

"If you've ever had the talent and lost access to it when it mattered most, this is the book you've been waiting for."

Chris Helder

Bestselling author of *Useful Belief*

THE BACK 9

A Story of Fear, Flow & Finding Your Fire
When It Matters Most



MATT BRADY

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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The **FLAME Method** (Find purpose, Limitless flow, Aims & goals, Mindset and Exceptional tenacity) and Championship Neurobiology framework described in these pages represent real performance systems I've developed and taught to professional athletes, leadership teams and organisations worldwide for over two decades. These principles have helped countless individuals consciously access their peak performance states when it matters most.

This book translates these evidence-based methodologies into narrative form to make them more accessible and memorable. My aim is to share these transformative tools with a wider audience, allowing readers to apply these principles to their own performance challenges, whether in sports, business or life.

The journey of Jesse and Alex reflects the very real struggles and breakthroughs I've witnessed in working with elite performers across diverse fields. While their specific stories are fictional, the underlying truths about human performance, potential and progression are firmly grounded in reality.

Foreword

It's a real privilege to introduce you to Matt's latest work. A book that's more than just a guide to performance; it's an invitation to uncover what's possible within yourself. Whether you're chasing waves or chasing quarterly targets, whether you're an elite athlete or someone looking to find a bit more spark in day-to-day life, you're in for something special. There's a warmth to Matt's approach that makes even the most daunting challenges feel surmountable and the most complex scientific concepts refreshingly relatable.

I first crossed paths with Matt at an event where we both were invited as keynote presenters. We bonded quickly over surfing and became firm friends. What struck me was his genuine curiosity and unwavering belief that greatness isn't reserved for a chosen few; it's hardwired into each of us, if only we have the tools and courage to access it. Matt has always been someone who listens deeply, asks the right questions and then gently challenges you to reach further than you thought possible. It's a rare mix of humility and wisdom, and it's apparent on every page of this book.

You'll quickly discover that Matt is not interested in empty self-help slogans or recycled sports clichés. Instead, he brings twenty years of hands-on experience with world-class athletes, corporate leaders and high performers from every walk of life. He's seen the inside of pressure cookers that most of us can only imagine. More importantly, he's walked beside people in the quieter moments too: in rehab after injuries, in the long nights before a make-or-break event, in the aftermath of both triumph and heartbreak. These stories, though they come to us in fictional form through Jesse and Alex, are alive with the truth of real journeys; messy, beautiful and deeply human.

What sets this book apart is its commitment to evidence-based practice, without losing that essential spark of storytelling. Instead of presenting performance psychology as a dry set of rules, Matt weaves it

into a narrative, making the lessons stick long after you've put the book down. The FLAME Method—**F**ind purpose, **L**imitless flow, **A**ims & goals, **M**indset, **E**xceptional tenacity—isn't just a catchy acronym. It's a living, breathing process that Matt has crafted and refined in the real world, helping countless people unlock their best selves when the stakes are highest. Add to that the innovative Championship Neurobiology framework, based on the latest in neuroscience research, and you have a toolkit that's as much about thriving in life as it is about winning on the scoreboard.

One thing I admire about Matt is his ability to break down the science behind peak performance, the brain chemistry, the mindset shifts, the nuanced habits, without ever making it feel intimidating. He's got a knack for translating complex research into stories and strategies you can actually use. It's one thing to hear about flow states or grit in a seminar; it's another to see it play out in the lives of characters you care about, to witness the stumbles and the breakthroughs and to realise, 'Hey, that could be me'.

I remember reading an early draft of this book and feeling that rare mix of excitement and recognition. There were moments when I saw myself in Jesse's doubts, in Alex's relentless drive, in the quiet conversations that shape who we become. It reminded me that we're all works in progress, navigating setbacks and victories in equal measure. Matt's gift is in showing us, through a compelling story, that none of us are alone in that struggle, and that growth isn't just possible, it's inevitable when we're brave enough to lean in.

This book is for anyone who has ever wondered if they have what it takes. For the kid on the beach dreaming of the big leagues, for the manager facing a make-or-break quarter, for the parent trying to juggle it all. It's for those who want more than just surface-level success, who want to dig deeper, to find the source of their own fire and learn how to keep it burning, even when the waves get rough. Matt's guidance is both practical and deeply compassionate.

As you turn these pages and wander around the golf course, I encourage you to do more than just read. Let yourself reflect. Imagine yourself in Jesse's shoes, experiment with the frameworks. The tools

you'll find here aren't meant to sit on a shelf; they're designed to be lived, tested, sometimes fumbled with, and ultimately owned. You'll find yourself challenged, cheered on, and maybe even a little changed by the end of it all.

Matt's passion for helping people shine comes through on each hole, every lesson, every gentle nudge to keep going. There's a sense of adventure here, a willingness to question and innovate, and a deep respect for the journeys we're all on. That's what makes this book such a joy to read and such a powerful resource to return to, again and again.

So welcome to a book that will challenge you, inspire you and remind you that your best is always within reach. Whether you're here to up your game or simply to reconnect with what matters most, you're in the right place. I hope you enjoy the game as much as I have, and that you walk away not just with new insights, but with the confidence to light your own flame, wherever life takes you.

Dr. Mark Williams
Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience

Introduction

You're holding this book for a reason.

Maybe you're grinding hard but feeling empty. Maybe you've lost the spark that once drove you. Maybe the pressure's building and you're not sure how much longer you can hold it together.

If that sounds familiar, you're in the right place.

This isn't another self-help book promising quick fixes or miracle transformations. It's something different. It's a story about two people who were stuck—really stuck—and what happened when they received a black envelope with a single flame embossed on the front.

No return address. No explanation. Just an invitation to meet someone named Mac.

Jesse's a professional surfer watching her dreams slip away. Every wave feels like a test she's failing. The joy that once pulled her into the ocean has been replaced by crushing pressure and doubt.

Alex is a corporate executive who looks successful on paper but feels hollow inside. Long hours have left him burned out at work and absent at home. His marriage is fracturing and his health is failing.

Different worlds. Same problem. Same mysterious envelope.

They've both lost connection to the fire that once burned inside them. That thing that made them feel alive, that drove them forward, that made the hard days worth it.

And then they meet Mac.

What follows isn't a typical coaching session. It's a journey through nine holes of golf that becomes a masterclass in performance, pressure

and purpose. Each hole reveals something essential about how we lose ourselves and, more importantly, how we find our way back.

You'll learn what Jesse and Alex learn. The same principles that elite athletes, world-class performers and extraordinary leaders use when the stakes are highest. Not theory. Not wishful thinking. Real tools that work when everything's on the line.

Here's what makes this different: you don't need to be an athlete or an executive to use what's in these pages. The FLAME Method—**F**ind purpose, **L**imitless flow, **A**ims and goals, **M**indset, **E**xceptional tenacity—works whether you're chasing waves, quarterly targets or just trying to show up better for the people you love.

The story you're about to read mirrors the journey you're on. Jesse's fear of failure, Alex's overwhelming pressure, their struggle to reconnect with what matters—these aren't unique to them. They're universal. They're human.

And the fire? That flame embossed on the envelope they received? It's not just a symbol. It's a reminder that the fire already exists inside you. It's not something you need to create. It's already there, buried beneath the noise, the doubt, the weight of expectations.

This book will help you find it again.

That black envelope found Jesse and Alex when they needed it most. Now it's found you.

Fair warning: this isn't a passive read. If you want transformation, you'll need to engage. Notice what resonates. Notice what makes you uncomfortable. Those moments of recognition, those flickers of 'that's exactly how I feel'—that's where the work begins.

