



LADIES' DAY

▶ CAN A ROUND OF GOLF
BRING A FAMILY TOGETHER?



Lisa Williams Kline

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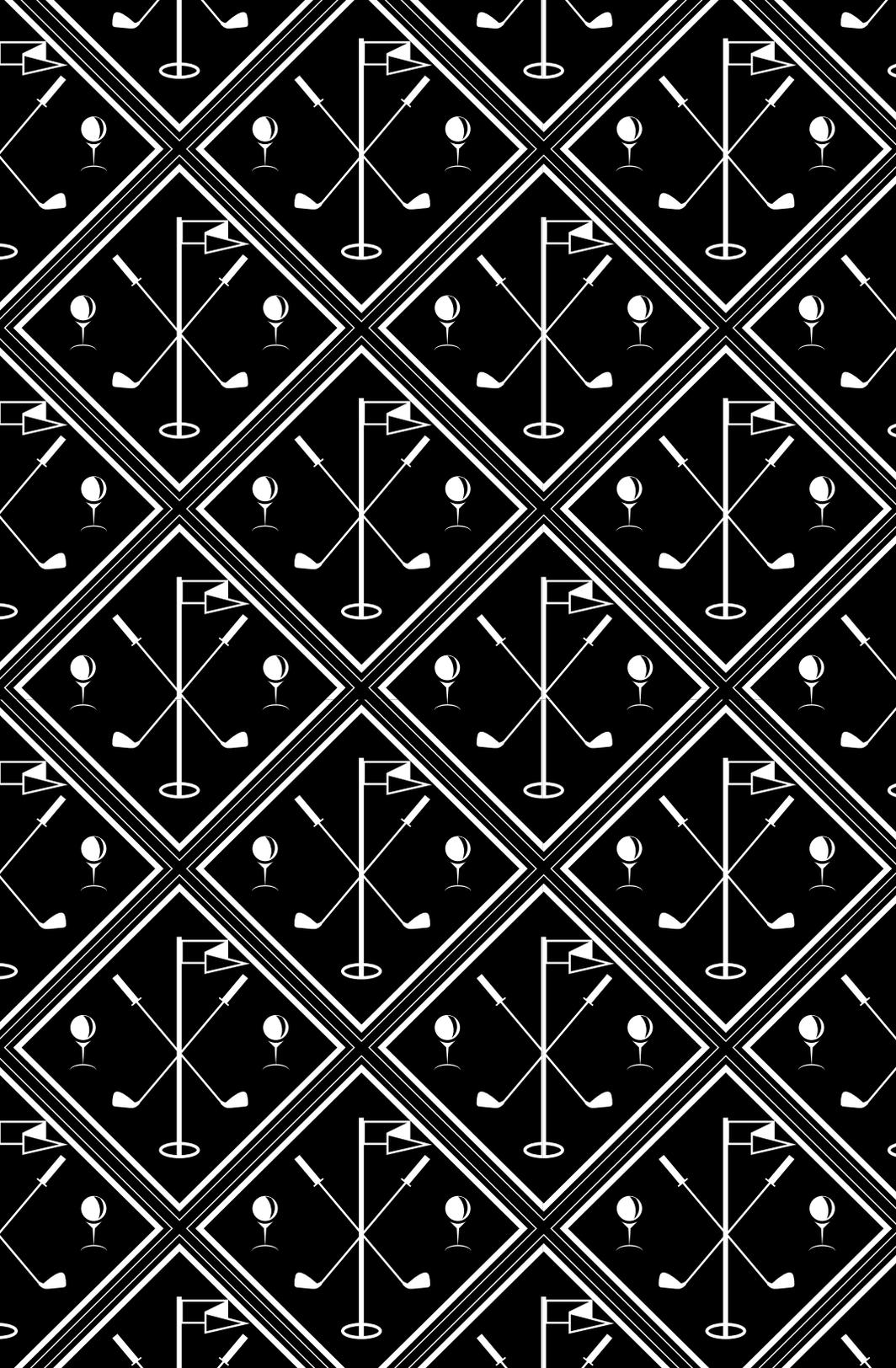
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FOR JEFF—

WHO TAUGHT ME TO PLAY GOLF.





