



There were no women in the early-morning foursome on the golf course. That was their first mistake. Cigar smoke mingled with talk of college football, NASCAR, deer hunting, breasts and business. Man talk. Much of it was vulgar, accompanied by guffaws and sniggers all the way down the fairway, up to the green and then on to the next tee.

The four men – a corporate CEO, his CFO, a patent attorney and a trade securities analyst – exuded an air of self-confidence and invulnerability. They were, after all, on hallowed ground for the consummation of insider business arrangements and under-the-table bargains. It was a time-honored tradition for men of their ilk to deal cards from a stacked deck. With their thousand-dollar putters and million-dollar stock options, they were merely doing what came naturally to them. The final handshakes on the eighteenth green would seal a bargain with unfair advantage bought and inside information sold. The formality of playing the game beforehand was little more than a primal competition to see who had the brightest plumage, the loudest roar, the widest antlers or the biggest . . . equipment.

Mist collected silently in the pot-shaped bunkers. The trees lining the fairway stood guard. Only the sparrows and finches darting about had

any direct access to what was going on and they were ignored. No little bird, it was collectively assumed, could possibly derail their plans to accumulate a mountain of additional undeserved wealth.

That was their second mistake.

The sixth hole was a par-four dogleg to the left with a water hazard skirting the fairway down to the green. Cattails rocked back and forth at the water's edge giving way to the gentle breeze.

"You reach the green in two," the CEO taunted the attorney with a smile, "and I'll send you a pair of courtside tickets for the Celtics."

The lawyer was the youngest of the four men, still in his thirties, and likely the only one who could reasonably hope to produce a long and accurate drive off the tee.

"I'd rather have that trophy wife of yours produce a twin sister for me, Richard," the lawyer replied and they all sniggered together like a locker room full of peephole delinquents. The attorney turned to address his ball, made a full backswing and uncoiled with a grunt. The driver connected solidly and the ball was launched as if shot from a cannon.

The next instant there was a sharp *crack!* and the golf ball disintegrated in mid-air.

The men were slow to respond. It took them a few seconds to understand they were no longer alone. Behind them stood a small, lithe woman dressed in black holding a revolver and wearing a burgundy mask.

"I'll score that as a birdie," she told them and took a step forward.

"What the —" the lawyer began. He set his jaw and brandished the driver as a weapon.

There was another *crack!* The oblong metal driver head fell to the ground like a wounded duck. The attorney swallowed hard and made an effort to keep from wetting himself.

"Don't test my patience," the woman warned. "I haven't had any coffee yet this morning and I've got PMS."

She tossed a dark velvet drawstring bag to the CEO.

"You've all got thirty seconds to fill that up. Watches, rings, jewelry, cell phones and wallets. Make it quick."

The men complied, still dazed by the sudden intrusion. Soon the

bag was lumpy with expensive trinkets. The securities analyst seemed to bite his tongue more than once to swallow a variety of complaints while the lawyer's eyes darted about looking for a possible means of escape.

"There," the pudgy CEO said and handed the bag back to the woman. "You've got what you wanted. Now be off with you."

The masked woman smiled and laughed, running a hand through her dark, shoulder-length hair.

"Mr. Armitage," she told him, shaking her head, "we've only just begun. Yes, I know you. And I know what you're doing here this morning" She jiggled the bag. The Rolexes, pinky rings and gold chains jangled together nicely. "This is only a down payment. Now listen closely. Remove your shoes and pants. You've got fifteen seconds."

"But -" the CFO protested.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Stanley?"

"These shoes are custom made. Orthopedically-designed just for me. They're of no use to anyone else."

The revolver fired again and smoke rose from a small black hole in the CFO's special left golf shoe. He'd effectively been separated from his little toe.

"You'll never wear them again, I promise." The woman watched as eight shoes and four pairs of pants were hastily tossed to the ground in a loose pile. The CFO hopped on one foot and leaned on Mr. Armitage's shoulder, a painful grimace painted on his face.

"Three boxers, one briefs," the thief observed. "How predictable. All right. You – Fruit of the Loom -" she pointed the gun at the lawyer, "- I want those two golf bags put into the first cart so they're all together. Understand?"

The lawyer ventured a glance at Mr. Stanley's bleeding foot.

"Yes Ma'am," he said.

"You're entering into a world of hurt, young lady," the securities analyst informed her. "Believe me, after today the authorities will be the least of your worries."

"You let me worry about that, Grandpa Hanes."

They all turned to watch the lawyer struggle with the golf bags. It

took some work but he eventually managed to wedge them all into the same electric cart. The exertion caused him to break out into a sweat. The masked woman bit at her lower lip. Fruit of the Loom had nice legs.

“All set,” the attorney said. He rejoined his companions at the tee box of the sixth hole. The foursome had lost all of its earlier swagger and bravado. They might yet join forces to screw over their shareholders and the competition but at least they wouldn’t brag about it. The woman in black looked at them all shivering in their skivvies and smiled.

“Into the water hazard,” she announced. “I want you all hip deep in the next twenty seconds.”

“This is outrageous,” Mr. Armitage grumbled. But he did as he was told with Mr. Stanley using him as a crutch.

The four men splashed their way out past the cattails and gathered together into a huddled mass yearning to be dry. The cart with the four golf bags pulled up to the water’s edge with the masked woman driving. She produced a small camera and took a digital picture of her handiwork.

“I don’t expect this little setback will change your stripes in any way,” she said. “But the day will come when your granddaughters will be unimpressed with all your money and more interested to hear about the time you crossed paths with *The Thieving Magpie*. In a sense, I’ve left you all with far more than you’ve given me.”

With that the young woman hit the accelerator and sped off. The cattails stood tall and proud while the sparrows and finches darted back and forth, chirping with smug satisfaction.