You'll meet Mac at The Back 9 Café and walk with Jesse and Alex through every hole. You'll see them stumble. You'll watch them break through. And somewhere along the way, you'll recognise yourself in their story.

Because that's the point.

This book isn't about golf. It's about you. About reclaiming what's been buried. About stepping boldly into who you're capable of becoming.

The nine holes ahead aren't just a story. They're a map. A way through the pressure, back to the fire.

So, here's the only question that matters: are you ready?

Ready to stop surviving and start performing? Ready to reconnect with your purpose? Ready to find the fire you thought was gone?

Then turn the page.

Mac's waiting.

And your game is about to change.

1

The Weight of Worlds – Jesse's Story

The midday sun beat down on the asphalt of Jesse's driveway, the heat making the air shimmer above the cracked pavement. The distant sound of the Pacific whispered a familiar rhythm, a sound that once made her feel good, but today, it lacked the normal comfort, instead feeling like a dull, constant ache. Salt, dried to a fine powder, still clung to her skin from the morning's surf session, a session that had left her feeling exhausted, as if the ocean itself, her oldest friend, had decided to weigh her down, to judge her.

The waves had been perfect: clean, fast, breaking with a precision that would make any surfer happy. The water, usually a cool embrace, had felt rough. But out there, in the water she once moved through with natural grace, her board had felt strange. Slow. Unwilling. Each paddle stroke was an effort. Each take-off a battle against an unseen current of doubt. Something important, something basic, wasn't working.

As she turned off the engine of her worn-out 4x4, the silence made the slow, steady crash of the tide just down the street seem louder. Her forehead rested on the cool plastic of the steering wheel, giving her a moment of relief. It hadn't always been like this. Images flashed behind her closed eyes: a younger Jesse, sun-kissed and fearless, her laughter echoing as she carved a perfect turn on a blue wave, feeling the pure joy of being completely one with the water.

One memory popped up clearly: Pipeline, five years ago. The waves had been huge, 15 to 20-foot walls of water that had most of the competitors shaking their heads in awe or fear. But Jesse had paddled out with total certainty, a knowing deep in her bones that went beyond thought or planning. It was her first event on the World Championship Tour after winning the junior world title and making it to the pro ranks, the moment everyone was watching to see if the young star would fail or succeed.

When that towering wall of water lifted her, time seemed to slow. Her body responded with a knowledge beyond conscious control, finding the perfect line down the face of the wave, her hand skimming the curved wall of water as the massive barrel wrapped around her completely. For a breathless moment, she disappeared from view, the crowd on the beach silent with hope. Then she emerged from the spray in a graceful finish, completing what the announcers would later call 'the most fearless debut in women's professional surfing'.

The judges had given her a 9.8, an almost perfect 10-point ride, and the footage went viral overnight. That single ride launched her professional career and immediately marked her as a future world champion. Sponsors called within hours and her face appeared on surfing magazines worldwide within weeks.

That feeling of complete, effortless surrender to something greater than herself. The instant connection between mind, body and wave that had seemed so natural then, had now vanished. The certainty, the joy, the pure instinct that defined her at Pipeline had been slowly replaced by calculation, doubt and a growing fear that perhaps that magical day had been luck, a high point she would never reach again.

Surfing had been pure freedom then, her playground, her sanctuary, an effortless, exciting conversation between her soul and the sea. Now it was a constant test, an exam she felt she was always failing, the ocean a cold, judging presence. A recent heat, one she should have won, had ended in an embarrassing early exit, a sponsor's barely hidden disappointment echoing in her ears, the money worries a cold knot in her stomach.

Her phone buzzed on the passenger seat, a sharp, intrusive sound that made her jump. Jesse didn't need to look. Another message from Mark, her manager. Another reminder of the coming mid-season cut and the brutal math that controlled her future. If she didn't start winning heats soon, her spot on the world tour, the dream she'd fought for, the identity she'd carefully built, would disappear like sea spray in the wind. Only three weeks to go. Five more surfers would be cut, sent back to the grind of the qualifying series, a demotion that often meant the beginning of the end. With her current ranking on the ledge, Jesse needed at least a semi-final finish at Bells next week. At 24, after grinding her way through the juniors, chasing the dream, cracking the World Tour and even nailing a World Junior Title ... could it really all unravel this fast?

The thought sent a chill down her spine despite the hot summer heat.

She finally risked a glance at the screen, the words blurring into an unclear threat. It wasn't a crisis of skill; she knew, deep down, she could still surf with the best. She should have been winning. But every time she paddled out for a heat, the weight came down—the crushing expectation of sponsors whose logos felt branded on her skin, fans whose cheers now sounded like accusations, and the loudest voice of all, her own relentless inner critic. The fear of losing wasn't just about the competition anymore; it was about losing her identity, the very essence of who she was. In the water, where instinct should have ruled, she held on too tightly, her body stiff, her mind a frantic storm of negative self-talk. Fear had stolen her flow, her fire.

And it wasn't just surfing. She felt distant from her family, too. Calls home becoming less frequent, her explanations for her poor performance sounding empty even to herself. She didn't want to disappoint them—the parents who had sacrificed so much.

As she pulled her board bag from the car, a small, dented tin of surf wax tumbled to the ground. It was from her junior world title win, a lifetime ago. The faint smell of coconut and victory still clung to it. She rarely touched it now. It felt like a relic from another life, a bittersweet reminder of when life was simple and the flame burned bright. Once a

symbol of victory, the tin now felt like quiet judgement—a reminder of just how far she'd drifted from the girl who earned it.

What bothered her most wasn't the lonely struggle—Jesse had always been self-reliant—but the growing realisation that perhaps no one could fight these battles alone. Her success had always been credited to her individual talent, her unique connection with the ocean. But what if that wasn't the whole story? What if she needed something, or someone, beyond herself to rekindle what she'd lost? The thought was both scary and strangely comforting, like the distant memory of learning to surf with her father's hands steadying the board until she found her own balance.

Her phone buzzed again, startling her. A different tone this time.

Lisa: Hey, up for a hit? Tennis. Been ages. Need to catch up b4 u vanish again. 3 PM. C U there?

Jesse hesitated. Tennis. The hard, unyielding court, the predictable bounce of the ball, it was completely different from the ocean's fluid judgement. She sent a thumbs up emoji. Maybe that was exactly what she needed. She tossed the phone aside with a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the world.

Later, the relentless sun still blazed as Jesse pulled into the familiar parking lot of the local tennis club. The air was thick with the smell of eucalyptus, concrete courts and chlorine from the nearby pool. Lisa was already there, leaning with an easy grace against the chain-link fence, twirling a racquet, her bright smile a stark contrast to Jesse's own gloom. They'd been inseparable since grade school, their bond forged in shared victories and defeats across countless sports. Lisa had chosen a different path—business school, a stable life—while Jesse chased horizons. Yet, Lisa remained her anchor, the one person she felt could still see the real Jesse beneath the layers of pressure.

"Didn't think you'd actually show." Lisa grinned, her eyes sparkling with genuine affection and a hint of concern.

Jesse managed a smirk, grabbing a racquet from Lisa. The grip felt unfamiliar, foreign. "Neither did I."

As they rallied back and forth, the steady thwack of the ball against their racquets created a near-meditative rhythm beneath the afternoon sun. Heat shimmered up from the court, while distant shouts from other players echoed in the background. It was a comfortable dance, with years of shared history woven into every swing.

“You’re tense,” Lisa observed after a few minutes, her voice casual but knowing as she tossed up a serve. “More than usual. Weren’t you just in Fiji with your sponsors? You should be riding a post-surf glow, not looking like you’re about to snap. You’ve got the weight of the world on you, Jess. What’s really going on? It has to be more than the usual tour stress.”