CHAPTER ONE



Beth

Beth went by the university to check her mail, and one of her freshman comp students was waiting for her in the faculty parking lot. Beth hadn't seen her in class for weeks and had, in fact, given up on her. But now here she stood, in jeans and a T-shirt that looked slept in, shifting her weight from one dirty flip-flopped foot to the other.

"Mrs. Sawyer, I know I've missed some classes, but can you give me an incomplete?" One of her pierced ears was infected; the lobe was an angry red.

"You have an F, Tiffany," Beth said mechanically, her heart beginning to pound as she unlocked her Civic door. That haunted look in Tiffany's eyes—it was like Julie's. And the way she resembled a wild cat yearning for escape. Beth had that sinking feeling she always got when a student self-destructed. Every battle she fought with a student reopened the battle she'd lost with Julie.

“Mrs. Sawyer, please.” The girl’s bloodshot brown eyes welled. “You have to give me another chance. I got kicked out of my apartment and I’ve been living in my car.”

“What about your parents?” Beth studied Tiffany’s face. So many of them lied. The lies they told were endlessly brazen and inventive. Not just the grandparents dying and dogs eating homework and computer malfunctions, but wild stories about crazed roommates and bizarre accidents. If only they put half that creativity into their essays.

“I can’t go back home. Please, just give me an incomplete. I have to get this grade to keep my financial aid.”

A bluish vein pulsed in the girl’s thin neck, and her slender fingers trembled slightly. When had she eaten last? Beth’s throat tightened, and she was carried back to that day with Julie. A day she yearned to have a chance to relive.

She dug into her purse and pulled out a bar of Hershey’s chocolate she had packed for energy during her upcoming golf round and gave it to Tiffany. “How much time do you need?” she asked.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Beth sat down on the wooden steps in front of the rundown Silver Lakes pro shop to put on her golf shoes and wait for Margo and Vanessa. A late spring breeze ruffled through the hot pink azalea blossoms, and a few petals fluttered to the ground. Stray dandelions bravely popped through a sidewalk crack next to Beth’s foot. While tying her left shoe, Beth spotted another spider vein beside her knee and scrubbed her thumb over it.

She suddenly had to think of sitting on the couch with Julie and Paul when they were little, on Friday afternoons, watching some animated movie, her fingers tracing the fine, damp hair at her children’s temples. They would still be in that position when

Mark arrived home. He'd come up behind them and put his warm, capable hands on Beth's shoulders. She remembered it so clearly it could have been yesterday.

That was before.

When life was sweet and simple.

Paul had just told her the night before that Mark was thinking about marrying Ronda, the woman he'd been living with for the past few years. She'd always known that her husband would move on long before she could. She'd been dreading it for years.

Beth gave her head a good shake to force herself back into the present, when Margo pulled her SUV into the lot and stuck her head out the window. "Hey, girl! Ready to bring this course to its knees?"

"Oh, sure," Beth said, grinning. Margo could always make her smile.

Margo, tall, thin, and athletic, with a long thick ponytail she'd let go gray, climbed out and headed around the back of her SUV to unload her clubs, then stuffed her golf glove into her back shorts pocket. "Now, should I accidentally on purpose forget to get a scorecard, or do we feel like higher math today?" Margo, a retired high school gym teacher and several years older than Beth, had kept her Maryland accent even though she'd been living in North Carolina for close to twenty years.

"Oh, let's keep score, we're not that bad." Beth followed Margo into the pro shop to check in.

"Afternoon, ladies!" said Vanessa, joining them inside to complete their usual threesome.

As Vanessa leaned over the counter to grab a scorecard, Beth admired her slim, dark legs and glossy black box-braided hair, both of which made her look younger than her sixty years. "Did you girls notice," said Vanessa, "that the Memberships Available sign by the club entrance has been vandalized?"

"Really?" Beth rolled her eyes.

“Somebody changed the *p* in *memberships* to a *t*, so it now says Membershits Available. Isn’t that the most juvenile thing?”

“Teenagers!” growled Margo. “Jean and I used to live on Bonner Lane and teenagers used to keep stealing our street sign because they thought it said Boner Lane. I wanted to say, ‘Hellooo! Spell much?’”

Beth laughed. “Have you ever known a time when Silver Lakes *wasn’t* having a membership drive?” In their small town of Solomon, there was the Old South Club for the old rich and the Country Day Club for the new rich. And then there was their Silver Lakes—the Groucho Marx of country clubs. People who *weren’t* rich and didn’t want to belong to any club that would accept them as a member.

