadn't been there, you would have ended up with a hundred and sixty dollars."

"Two hundred," Louise corrected gently. She was, after all, the former math teacher.

"Whatever. All I'm saying is that your brother played with a lot of confidence and had a great game."

"I owe that to you, Marty."

"Maybe you and Judy ought to come down to North Carolina for a week or two. We'll play at my club and I'll show you more stuff."

"Be careful what you ask for," Hiram warned. "Once I retire, we'll be turning up on your doorstep like a bad penny."

Marty and Louise waved from the front seat as they pulled away from the curb.

"That was fun," Marty said. "I really had a good time."

"I'm so glad, sweetheart. They both like you a lot, I can tell."

"I like them too."

"I didn't realize how much I missed seeing them. We used to get together at least once a month, and now I only see them a couple of times a year."

"But now they'll be coming to visit us too."

"That was sweet of you to invite them." Louise reached over and patted Marty's thigh.

"I had an ulterior motive," Marty confessed. "Judy fixes sweet potatoes, and pasta, and rice with mushroom soup. I figure if they visit, you'll fix stuff like that so they'll feel at home."

"Do you hear that, Petie? She'd do anything for pasta, even put up with my relatives."

The Boston terrier flattened his ears and twitched his tail, as he always did when he heard his name.

Louise sighed. "I'll probably have to come back before too long, you know. William won't be with us much longer."

"I know." Marty held out her hand, which Louise squeezed hard. "I'll come back with you if you want ... even if it's just to share the driving."

"What would I ever do without you, Marty?"

"Maybe if we take good care of each other, it will be a long time before we have to find out."

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it. If you'd like to send feedback, drop me a line at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.

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