Jesse shrugged, rolling her shoulders like it might shake something loose, but the knot stayed firm. “Been tense for months. Maybe years.”

She paused, then added, “Yeah, it was paradise ... but all I could think about was the next comp. Replay after replay of where I blew it. It was supposed to be a break, but it felt like they were all watching, judging every wave. I don’t know ... it’s complicated.”

Lisa’s serve clipped the net. She didn’t seem to mind. “Ever think about talking to someone? You know, professionally? Someone who isn’t me, for a change?”

Jesse walked to the net, scooping up the ball. The fuzzy yellow felt strangely heavy. “Tried the usual suspects. Sports psychs, mindset gurus. Life coaches. None of it sticks. They all want to talk about visualising victory. I can visualise it just fine. It’s the feeling that’s gone, Lis. The joy. The fire.”

Lisa tapped her racquet against the sun-scorched court. “You’re too stubborn for your own good, Jess. Always have been. You try to muscle through everything alone.”

Jesse offered a faint smile. “Yeah, well, it’s got me this far, hasn’t it!”

“And now it’s getting in your way,” Lisa countered gently but firmly. She pointed towards the pro shop, its shaded interior a welcome promise. “Tell you what, take the racquets back, and I’ll grab us some iced coffees from that little café next door. My treat. Deal?”

Jesse nodded, a flicker of gratitude in her eyes.

She stepped into the cool, air-conditioned pro shop, the familiar smell of new tennis balls, old sweat and a hint of sunscreen surrounding her. Greg looked up from behind the counter, his weathered face marked with the lines of a thousand sunny afternoons breaking into a warm smile.

“Well, if it isn’t Jesse Evans,” he said, his voice a low, comforting rumble. “Back from conquering the seven seas, or just hiding from them?”

Jesse grinned, the expression feeling a little rusty but genuine. “Sort of. Still trying to stay afloat, Greg.”

Greg had been a fixture at these courts for as long as she could remember—a former touring pro whose quiet wisdom was as much a part of the club as the scuffed hard blue courts themselves. He’d seen her grow up, seen her triumphs and her stumbles, always with an encouraging word or a knowing nod.

“Rough day on the court?” he asked, his gaze perceptive as he noted the racquets in her hand and the weariness in her eyes.

Jesse shrugged. “I’m definitely better in the water. Or I used to be. Lately, even that’s a battle.”

Greg chuckled, a dry, raspy sound. “That you are. We always knew you’d make it big. How’s the tour treating you, really?”

Her smile faltered. Her eyes dropped to the counter, tracing the scuffed surface. “Not great, Greg. Honestly, it’s ... it’s a struggle. I feel like I’ve lost something and I don’t know how to get it back.”

Greg’s smile softened with understanding. He leaned on the counter, his voice dropping conspiratorially. “I know that feeling, kid. Hit a wall myself, back in the day. Mid-career, everything just ... stopped clicking. Couldn’t buy a win. Wasn’t physical, not really. It was, I thought, all up here.” He tapped his temple gently. “Felt like the fire had gone out. Like I was just going through the motions.”

Jesse looked up, a flicker of genuine interest in her eyes. This was different from the generic advice she usually got. “So, what did you do?”

“Got a little lucky,” Greg said, his eyes distant for a moment as if recalling the past. “A mate, someone who’d been through the wringer himself, sent me to this ... well, he called himself a performance coach, but he was different. No spreadsheets, no drills, no rah-rah speeches. He just ... helped me find the spark again. Helped me see what was burying it.”

“A coach?” Jesse asked, scepticism in her tone, born of past disappointments.

“Not the kind you’re thinking of,” Greg said, his voice low and certain. “Mac doesn’t obsess over stats or technique, not at first, anyway. He looks deeper. Beneath all that. What’s going on inside. I can’t explain exactly where he came from, different sport, different path, but the way he sees things ... it’s like he knows what’s holding you back before you do. He helped me realise the fire doesn’t disappear, Jesse. It just gets buried. Under fear, doubt and all the noise we let the world pile on top of us.”

Jesse shifted, uncertain. “Sounds a little ... unconventional. A bit out there.”

Greg chuckled. “It is. He is. But it works. Or it did for me. Look, no pressure, but I could give him a call, see if he’s got an opening. If you’re interested. He’s not for everyone, but when you’re at a certain point ...” He let the sentence hang.

Jesse thought of the endless cycle of pressure, the gnawing fear, the hollow feeling where her passion used to be. She thought of the looming cut, the disappointed faces. “At this point, Greg,” she said with a sigh that seemed to come from her very core, “I’m willing to try almost anything. Can’t hurt, right? What’s the worst that can happen? I waste an afternoon?”

Greg's eyes twinkled. "That's the spirit. Pop back in tomorrow morning. I'll have the details by then. And Jess?" He paused. "He's good. Really good."

The next morning was a classic Sydney summer—blue skies, sun already biting, but Jesse's mood hadn't caught up. She nearly bailed on the trip back to the club. What was the point? Another washed-up coach with a magic method? But something in Greg's calm stare yesterday had stuck. That and the fact she really didn't have anywhere better to be.

Greg was behind the counter again, like he hadn't even moved. He didn't say 'Good morning'. Didn't ask how she slept. Just reached below and slid a jet-black envelope across the counter like he was dealing cards.

Jesse stared at it. "Seriously?" she said. "What is this, some kind of cult invite?"

Greg didn't flinch. Just smiled. "Something like that."

The envelope was thick, matte and stupidly dramatic. In the centre, a flame raised, textured, almost glowing. Jesse picked it up, turning it over like she expected it to hiss.

"Wow. Someone's got a flair for theatrics."

Greg nodded. "Told you, he's not like the others."

"That usually means I should run the other way."

She popped the seal without ceremony, half-expecting it to play a sound effect. Inside was a single card. No fluff. No backstory. Just:

You are invited to Stone Ridge Golf & Club Resort.

Meet at The Back 9 Café

Thursday. 12PM sharp.

Ask for Mac.

Jesse frowned. “No contact. No agenda. Just show up and ask for some guy named Mac?” She snorted. “Sounds legit.”

Greg leaned in slightly. “He won’t fix you. That’s not what this is. But he might help you remember who you were before all the noise.”

Jesse held his gaze a second longer than she meant to. Then dropped her eyes back to the card.

She hated this kind of thing—mystery, vulnerability, hope. It all reeked of past disappointments waiting to happen. But damn it, that flame. It was intriguing.

She stuffed the card into her backpack and slung it over her shoulder.

Halfway to the door, she paused and glanced back at Greg. “Thanks,” she said flatly. “I guess.”

Greg just smiled and gave a knowing nod.

In the car, Jesse sat with the engine idling. Her backpack sat on the passenger seat, the envelope inside. She stared at it. Fingers tapping the wheel. Jaw tight. But she didn’t drive off. Not yet. Something about it had lodged itself under her skin. Uninvited. Unwelcome. But undeniably there.

Finally, she muttered, “Whatever. If it sucks, I’m out.”

2 The Hollow Peak – Alex's Story

The late afternoon sun came through the blinds of Alex's home office in Sydney, making stripes across his messy desk. Half-empty coffee mugs sat next to crumpled sticky notes with forgotten reminders about client accounts, each worth \$5 to \$15 million yearly.

Two phones lay silent, only buzzing now and then with another 'urgent' message from his team of sales engineers and account strategists spread across Singapore, Sydney and sometimes, it felt, the other side of the world. The laptop beside him, a sleek reminder of his job as Head of Client Solutions—APAC Division for FINTEQ, 'Financial Analytics and Performance Technology Solutions', a giant in the B2B financial technology world—seemed to silently judge him.