“I don’t think I could play on one of those fancy courses with putting greens like velvet. Silver Lakes is just my speed,” Beth said.

“You would be referring to bumpy greens constantly under repair?” Vanessa shook her head, laughing.

As the three of them headed down the path toward the first tee, Beth patted her left pocket for her lucky ball and her right pocket for the ibuprofen for her joints on the back nine. Her old pull cart squeaked as it bounced along behind her. Sturdy yellow daylilies swayed in an overgrown bed beside the cement walkway, which badly needed power washing.

Margo, Beth’s friend and neighbor, with Mark’s support, had persuaded her to try golf. It was fun but also required intense concentration. It helped to push the obsessive thoughts out of Beth’s mind. Vanessa, who taught composition at the university with Beth, joined. Beth had always envied Vanessa’s no-nonsense, upbeat control of a classroom. The three women, none of whom had played before, had taken lessons together. They’d never found a fourth, though they’d invited others to join them at first. Fitting the weekly game around their respective work schedules, they became comfortable as just three. They complemented each other so well. Beth was perfectly content playing straight man to Vanessa

and Margo. She had long accepted that she didn't stand out in a crowd, neither with her reserved, quiet personality nor with her appearance—average height, slim build, and light brown hair that she occasionally highlighted to disguise the threads of gray. She loved the laughter caused by Margo's outspoken wit, and she reveled in the attention caused by Vanessa's beauty and confidence. And that's the way it had been, for over fifteen years.

"Well, Silver Lakes isn't as bad as it used to be," Beth said. "Remember when we didn't even have a porta-potty on the course and we had to go in the woods?"

"And instead of a snack bar," Vanessa added, "they had that self-serve steamer with those wrinkled, green weenies?" All three of them made faces and laughed at the memory.

"Come on, let's show this course who's boss," Margo said, teeing up her ball.

"I hear you, girlfriend," said Vanessa.

Beth smiled. Being with Margo and Vanessa had lifted her spirits already.

The friends had a long-standing agreement that serious subjects had to wait until after the round, and so Beth didn't bring up Mark's plans to get married again until they had ventured into the parking lot. "I knew it would happen someday, but it still comes as a shock!"

Margo opened the back of her SUV and sat on the tailgate to take off her golf shoes. "After all the water under the bridge, do you really care?"

"No, I guess I don't really care." Beth put her ibuprofen and lucky ball back in the zippered compartment of her golf bag, knowing she sounded defensive.

"Yes, you do." Vanessa threw her clubs in the back of her little red convertible. "But you shouldn't. That's ancient history.

Margo took off her visor and redid her gray ponytail. She gave Beth a pointed, almost pained look. "You do still care, don't you?"

Aww, Beth. Vanessa is right. That's ancient history. Think how hard you've worked . . . how hard we've all worked . . . to put that in the rearview mirror."

Beth looked away.



CHAPTER TWO



Beth

Beth and Vanessa were almost out to the first tee for their weekly round when Margo came scooting up on a cart at top speed. “Sorry I’m late, girls!”

Vanessa glanced back at the pro shop and pointed to two carts full of men racing toward them. “Hey, is that Buddy Watkins’s group trying to jump in front of us?”

“Oh, they’re slow as Methuselah!” Beth said. “Quick, Margo, gun it up there and hit!”

Margo, the only one on a cart, gasped and zipped toward the red tees, still eighty yards away. The golf clubs in the men’s bags rattled like sabers as their carts bounced over the gravel path, closing the distance to the women.

“Hey, girls,” Buddy shouted, twenty yards away. “When’s your tee time?”

“Twelve-forty-one,” Vanessa said.

“Ours is twelve-thirty-one,” Buddy, red-faced, screeched his cart to a halt and jumped out. “So I guess we’re up.” He hiked his pants under his protruding stomach and pulled out a driver with a head the size of a Clydesdale’s hoof.

“Your tee time is twelve-fifty-one,” said Beth, feeling heat rush to her face. “I saw the book. We’re up.”

Buddy glowered, caught in the lie.

His current behavior was proof of his misogyny. Not that proof was needed. The three friends hated Buddy on principle, because he’d once stopped Vanessa in the hallway of the clubhouse and asked her to get him another beer—even though she was dressed in golf attire.

