

1

On the first day of February, the coldest day of the year so far, I took it as a very good omen that a woman I never met brought me a sandwich. I had my pair of steel-toed Redwings kicked up on the corner of my desk, thawing out, when she arrived. My morning coffee and two corn muffins were a distant memory.

She lay down the sandwich wrapped in wax paper and asked if my name was Spenser.

“Depends on the sandwich.”

“A grinder from Coppa in the South End,” she said. “Extra provolone and pickled cherry peppers.”

“Then my name is Spenser,” I said. “With an S like the English poet.”

“Rita said you were easy.”

“If you mean Rita Fiore, she’s not one to judge.”

“She also said you’re tough.”

“True.”

“And hard headed.”

“Also true,” I said. “And did she say if you scratched behind my left ear my leg would shake?”

“No,” the woman said, squeezing into a client chair. “But when I told her my problems, she said to go see Spenser.”

“And bring him a sandwich?”

“She said that would help.”

I shrugged and walked over to the Mr. Coffee on top of my file cabinet, poured a cup, and offered her one. She declined. I mixed in a little sugar, set the spoon on the cabinet, and moved back to my desk. My pea coat and Brooklyn Dodgers cap hung

2 Ace Atkins

neatly from my coat tree.

“You can go ahead and eat,” she said. “Don’t let it get cold.”

I unwrapped the sandwich, which was still miraculously warm, and took a bite. I nodded with appreciation. The woman had indeed made a friend. Outside traffic bustled and zoomed along Berkeley and Boylston. It was still early, but dark and insular, with snow predicted all week. I had crossed winter days off the calendar until opening day for the Sox.

“My name is Sheila Yates,” she said. “Three weeks ago, my son Dillon was taken from me by the state of Massachusetts. He was sentenced to nine months in a juvie facility out in the harbor.”

She motioned with her chin as if you could see the harbor from the Back Bay. I was still able to leap medium size buildings in a single bound, but my X-ray vision was a bit iffy. Sheila was big and blonde, with thick, overly-styled hair, a lot of makeup, and gold jewelry. She wore a blue sweater and blue jeans under a heavy camel-colored coat. She also wore a lot of perfume, which in small quantities might have been pleasant.

“What did he do?” I said.

“Jack shit.”

“OK,” I said. “What was he charged with?”

“Terrorism, stalking, and making criminal threats against a school administrator.”

I started to whistle but my mouth was full. I chewed and swallowed and then took a sip of coffee.

“You want to know what he really did?”

I nodded.

“He set up a fake Twitter account for his vice principal,” she said. “He’s a funny kid. Although some might say he’s a smart ass.”

“I like him already.”

“Does any of this make sense to you?”

“What did your lawyer say?”

“Then?” Sheila said. “We didn’t have a lawyer. I couldn’t

make the hearing. I had to work or I'd get fired, so Dillon's grandfather took him. It's my mistake. I would have never signed that stupid piece of paper. It waived his right to an attorney."

"Not good."

"You bet your ass," she said. "Rita's now got a young attorney at her firm to help."

"Did he make threatening remarks on Twitter?" I said.

"No way," she said. "It was all a big joke. He may have wrote something about the guy getting his privates stuck in an appliance. He did say the guy liked to garden in the nude."

"In all fairness," I said, "pruning shears could be dangerous."

"You get it," Sheila said. "It's a gag."

"I've been doing this for a long time," I said. "And in those years it never ceases to amaze me the great wealth of people born without a sense of humor."

Sheila took in a large breath of air, threw her hands up in the air, jewelry clanging, and said. "Oh, thank God," she said. "So you'll help me?"

"What can I do?" I said. "Sounds like Rita's firm is on it."

"They are," she said. "But while they're filing papers and stuff, I want to know how this crap happened. Rita says it's one of the craziest things she's ever heard."

"Where was he charged?"

"Blackburn."

"Ah," I said. "The Riviera of the North."

"Wasn't my choice to live there," she said. "I grew up in Newton. I took a job there after I split with Dillon's dad. You do what you can."