FINTEQ made software that automated complex financial systems for huge organisations, national banks, major insurance firms and global investment houses. Think Square or Stripe but focused on the enterprise backend. Alex ignored the laptop, his attention split between three screens; Teams channels filled with updates from the Singapore team and urgent problems from a key banking client in Melbourne; a flood of emails, many marked important, asking for his input on technical plans; and a LinkedIn feed where industry colleagues seemed to be easily conquering the FINTEQ world. The constant notifications had blended into one continuous hum, the background music to his stress. The promotion everyone talked about was a constant reminder

of upcoming quarterly reviews with CFOs and CIOs, and the endless pressure to innovate faster than banks could adapt.

His personal phone buzzed against the wooden desk. He looked at the screen: ‘URGENT: FOLLOW-UP NEEDED—Project Titan Onboarding’. Project Titan was a new \$10M banking client and their setup was already having problems. With a heavy sigh that carried the weight of many broken promises to his family, he turned it face down.

Another email arrived, popping up on the middle screen in front of him, sounding both demanding and unimportant. Another issue that, according to the sender, couldn’t possibly wait, though Alex knew from experience as the company’s go-to problem solver that it probably could. His health, however, felt like it couldn’t wait much longer; the constant headaches and the pain in his chest were getting harder to ignore. He was known for being the fixer, the one who jumped into high-stakes demos or solved rollout problems, so no one saw him struggle, until, perhaps, now.

He leaned back in his chair, the old leather creaking. Rubbing his eyes hard, he felt the familiar ache in his shoulders settle deeper into his bones, a permanent part of his stressed body. It wasn’t always like this. There was a time, not long ago, when he’d loved this fast pace, the thrill of working across time zones, the rush of meeting impossible deadlines for client renewals, the satisfaction of leading his team through the complex technical and strategic challenges of FINTEQ. He remembered the excitement of launching that new SaaS (Software as a Service) platform feature, the late nights fuelled by lukewarm coffee and pure passion, the shared feeling of success with his team. He’d been the guy who got things done. That fire, that drive, where had it gone? Now, even small decisions felt huge. The much-talked-about promotion to Global Strategy Director, a job that should have been a career high point, felt more like a trap—a fancy cage of even greater responsibility and less life.

The irony wasn’t lost on him. His greatest successes had always come through working with others, connecting developers and executives, finding the sweet spot where technical possibilities met business needs. He’d been the essential connector, the translator between worlds. Yet somehow, he’d ended up alone, drowning in his own thoughts. Perhaps

what he needed wasn't another productivity trick or mindfulness app, but a real change in how he approached his challenges, something that would pull him out of his lonely struggle and back into the kind of meaningful connection that had once powered his best work.

The board would make their decision after Q2 results next month. A promotion would mean another hundred thousand in base salary, much larger stock options, and a level of influence few reached in the FINTEQ world—the result of 15 years of non-stop work. It would also mean more travel, more pressure, more of his life given up for corporate ambition.

Alex couldn't remember when the goal that had once energised him had turned into a weight threatening to pull him under. But now? The pace hadn't slowed, but his ability to keep up had. His energy, once seemingly endless, was critically low, replaced by a deep tiredness. Each new decision, each fresh demand from a high-value client, felt like another crack in a dam already struggling to hold back the flood. And Alex was quickly running out of ways to plug the leaks. He'd missed an important deadline for a major investment fund client last week, a rare mistake that had brought concerned, though carefully worded, emails from regional leadership.

From the living room, the theme song of a children's cartoon played, mixed with his kids' laughter. Sounds that once filled him with joy now often reminded him of the life happening just beyond his office door, a life he was increasingly missing. His wife, Megan, called out from the kitchen, her voice sharp, drained and more obligation than invitation,

“Dinner's ready. Not that it matters.”

He didn't answer right away. His eyes stayed glued to the screen, reading the last Teams message from his lead sales engineer in Singapore as if finishing it would somehow lift the heavy weight from his chest, as if one more completed task could justify his absence. *I used to thrive on this*, he thought, a bitter taste in his mouth. *Now it feels like I'm trading time with my kids for another slide deck, another late-night troubleshooting call.*

By the time he finally shut the laptop and dragged himself into the kitchen, he could smell the roasted chicken, mixed with something heavier—Megan’s disappointment. The kids were already halfway through dinner.

Lily, his five-year-old, looked up, her bright eyes dimming. “Daddy, you missed the funny part of the show ... again.”

Alex winced. Megan didn’t say a word at first. She just placed his plate in front of him, firm, mechanical, like a waitress clocking off.

“You’re late. Again,” she snapped, sitting down across from him. Her tone wasn’t angry. It was clipped. Blunt. A dull blade worn down from overuse. “The chicken’s dry now. So is the patience.”

Alex nodded, poking at the food with his fork, appetite long gone. “I know. Sorry. Project Titan’s being ... Project Titan. And the Singapore team needed input for a CIO pitch tomorrow.”

The words spilled out like loose change, all too familiar, too rehearsed. Even to him, it sounded hollow. He’d promised Lily he’d help build her new Lego castle before dinner. He glanced at her across the table. She was just about finished her dinner.

Megan didn’t follow up. She didn’t even sigh. She just looked past him, like she was already planning a life that didn’t include late dinners and excuses.

“Daddy, look!” Lily suddenly exclaimed, briefly breaking the tension. She held up a drawing she’d been working on—a stick figure family holding hands beneath a rainbow-coloured sky. “That’s you,” she pointed, “and that’s me, and Mommy, and Max. We’re at the beach!”

Alex leaned closer, truly touched by the simple picture. His daughter had drawn him smiling, a wide, carefree grin he barely recognised. When was the last time he’d smiled like that? He couldn’t remember.

“It’s beautiful, sweetheart,” he said softly, feeling a brief connection that cut through the tension and his exhaustion. He caught Megan’s eye across the table, a brief look of shared tenderness that reminded him of what was slipping away.

“Can we go to the beach for real soon?” Lily asked, her eyes hopeful. “You promised, remember?”

The promise. From three months ago. Another commitment he'd failed to keep.

Megan gave a slight nod, but her eyes were harder now, tired, edged with something that had moved past concern and was quickly becoming resentment. He hated that look. She didn't push. She rarely did anymore. But the silence? It spoke louder than any fight.

The air between them was thick with everything they weren't saying. Unshared worries. Unkept promises.

Then, finally, she spoke, quiet, but not soft. “It's not just me, Alex.” She didn't look at him when she said it. Just focused on clearing Lily's plate. “The kids ... they ask where you are, even when you're in the next room.”

She paused, voice tightening like she was holding back more than she was saying.

“This always-on thing with FINTEQ? It's not just burning you out. It's killing whatever's left of us.”

He knew she was right. The proof wasn't just in her voice, it was in his wallet. Tucked beside his corporate Amex was a crumpled note from Lily, written in wobbly crayon: ‘You're the best daddy’. He'd found it on his desk a few weeks back, a quiet reminder of who he used to be. Back then, it made him smile. Now, it felt less like a compliment and more like an accusation, a reminder of the man he was failing to be.

Halfway through his silent meal, Alex's work phone buzzed from the counter where he'd left it, its demanding ring cutting through the strained quiet. Habit, formed by years of corporate service in FINTEQ's fast-growing, results-driven environment kicked in. He reached for it without thinking.

“Alex.” Megan's voice cut through the room, low, steady and unmistakably done with being ignored. He froze, hand hovering over the screen, the cold blue light casting shadows under his tired eyes.