Beth knew all of Buddy’s buddies, except the man sitting in the back cart. He was slim, with salt-and-pepper hair, and seemed entirely too distinguished to be with the rest of those Neanderthals.

“Be reasonable, ladies,” Buddy said. “We’re on carts and you’re walking. We’ll get on out of your way and you can have a nice *leisurely* game. Talk all you want.” He minced his fingers together like he was tapping the ash from a cigar.

His mocking emphasis on *leisurely* made blood pound in Beth’s head.

Buddy Watkins had been known to go into a catatonic state while standing over a putt, and he had the nerve to accuse them of slow play?

“We don’t have to go ahead of them, Buddy,” said the salt-and-pepper man. “I’m not in that big of a hurry.” He smiled. At Beth. She almost turned around to see if there was someone behind her whom he was smiling at.

“Aw, let them go,” Vanessa whispered to Beth. “If they’re behind us they’ll try to hit us with every shot.”

Beth stared at Vanessa for a few long seconds, glanced at salt-and-pepper man, then finally shrugged. “Fine.”

"Mighty kind of you ladies," said Buddy with a gloating smile. "We'll get right on out of your way. I doubt you'll see our dust for the rest of the afternoon."

Beth waved up at Margo to move aside, then stepped behind the ball cleaner to wait with Vanessa while the men hit. Buddy had a baseball swing but was a competitor who managed to muscle most shots down the fairway.

Beth heaved a sigh. Sometimes she damn near hated every man on earth. At the same time, there was always that deep and almost indescribable connection with Mark that would never be severed. All those years they'd spent with Julie, and the difficult years after she was gone.

But what was with salt-and-pepper guy in the back cart? She could feel him looking at her. It surprised her. Most men, when meeting the three of them, would check out Vanessa, and laugh at Margo's jokes. Men didn't even notice Beth. According to Vanessa, it was because Beth didn't send out signals. "What signals?" Beth had asked. "You know, girl . . . *signals*," Vanessa had said. "Obviously you don't know what they are because you haven't sent out any for fifteen years."

When the gray-haired stranger stood to hit, he had a smooth swing that spoke of a few lessons, but mostly of natural athleticism. He was a thinking player. While he didn't hit his drive as far as Buddy's, it was in better position for his next shot.

Beth joined Vanessa in managing a flinty smile as the men scooted by. She looked away but she was too late to avoid snagging the gaze of the gray-haired man again. He touched his fingers to the brim of his cap. Funny, they hadn't said a word. Signals, she supposed, beginning to feel the heat of a blush.

Good grief, she'd literally felt a physical pull, like being reeled in by a fishing line. Maybe it was the pills. She had just started on estrogen. Within days, the hot flashes and mood swings gloriously

disappeared, but Beth also found herself struggling not to stare at men's crotches, and she'd nearly tackled that poor new management trainee at Harris Teeter, with his starched white shirt. Surely all she had to do to stop this foolishness was to quit taking the pills for a few days. Who said there was no upside to getting older?

Beth had told herself for years that her life was full without a man. She had her own house. Her teaching career. A son she saw three times a year. The possibility of a very sweet daughter-in-law, if Paul *ever* married Andrea. Grandchildren, maybe, in the future. And she knew that the reason her marriage had ended had very little to do with her or her ex.

No, Julie's disappearance had done them in.

As she and Vanessa headed down the fairway to meet up with Margo, two well-fed Canadian geese and their long-legged, downy babies waddled along a muddy pond's edge. A couple of yellow butterflies looped by, fluttering around each other in figure eights, then, seconds later, a pair of dragonflies, stuck together, buzzed Beth's ear. Pairs everywhere.

When Beth and Vanessa arrived, Margo picked up her tee. "I cannot *believe* y'all let them play through."



BETH HAD A HARD time concentrating on the game. On the fifth hole, she hit a terrible shot that went deep into the woods. She waded through the muscled oaks and grasping underbrush to find her ball, but she found her mind wandering back to the unraveling of her marriage. The sun went behind a cloud, and suddenly the air went cold and the leaves on the trees rattled like bones. A vine wrapped around her ankle, and she kicked her foot blindly, her eyes beginning to swim with tears as she tried to shake it off. Her friends seemed so small and so far away.

"C'mon, Beth," Margo yelled. "It's not the Hope Diamond. Just drop one!"