He looked at her, really looked, for the first time all evening. Her eyes, once so full of light and laughter, now held a dull ache. Not anger. Just worn-out sadness. She gave a small nod towards the kids, who were now bickering over a toy, blissfully unaware of the silence pressing in around the table.

Megan didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to. "You're sitting right there, Alex, but it's like you're somewhere else." Her gaze didn't flinch. "The kids feel it. I feel it. And honestly ..." She hesitated for just a beat, then let it land, "I don't know how much more of this I've got left in me."

Alex's hand drifted away from the phone. He set it down face-first on the counter, the silence that followed louder than any ringtone. "I know," he said quietly, the words thick in his throat. "I miss you. I miss the way things used to feel."

He paused, eyes fixed on his plate. "I should be proud of what we've built at FINTEQ ... but most days?" He exhaled, jaw tight. "I just feel empty. Tired. Like I'm showing up everywhere, except where it matters."

Later that night, Alex lay awake watching the ceiling fan spin, each turn a slow tick towards another exhausting day. Sleep was a luxury his racing mind refused to grant him. His thoughts churned endlessly through client renewals, team performance metrics and the upcoming Friday Showcase Call where regional leaders presented their progress (or lack thereof) under intense scrutiny.

Unanswered emails, half-finished strategic plans for APAC expansion, and the constant, nagging feeling that despite working harder than ever, he was achieving less and moving further away from his goals, from his family, from himself.

He glanced at his phone on the nightstand. 11:37 PM. Megan breathed softly beside him, already lost to the peace he craved. He wished he could turn off his brain as easily as she did. Instead, he gave in to the familiar habit—grabbing his phone, the screen's harsh

light showing his tired face in the dark room. He scrolled mindlessly through FINTEQ internal Teams channels, a parade of 'wins', team rankings and endless positivity that felt increasingly foreign. Then, looking for some form of distraction, he switched to industry news. His competitors were launching new products, getting massive funding rounds.

The pressure was huge. *This job was supposed to be a stepping stone, he thought bitterly. I didn't think I'd get stuck on it, slowly burning out while pretending everything's fine.* The potential promotion to Global Strategy Director now loomed not as an opportunity, but as a sentence to more of the same, on an even bigger, more demanding scale.

An email arrived on his phone. It was from Peter Bennett's private address. Peter, his first boss at FINTEQ, a mentor who had taken a chance on him years ago and had since retired from operations to a respected position on the board.

The subject line was simple: "Catch up?"

Alex hesitated. Peter was a legend at FINTEQ, a man whose insights were still sought after, even in retirement. A meeting with him wasn't something to take lightly. He hadn't seen Peter for a proper chat in months—not since the launch of the new three-year strategic plan, where he'd delivered one of his typically inspiring yet practical addresses. He wondered what Peter wanted. Perhaps it was about the Global Strategy role. Alex felt a knot tighten in his stomach.

He typed a quick reply: "Of course, Peter. When's good for you?"

The response was almost immediate: "Tomorrow morning? That little café down the road from Stone Ridge Golf Club, 'Cafin8'. Eight AM. My treat. Just us."

Stone Ridge, that's way on the other side of town. An odd choice. But Peter always had his reasons. Alex felt a flicker of something other than dread—curiosity, perhaps. Or maybe just the desperate hope that someone, anyone, might offer a different perspective, a way out of the fog.

Cafin8, a charming, sunny spot, smelling of freshly baked pastries and strong coffee, was already busy with morning energy when Alex arrived. Peter was easy to spot, sitting in a corner by the window, two steaming coffees already on the table. He looked relaxed, the lines of corporate stress that Alex remembered from Peter's own time as a senior executive now softened, replaced by an air of contentment. He still had that sharp, intelligent look in his eyes, though.

"Alex, good to see you," Peter said, his voice warm as he stood to shake Alex's hand. "Right on time, as always."

"You too, Peter," Alex replied, trying to match his mentor's easy manner, though he felt anxious. "Thanks for this." He held the warm mug, the heat feeling good in his hands.

They chatted for a few minutes about simple things—the market, a recent industry conference. Then Peter leaned back, his expression becoming more serious. "So, Alex. I've been hearing things. And frankly, seeing things. You look terrible, son. Like you're carrying the weight of the entire APAC division on your shoulders and it's crushing you."

Alex was surprised by Peter's directness, but also strangely relieved. He didn't have to pretend. "It's ... been a tough few quarters, Peter. The pressure, the hours ... it never stops. I feel like I'm drowning."

Peter nodded slowly, his gaze understanding. "I know the feeling. I remember it well from my own time in the trenches at FINTEQ. It's a demanding company, asks a lot. But it can also give a lot, if you manage it right. Right now, it looks like it's managing you." He paused, then reached into his worn leather briefcase, the kind that spoke of years of important meetings and hard-won deals. He pulled out a sleek, jet-black envelope. It was striking, the smooth, matte surface reflecting the café's light. In the centre, a flame symbol, bright blue and orange, seemed almost to pulse with a life of its own.

Peter placed it gently in front of Alex. "This Thursday," he said, tapping the envelope. "I've already spoken to Henderson. He agrees

you could use a ... reset. He's cleared your schedule. No meetings, no calls. Just this. You've got the afternoon free. No excuses."

Alex frowned slightly, picking up the envelope. It was heavier than expected, the embossed flame raised beneath his thumb. It felt ... deliberate. Important. Different from anything that normally crossed his desk. "What is this?" he asked.

Peter leaned in, his voice low and steady. "A reset. With someone who helped me when I was where you are, burned out, hollowed out, running on fumes." He tapped the table once for emphasis. "His name's Mac. Not your usual character. Doesn't do buzzwords or bland advice. It's different. Life-changing kind of different." He paused, then added with a half-smile, "Oh, ditch the suit. You won't need it."

Alex frowned slightly. "You spoke to the CEO? Henderson knows about this?"

Peter nodded without flinching. "I did. Because someone needed to."

Alex studied him for a long moment. The concern in Peter's eyes wasn't performance-related. It was personal. Genuine. This wasn't a casual referral, it was a lifeline, wrapped in a black envelope and delivered by someone who'd already walked the edge.

Alex nodded slowly, a reluctant flicker of hope rising. "I appreciate it. Really." He slid the envelope into his bag, the flame on the cover catching the light. It didn't feel like a work trip. And for the first time in months ... that felt like a good thing.

Later that evening, the house was quiet. The kids were finally asleep. Megan moved around the kitchen, rinsing dishes with the kind of precision that said she was still fuming, just quiet about it. Alex dropped his bag on the counter. Unzipped it. He pulled out the sleek black envelope, holding it up to the light. The flame symbol shimmered—bold, raised and very out of place in their tired kitchen.

Megan glanced over, drying her hands, eyes narrowing. "What's that? Looks like it should come with a code word and a secret handshake."

Alex gave a half-smile, more reflex than anything. “Peter Bennett gave it to me. Some kind of invite-only coaching thing. Says it’s ... transformational.”

Megan snorted. “Peter Bennett? From the board? Giving out life advice now?” She tossed the towel on the bench. “That’s rich. Executive enlightenment in an envelope. How original.”

Alex exhaled through his nose, breaking the seal with a snap. “Yeah, well ... apparently it helped him when he was fried. Said this guy, Mac, is the real deal.”

Megan crossed her arms, eyes on the envelope. “Right. Because nothing says breakthrough like a mystery invite wrapped in black matte and ego.”

Alex didn’t bite. He cracked the seal with a sharp snap and slid the card out. Same flame symbol, embossed at the top. Clean. Intentional.

You are invited to Stone Ridge Golf & Club Resort.

Meet at The Back 9 Café

Thursday, 12 PM sharp.

Ask for Mac.

Megan stepped in, peering over his shoulder. “Golf club coaching? Seriously?” No laughter, just that dry, hollow tone she’d perfected lately. Then, lower, like a truth she wasn’t sure she wanted to say out loud, “You hate golf.”

Alex shrugged. “Peter said it changed everything for him. Said the guy behind it doesn’t pull punches.”

Megan was quiet for a moment. Her hand brushed his arm, but there was no tenderness in it. Just ... exhaustion. “Well, whatever it is, I hope it’s not another distraction in a different package.” She looked at him, really looked. “Because I’ve watched you disappear one meeting, one missed dinner, one excuse at a time. And if this doesn’t change something, I don’t know what’s left.”

Alex swallowed hard. He tucked the card back into the envelope and slipped it into his wallet like it might vanish if he wasn’t careful. “Yeah.”

His voice was low, the weight of it sitting in his chest. “Maybe it’s the reset I should’ve taken years ago.”

Megan didn’t respond. She just turned back to the sink, the faint drip of the tap the only sound left between them.

3

The Unlikely Invitation – The Meeting

Two lives, seemingly worlds apart, one a professional surfer drifting from the rhythm of the waves, the other a corporate executive slowly sinking beneath deadlines, were about to collide in the most unlikely of places. Both had been summoned by the same symbol, a flickering flame embossed on identical black envelopes. Neither of them knew it yet, but this quiet moment would mark the beginning of something far greater than coincidence—a shared path towards rediscovery.

The Back 9 Café inside Stone Ridge Golf & Club Resort wasn't very busy, but the silence that hung between the few occupied tables felt louder, more noticeable than it should have, filled with the smell of expensive coffee and unspoken status. Alex arrived ten minutes early, a habit formed from years in a world where being on time was essential, even if the meetings themselves often felt pointless. He sat in a seat by the large window, his eyes wandering over the perfect green fairways that stretched, seemingly endlessly, under the late morning sun.

The grass was almost unnaturally green, manicured with the kind of precision usually reserved for hedge funds and high-stakes boardrooms. Alex had been in plenty of expensive spaces before, but this was different. This wasn't tailored suits and tight agendas.

This was slow. Quiet. And disarmingly casual. His faded polo and scuffed sneakers weren't a sign of being underdressed, they were just ... out of rhythm. No schedule. No assistant. No structure to hide behind.

Just a golf course, a cryptic invite and a growing sense that here, the rules were different.

The black envelope Peter had handed him sat in the pocket of his shirt, a quiet weight he hadn't stopped thinking about since their coffee. Even now, surrounded by the polished stillness of the place, the low murmur of conversations that sounded more like deals than chats, Alex wasn't sure why he'd come. Another so-called performance coach? He'd been down that road before. Nothing had stuck. Nothing had shifted the growing fog he was in. Doubt crept in again, familiar now, like an old injury that flared up when the pressure built.

At the table beside him, a woman stirred a spoon absently in her coffee, her posture relaxed but defiant. She leaned back in her chair, hoodie pulled up, a stark contrast to the polished appearance of the club. Her gaze, like Alex's, drifted towards the sprawling green, her expression a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. She looked, Alex thought, as out of place as he felt—a splash of vibrant, untamed energy in a carefully controlled environment.

Their eyes met for a brief second, a quick acknowledgment of shared displacement. Two fish clearly out of water.

"Amazing course, isn't it?" Alex offered, his voice a little louder than intended in the quiet room, leaning slightly over his own untouched coffee. He felt an odd need to connect with this fellow outsider. Something in her manner reminded him of his most creative developers—that same restless energy, that refusal to be contained by normal boundaries.

The woman glanced towards him, then back at the pristine fairways. "Yeah ... not exactly what I expected," she replied, her voice low, carrying a hint of a surfer's relaxed, laid-back tone, though her eyes held a twitchy energy. "More ... green. And quiet. Too quiet." She paused, seeming to weigh whether to continue the conversation. "I'm Jesse, by the way."

"Alex," he replied with a slight nod. Despite herself, she found something reassuring in this stranger's awkward attempt at connection.

A corporate type, clearly, but with an honesty that reminded her of her younger self, before doubt had become her default shield.

Alex tilted his head. “You waiting for someone? A player on the course, maybe?” he asked, trying to read her. She had that unmistakable athletic presence, the kind that didn’t need to be announced. Even under the hoodie, there was a sharpness in her eyes, a coiled energy that didn’t quite match the slow, polished pace of the resort. He found himself wondering what someone like her was doing here, in this sanctuary of manicured perfection.

Jesse shrugged, shifting in her chair. “Meeting some guy named Mac. Performance coach, apparently? Though what he can teach me here that the ocean can’t, I have no idea.”

Alex straightened, his interest instantly caught. The name, the place, it couldn’t be a coincidence. “Mac?”

She reached into the pocket of her hoodie and pulled out a jet-black envelope. The flame embossed on the front shimmered faintly under the café’s subtle lighting, identical to his.

Alex’s eyes narrowed. Without a word he retrieved his own envelope, unfolded it and placed it on the table between them. “I’ve got the same one.”

Jesse leaned forward slightly, her brow lifting in surprise. “No way. Greg send you, too?”

Alex shook his head. “No, Peter. Old work friend. He said this Mac guy was ... different. Life-changing, were his exact words, I think. Though I’m not sure yet.” He found himself sharing a doubtful smile with her. “So, a surfer and a suit. What do you think he’s selling?”

Jesse chuckled, a dry, sceptical sound, tapping her envelope lightly against the table. “Right. I’m still trying to figure out what a golf course is supposed to teach me about winning surf competitions when I’m about to lose my spot on tour.”

Alex managed a smirk, feeling a strange sense of connection. “Yeah, and I’ve got no idea how it’s supposed to help someone running on

empty, with their life barely held together,” Alex said with a wry smile. “Maybe it’s group therapy with a nine iron?”

Jesse chuckled softly, a small, unexpected bond of shared scepticism and curious interest forming between them in the hushed elegance of the café. “At this point,” she admitted, “I’d try just about anything to get my mojo back.”

Before Alex could respond, the soft creak of the café door opening interrupted their conversation.

They both glanced towards the entrance as a figure stepped inside.

The man who entered looked like he’d just finished tending the flower beds. His work boots were scuffed and dusty, with traces of grass clippings clinging to the worn leather. Faded khaki pants, the kind you’d find at any hardware store, were paired with a simple, well-worn polo shirt that had seen better days, faded from countless washes. A weathered baseball cap sat low on his head, shading his features, while grass stains marked his forearms like badges of honest work.

“Thanks for fixing that sprinkler system this morning, Mac!” called out a cheerful voice from behind the counter. “The head groundskeeper was singing your praises, said you had it working better than new.”

The air in the café seemed to subtly shift, a ripple of energy that only they, perhaps, were aware of.

He was tall, leaning slightly on a simple wooden cane, everything about him suggested a man who worked with his hands, who knew the feel of soil and the rhythm of physical labour. His movements were unhurried, deliberate, like someone accustomed to the steady pace of maintenance work rather than the urgent energy of high-performance coaching. There was something about the way he scanned the room—a quiet authority in his presence, a stillness that seemed to draw the light towards him—that made Alex instinctively know ... this was Mac. His eyes, sharp and perceptive beneath the cap’s shadow, held the weathered wisdom of someone who had both achieved and lost greatly before finding his true path. A thin scar traced his jawline, a reminder of some

past accident or mishap, and despite his humble appearance, there was a quiet self-assurance in the way he moved.