Beth didn't answer and, finally, she found the ball nestled under a healthy-looking patch of poison ivy. Beth could hardly see the ball for her tears. She'd gotten pretty good at losing things. Golf balls. Daughters. Husbands. She launched a low screamer and the ball skidded out of the poison ivy, solidly bonked the trunk of the oak tree, and ricocheted into the rough ten yards behind her original location.

"I can't concentrate," she told Margo. "I should just quit."

"If there's one thing I know, woman, you're not a quitter," Margo said.



THERE WERE NO silver lakes at Silver Lakes Country Club, although there were several muddy, scum-covered ponds badly in need of dredging, and when they reached the seventeenth tee, a par three over one of the ponds, Buddy's group was still on the green. Like a buzzard, Buddy circled his putt, peering from every angle.

"Jesus H. Christ." Margo leaned against her cart, blowing air through her cheeks. "They've been there long enough to take out a mortgage." She rummaged in her bag to pull out a short tee. A printout fluttered out of the pocket.

Beth jumped to pick it up.

"No!" Margo reached for the flyer. "Let me have that! You're not supposed to see that!"

Beth, surprised, began to hand the printout back to Margo, but couldn't help but glimpse a photo of a tall, solid girl with shoulder length chestnut hair. The resemblance was inescapable.

Margo tried to snatch the printout back, but Beth pulled away. "No, Beth!"

Beth turned her back to Margo to read the caption. “Local Teen Phenom Sky Sawyer to Play in US Girls Junior Qualifying Event in Winston-Salem.”

She looked like Julie, but yet, she didn't. She was serious, determined, nothing impulsive or dangerous about her. Where Julie's eyes had always flickered with mischief and secrets, this girl's eyes, beneath her visor, looked out across the fairway with disarming honesty, determination, and lack of guile. “Sky Sawyer? Oh my God.”

Beth flashed to a memory of Julie announcing that should she ever have a daughter she'd name her Sky. And Beth and Mark had laughed; the choice had seemed so, well, like a teenager.

“Okay, fine, you've seen it. Freaks you out, doesn't it? I mean, the name and the resemblance. What are the odds?” Margo raked a hand through her gray hair and jammed on a flowered sun visor. “Vanessa and I kind of had words over it. We wanted to tell you, but thought we'd be jumping back on that crazy merry-go-round again. I told her, ‘Let's just not say anything.’ But, last night I thought about it, and woman, you deserve to know. I was going to show you after the round.”

Beth scanned the article. Sky Sawyer was a fifteen-year-old freshman at Solomon High, a small school south of Statesville. She had moved to the area a few years ago, taken up golf, and had quickly begun to score well against the country club girls who had started at a much younger age. In exchange for lessons, she worked at the driving range at Solomon Municipal. “I cannot believe this.”

Vanessa waved a long-fingered and manicured hand at Beth. “She's fifteen, Beth,” she said. “About the right age.”

“Could be coincidence,” Margo said.

“An incredible coincidence. But she could be her—” Beth couldn't finish the thought. Was it possible? No. She couldn't believe how easy it was for her to get her hopes up. After the private investigator, thousands of dollars, hours of therapy for both herself

and Mark, after fifteen years of false clues and dashed hopes, this was the closest thing to a lead in a long, long time. Beth pulled out her three wood and took a practice swing, but her brain was a jumble and her hands were shaking. She forgot to check to see if the men had cleared the green. And she must have had more adrenalin than she thought. Her shot soared over the pond and took the green on the fly.

“Fore!” Beth should never have yelled. Buddy Watkins straightened up and glared. Just as Mr. Salt-and-Pepper turned to look, he grabbed his side and doubled over. Beth’s ball had hit him right in the ribcage.

“Oh my God, you did a Gerald Ford!” Vanessa said, gasping.

After a jumbled moment of confusion, they agreed that Beth should take Margo’s cart and go down and see if the man was okay. Margo offered to go with her, but Beth thought that could be more incendiary than helpful. Beth jumped in, feeling like an idiot as she bounced down the asphalt path and thundered over the small wooden bridge to the turnaround beside the green. By the time she pulled up beside the other two carts, the man was hunched over with his hands on his knees, surrounded by his buddies.

“I’m so sorry,” Beth called as she tried to push through. “Are you hurt?”