Alex and Jesse exchanged a quick glance. A maintenance worker who fixed sprinklers? This had to be some kind of mistake.

Jesse squinted and, with a small tilt of her head, gestured towards the entrance, asking subtly, “Is that ... him? He looks like he’s about to mow the fairway, not change our lives.”

“I ... think so?” Alex replied, equally uncertain, yet strangely drawn by the man’s simple presence.

The man stopped between their tables, tapping the cane gently against the polished floor. His eyes, when they met theirs, were surprisingly sharp, missing nothing. “You two must be Jesse and Alex,” he said, a half-smile playing on his lips. His voice was low, calm and steady, the kind of voice that didn’t need to be raised to command attention. A voice that resonated with an unexpected depth.

“Yeah,” Alex replied, a little surprised by the man’s directness. “We were told to meet a performance coach named Mac.”

The man’s smile widened just slightly. “Well, looks like you’ve found him.” His gaze moved between them thoughtfully. “Interesting combination. The wave and the boardroom. Different worlds entirely, yet here you both are, facing the same essential challenge.”

Alex and Jesse exchanged a quick, puzzled glance, both wondering how this stranger could so immediately distil their circumstances to such a simple truth.

Jesse arched an eyebrow, her gaze sweeping over his simple attire. “You’re not exactly what I expected. No offence.”

Mac chuckled, a warm, genuine sound that seemed to fill the space around them. “Good. The ones who look like they’ve got it all figured out? They’re usually the ones faking it best. Real answers, those don’t come wrapped in neat little packages. They show up in the mess, the cracks ... the places most people avoid.”

Alex found himself grinning despite his lingering doubt. “So, what now? More coffee? A PowerPoint presentation on winning? Or do we dive straight into the deep feelings?”

Mac glanced at the ornate clock on the café wall, letting out a loud sigh. “Hmmm ... This is going to be fun, but you know, you won’t find what you’re looking for in here.” He gestured towards the door with his cane. “The real work, that’s out there. Come on.”

Outside the fancy clubhouse, the sun hung high, bathing the scene in a brilliant, almost dazzling light. The air smelled of freshly cut grass, money and the faint bite of sea spray drifting in from the coast. A four-seater golf buggy waited by the entrance, two sets of well-used golf clubs already strapped to the back.

Jesse’s eyes narrowed at the sight. “Hang on. I thought this was a performance session. Not a golf lesson. I haven’t swung a club since I was ten, and that did not end well. Trust me.”

Mac smirked. “Relax. It’s not about the golf. Golf is just the arena for today’s conversation.” He made his way over to the pro shop window, tapping lightly on the glass. A young woman with a friendly smile and a nametag reading ‘Sarah’ appeared.

“Sarah, my dear, think we can borrow this chariot for the afternoon?” he asked, leaning casually on the counter. “We’ll have it back by four, promise.”

Sarah gave him a knowing grin. “You can take the back nine, but only for this afternoon, alright?” Then, with a touch more edge, “You know the rules, Mac. If you’re late again, Mr. Carrington will be hunting you down that fairway. And for the love of golf, stay on the course this time, would you? No more disappearing to your so called ‘Contemplation Corner’ behind the 15th. That spot’s out of bounds, and you know it.”

With a cheeky grin, Mac shot back. “Can’t promise, but I’ll try my best. Keeps life interesting.” Turning back to Jesse and Alex, Mac nodded towards Sarah. “Best leave your bags and phones with her. She’ll keep them safe till we get back.”

Jesse hesitated, her hand instinctively going to her phone in her pocket. The thought of being disconnected, even for a few hours, felt strangely nerve-wracking, like losing a limb. What if Mark called with news? What if she missed something crucial?

Alex felt a similar pang of anxiety. His phone was his lifeline, his connection to the relentless demands of his job. He almost checked it one last time, picturing the unread emails piling up, the missed calls that would require immediate attention. But Mac's calm, expectant gaze, and the memory of Peter's conviction, stopped him. This was part of it, he supposed.

Mac leaned on his cane. "You won't need them out there." He waved his cane vaguely towards the sprawling expanse of the course. "The answers you're looking for, I can assure you, aren't in those devices. They're usually found in the quiet spaces in between the noise."

He looked between them, his expression softening. "Besides, out there, you'll have something more valuable than any digital connection. You'll have each other. Sometimes the most important insights come not from our own thoughts, but from watching someone else navigate their challenges, right alongside us."

Jesse and Alex looked at each other, awkward, uncertain, but with the first stirrings of genuine curiosity about what they might learn from this unlikely pairing.

Alex shrugged, a gesture of surrender, and handed over his phone and backpack. It felt surprisingly freeing. Jesse, after a moment's further hesitation, her jaw set with a mixture of reluctance and resolve, followed suit, leaving her phone and keys with Sarah, before tucking the black envelope back into her pocket.

"Alright," Mac said, a note of satisfaction in his voice as he climbed into the driver's seat of the buggy. "Let's go."

The buggy hummed softly as it rolled down the narrow, winding path, weaving between emerald fairways and groves of old, shady oaks. The midday sun set high overhead, filtering through the leaves in shifting patterns of light. In the quiet, only the occasional thud of

a distant tee shot, the chirp of unseen birds and the rustle of leaves in the breeze broke the stillness. It was, Alex had to admit, remarkably peaceful. A world away from the relentless pace of his office and the unspoken tension at home.

Jesse sat back, her gaze softening as it wandered out to where the sky kissed the horizon. The sharpness in her posture had eased. Even her fingers, once clenched, now danced a quiet rhythm on her knee.

“Why golf?” Jesse asked, gesturing to the sprawling greens. “Seems like an odd choice for someone with my background.”

Mac tapped his cane against the buggy, more rhythm than thought. “Golf’s different,” he said. “It’s not you versus someone else. It’s you versus the course, and more than that, it’s you versus you. Every decision, exposed. No bluffing, no hiding. Just action and outcome. And the thing is ...”

He gave a half-smile, cryptic as ever. “The ball? Doesn’t care who you are. Doesn’t care what you’ve done. It just reacts. To what actually happens, not what you meant to happen.”

Alex leaned back, frowning slightly. “So ... it’s a metaphor?”

Mac nodded, still facing the path ahead. “Everything is. If you’re awake enough to notice.” A beat passed. The cart hummed over a gentle rise. Then Mac spoke again, almost offhand. “And golf? It’s just the excuse.”

Jesse tilted her head. Sharp. Curious. “An excuse for what?”

Mac’s voice dropped to a quieter register. Low, steady, unmistakably deliberate. “To talk about the fire.”

For a second, no one moved. The symbol on the envelope flashed in Jesse’s mind, blue and orange, flickering, alive. The silence didn’t feel empty. It felt charged. Jesse shot Alex a quick, curious glance. Alex raised an eyebrow in return, mirroring her intrigue. This definitely was not like any coaching session he’d ever attended.

Alex broke the pause, his voice tinged with uncertainty. “The fire? As in ... passion? Drive?”

Mac didn’t answer immediately. The buggy rolled to a slow stop; they could see the tee box of their first hole in the distance. He rested both hands on the steering wheel, letting the silence stretch, drawing them in, forcing them to be present in the quiet beauty of the course.

“You ever hear Michael Jordan talk about his approach to the game?” Mac asked finally, his gaze sweeping out over the championship course that stretched before them.

Jesse’s eyes sparked with recognition. “Of course. The guy was a machine. A total competitor.” Her smile faded slightly. “I used to feel like that.”