Buddy’s face was florid as he poked at the air in front of Beth’s nose with his index finger. “Were you trying to kill somebody?”

“In all fairness, Buddy,” said Salt-and-Pepper Man, rubbing his ribcage, “I could have read the Sunday *New York Times* while you were standing over that four-footer.”

Beth felt a flush of appreciation for the man’s support, especially since he was the one she’d hit. She stepped closer. “Seriously, maybe you should get that looked at.”

“It’s okay, I’ll be fine. Just a little bruise.” The man hobbled back to his cart.

“If you end up having to go to the doctor, I’ll take care of the bill,” Beth said. She checked her pockets, already knowing she hadn’t brought any business cards, and finally scribbled with the stubby golf pencil on the scorecard folded in her pocket. “Here’s my name and number. I’m so sorry,” she said again.

“It was a nice shot,” he said with a grin, wincing slightly. “Rib . . . I mean pin high.” He looked at the scorecard. “You have a decent round going here. You sure you want to give me the scorecard?”

“With the amount of time I’ve spent in the woods today, I don’t think I’m going on tour any time soon.”

“So who is?” He laughed. He had nice, even teeth, with one crooked incisor on the right side. Lively, deep-set brown eyes with crow’s feet around them. A person who laughed a lot. Again, the pull, like a magnet. Good God, maybe she ought to ask her doctor if cutting back on that estrogen dosage would help her gain back her equilibrium.

“Do you have any ice? Try putting ice on it,” she ended up saying, a little breathlessly. And as quickly as she could escape, she rode the cart back up the hill toward her friends.

“You survived!” Margo said, shielding her eyes against the sun. “Did you get your ball?”

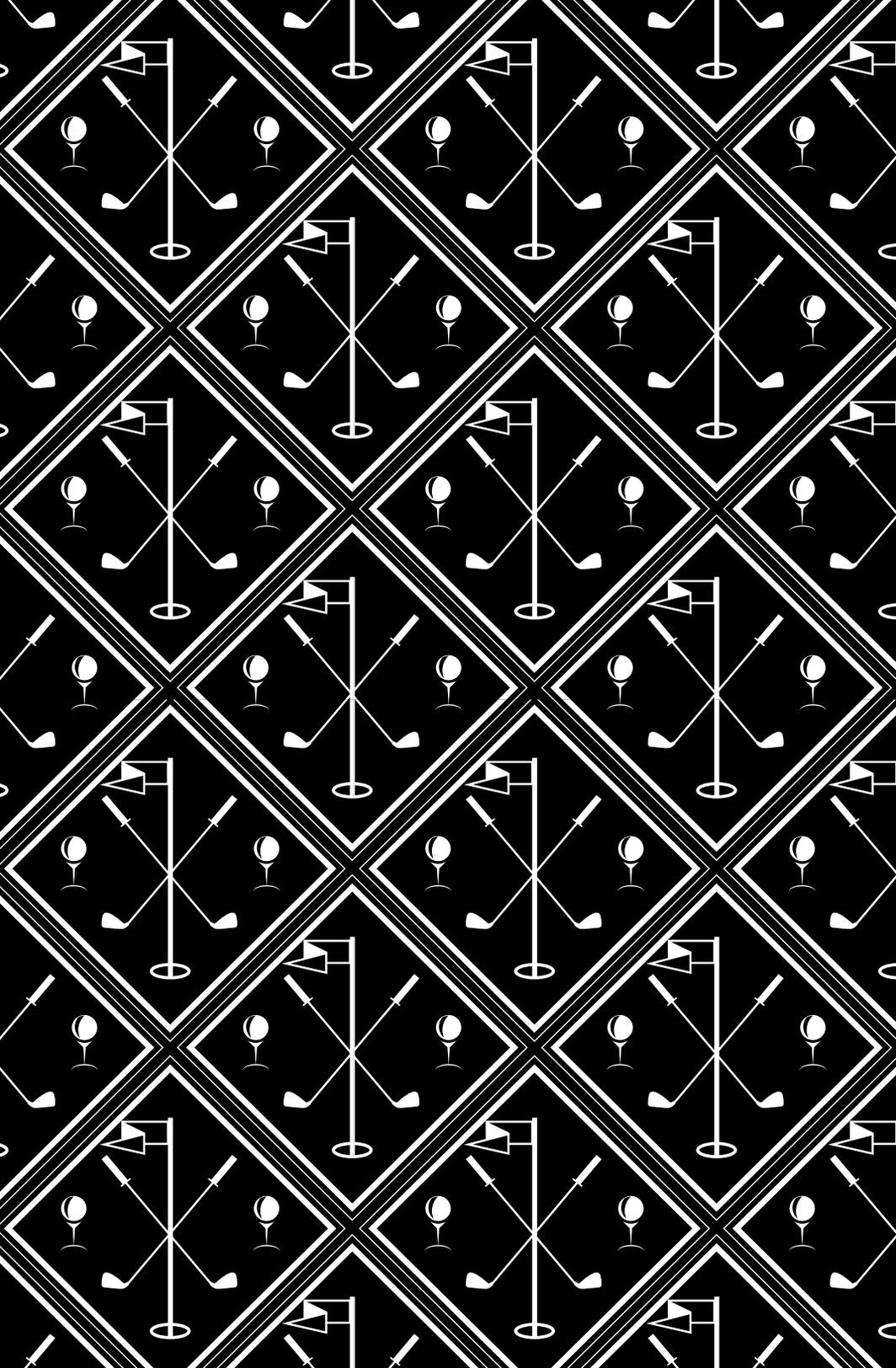
“Shit. In all the confusion, I forgot.”

Beth looked back just in time to see Buddy Watkins pluck her ball from the green, glance at their group on the tee, and toss the ball into the pond. Then he got in his cart and headed for eighteen.

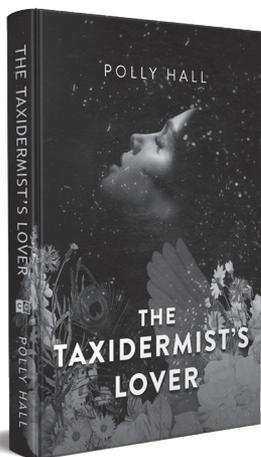
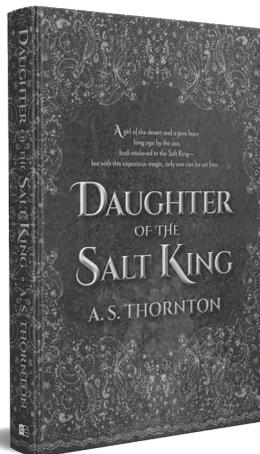
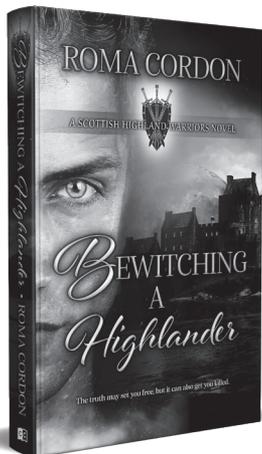
“That son of a bitch!” Margo said.

“We ought to report him to the golf committee!” said Vanessa, crossing her arms in frustration.

“That’s okay, I don’t need that ball, because I’m definitely quitting now.” Beth climbed out of the cart. She just couldn’t concentrate. All she could think about was Sky Sawyer.

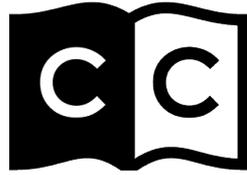


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HEARTACHE IS PAR FOR THE COURSE.

Fifteen years after her troubled daughter Julie ran away from home, Beth Sawyer stumbles across a newspaper photograph of an up-and-coming teen golfer, who not only shares her last name, but also looks just like her daughter. Sky Sawyer couldn't possibly be her granddaughter—or could she? With her sort-of-functional life sinking into a full on mulligan—and let's not get started on her soon-to-be-married ex-husband—Beth meets Barry, a fellow golfer who she accidentally hits with her golf ball and who might just be Mr. Right.

When Sky Sawyer joins her high school golf team, she hopes that the mother she thought dead may still be alive and seek her out at the championship tournament. But when she discovers that the man who raised her is not her father and a woman claiming to be her long-lost grandmother appears, her world falls apart.

With Beth and Sky fighting to gain what they both had lost, can they finally get a second chance at a happily ever after?



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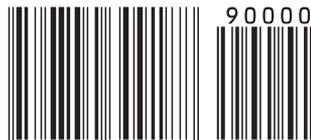
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