Alex nodded, reflective. “Relentless. Obsessed with winning. He was the fire.” Then, quieter, “Mine doesn’t feel like that anymore. Hasn’t for a long time.”

Mac finally turned, locking eyes with Alex—steady, unwavering. “That’s the trap. People think it was about winning. But that was just the outcome. Not the why.”

Jesse leaned in, brow raised. “Then what was it about?”

Mac’s gaze drifted back to the fairway, as if the answer lived somewhere out there.

“It was the pursuit. The obsession with the craft. The hunger to improve, to evolve, to squeeze every drop of potential from every opportunity.” He paused. Then, with quiet force, “Jordan never let up, not until he walked away on his own terms. That’s the difference. Some people coast when things get comfortable. Others commit. All the way to the end.”

Jesse shifted, a flicker of something—regret?—crossing her face. Her voice dropped, almost a whisper. “I think I lost that. The burn. It used to drive me. Now ...” She looked down at her hands. “... Now I’m just tired.”

Mac's voice softened. A rare gentleness. "Most people do, Jesse." He let the moment breathe. "Life buries it. Fear. Doubt. Pressure. Other people's stories ... and the ones we start telling ourselves." He looked at her, then at Alex. "That's why you're both here. To find it again."

Jesse let his words sink in, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully at the course ahead. The smell of pine and damp earth filled her nose. "But what if the fire just ... burns out?"

Jesse's voice was barely above a whisper. Her fingers worked the edge of her sleeve, the question carrying more weight than she intended. It wasn't theory, it was fear.

Mac shook his head slowly, with quiet conviction. "It doesn't burn out. Not really." He paused. "It just gets buried. Smothered by the debris of life, pressure, doubt, disappointment, noise. But it's still there. Always."

Alex exhaled, leaning back in his seat. "Yeah," he murmured. "That ... sounds painfully familiar. Like living on fumes."

Mac glanced at him. No judgement. Just truth. "You think too much. You stay stuck in your head, replaying, overanalysing, trying to fix everything from up there." He tapped his temple. "That's where fire smoulders. Can't breathe through the clutter."

Alex let out a dry chuckle. "Pretty accurate. My brain's like a browser with 50 tabs open, and a couple of them are playing music I never heard of."

Mac nodded towards the distant green. A lone golfer stood in the morning light.

"See him? Comes out here every day at dawn. Seventy-three. Had a stroke two years ago. Lost his coordination. Docs told him he'd never play again."

They watched in silence as the man lined up his putt, smooth, steady, sure.

“He couldn’t even hold a club at first. Started with nothing but visualisation. Then five minutes a day gripping the club. Just gripping. Now?” Mac gestured at the green. “He’s back to his old handicap.” He turned to them, eyes steady. “That’s fire. Not hype. Not talent. Something deeper. Something that stays when everything else walks out.” He let the silence settle. Then added, softly, “Sometimes it just needs a little oxygen. A little space. Someone to fan the embers.”

Jesse looked at Mac now, no sarcasm left, just raw curiosity. “So how do you light it again? Where’s the oxygen? How do we clear the junk?”

Mac looked towards the first tee, the sun catching the curve of the fairway. His voice was quiet, sure. “Purpose,” he said. “But not the kind you find on a retreat or scribbled on a vision board.” He turned back to them. “It’s built. Day by day. Decision by decision. In the showing up. Especially when you don’t feel like it. That’s where meaning lives—not in waiting for inspiration, but in creating it.”

Alex rubbed his jaw, thoughtful. “Sounds ... exhausting. More grinding?”

Mac chuckled, a warm, but softened sound. “Yeah. Sometimes it is.” Then he added, gently, “But so is living without it. That’s the real grind. The one that wears you down without you even noticing.”

Jesse squinted towards the horizon, where green met sky in a seamless blur. “And you think we’re supposed to find purpose out here?” she asked. “By chasing a little white ball?”

Mac rapped his knuckles lightly against the side of the buggy. “You won’t find it in the scorecard, if that’s what you mean. And not in a perfect swing either.” He paused, gaze following the curve of the fairway. “But you might catch glimpses of it in how you approach the hard shots. How you respond after one sails into the trees. It’s in the next swing, not the last one.”

Alex folded his arms, letting the idea settle. Still sceptical. But something in him—it wasn’t logic, it was longing—leaned in. “So ... we’re not really here to play golf?”

Mac smiled faintly. “Not in the way you think. We’re here to see what shows up when you take on a challenge without your usual armour.”

Jesse leaned back, some of the edge in her voice softening. “Alright then,” she said with the smallest smirk. “What’s step one, Coach?”

Mac pressed the accelerator gently, guiding the buggy towards the first tee. “You’ll take a shot,” he said, voice calm as ever. “Don’t think about the score. Don’t worry about how it looks, who’s watching or what it means. Just swing. Let’s see what shows up.”

Alex frowned. “What ... That’s it? No warm-up, no tips, no plan?”

Mac gave his signature half-smile, equal parts serene and infuriating. “Oh, there’s a twist! You’re playing alternate shots. One of you hits the tee shot. The other plays the next. Then back and forth, until it’s in the hole.”

Jesse arched a brow. “So, I have to clean up whatever mess he makes, and he has to deal with mine? Real motivating, Coach.”

Mac’s eyes twinkled. “Exactly. Like life. We don’t always get to start fresh. Sometimes we inherit someone else’s chaos. Sometimes we leave a gift behind. Either way, you play the shot in front of you.”

Alex and Jesse locked eyes, curiosity, tension and something unspoken crackling in the space between them. There was friction, yes. But beneath it, a flicker of shared challenge. An unlikely partnership forming between two people who, minutes ago, felt worlds apart.

Alex cleared his throat. “So ... who goes first?”

Before Mac could answer, Jesse jumped in. “I’ll go.” It wasn’t a question, it was muscle memory. Years of chasing the first wave of a heat. Of claiming priority before hesitation had a chance to creep in.

Mac raised an eyebrow, amused. “Easy there, priority princess.” He turned to Alex. “Suit before surfer. Let’s see what corporate precision looks like under pressure.” Then glancing back at Jesse. “Don’t worry,

you'll get your turn. I'm curious to see how you adapt when you're not first off the mark."

Jesse smirked but didn't argue.

As Mac brought the cart to a stop beside the first tee, Jesse absently reached into her pocket, fingers brushing the black envelope she'd tucked away earlier. She traced the raised flame symbol, its edges still warm, almost alive beneath her touch. Looking up, she caught Alex watching her. He gave a small nod, his hand drifting to the chest pocket where his own card rested. Whatever that flame represented, it was starting to feel like more than just an elegant emblem.

Was it a promise? A challenge? A beacon calling to something dormant within them both?

The course stretched endlessly ahead, a ribbon of green winding through the landscape. But Alex couldn't shake the feeling that this drive, this unconventional coach, and the mysterious flame on that black envelope, were leading them somewhere far beyond the fairway—perhaps towards a fire they'd both forgotten they possessed, a fire that was just waiting for the chance to burn bright again.

As Alex stepped onto the first tee, driver in hand, a surreal thought crossed his mind. How strange—that after years of high-stakes presentations to banking executives, after countless sleepless nights wrestling with million-dollar implementation problems, his professional future might somehow be connected to how well he hit a little white ball with a stranger watching.

The rational part of his brain, the part that had made him successful at FINTEQ, scoffed at the notion. Yet something deeper, something that had been buried beneath spreadsheets and status meetings, stirred with unexpected anticipation. He adjusted his grip, feeling the weight of the club, aware of Jesse's eyes on him, and prepared to take his first swing into the unknown.

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