I nodded. I reached over the sandwich for a yellow legal pad and wrote her name at the top left corner. I asked her for a phone number and an address. I asked her son's full legal name and his date of birth. She told me more about the charges and then a lot about the judge.

"Judge Scali," she said. "He's a class-A prick."

"Now that's a campaign slogan."

“He’s the Zero Tolerance for Minors guy,” she said. “You know who I’m talking about now? He’s all over the news and on the radio. He says what he does is tough love. Says parents that complain can deal with him now or go see their kids at Walpole later.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Well, he’s a big freakin’ deal in Blackburn,” she said. “Everyone up there is afraid of him. They think his word is God. The DA, the public defender, the cops. No one will listen to me. That’s when I called Rita. I used to work in the business office at Cone, Oakes. I don’t have a law degree, but I know when I’m being jerked around.”

“How’s Dillon?”

“They won’t let me see him,” she said, reaching into her purse for a tissue. “They won’t let me talk to him but once every couple weeks. They say it’s part of his rehabilitation out on Fortune Island. Rehabbing what? Being a wise guy? These people up there are nuts.” She started to cry but then just as quickly wiped her eyes and sat up.

I leaned back into my chair. I crossed my arms over my chest. “I can’t make any promises,” I said. “But I can check into things. Maybe find out something to help your attorney for appeals.”

“Thank God,” she said. “When can you start?”

I looked down at the day planner on my desk. I flipped through several empty pages. “How about tomorrow?”

“Jesus, you mean it?” she said, standing, coming around the desk. As I stood, she reached around to hug me. I didn’t return the embrace, only patted her back a couple times. “You know I probably can’t afford your day rate, whatever it is? I saw how much some snoops charged the firm.”

“Outrageous.”

“But you’ll help anyway?”

I nodded. She walked back around to the client chair and grabbed her big purse. She did not sit back down. I looked down at my desk and saw my sandwich waiting, only one bite mark in

place. The coffee had probably grown cold.

“Thank you,” she said. “I haven’t been able to sleep or eat since this happened. I blame my dad. I blame myself. The only person I don’t blame is Dillon.”

“Doesn’t sound like it’s his fault.”

“He’s a good kid,” she said. “He doesn’t deserve to be treated like this.”

“Nobody does.”

“Everyone in Blackburn says I’m an outsider,” she said. “They tell me to let this all play out. Keep my mouth shut. Don’t piss people off.”

“Let me piss ’em off,” I said.

“I heard you’re good at that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve had years of practice.”

2

Blackburn, Massachusetts didn't appear on many tourist maps of New England. The old mill town, about fifty miles north of Boston on I-93, had lost any of its Norman Rockwell charm long ago. The huge brick mills stood like forgotten fortresses along the slow-moving black water of the Merrimack. The skies were gray. A light snow was falling. As I crossed over a rusting metal bridge, I saw ice chunks in the river. I made a mental note: only forty-three days until opening day.

I drove around a bit, cruising the downtown and Central Avenue toward the Victorian-era city hall. Most of the storefronts sat empty. I passed the police station, an all-night diner called The Owl, a Vietnamese grocery, and several corner bars. There was the high end of town with an upstart coffee shop and a ladies' boutique. There was a low end of town with Farman's Salvage and a scratch-and-dent furniture warehouse. I soon ended up in front of Blackburn High School and parked in a space reserved for the school resource officer.

Might as well start making friends now.

Blackburn High looked to have been built in the twenties, constructed of blondish brick and dull glass blocks. According to a sign, they were home to the Fighting Eagles. I checked in at the office, as thuggish middle-aged men were often frowned upon for wandering school corridors. And these days, schools were locked down after the first bell.

A dour-looking woman in an oversized T-shirt reading *Achieve!* issued me a badge, unlocked the entrance, and gave me directions to where I was headed.

The school had that familiar scent of old books and

disinfectants. Being in school always tightened my stomach. My best day in high school had been graduation.

I found Officer Lorenzo sitting at his desk, hunched over a computer and not looking up even after I knocked on his open door. He was a fat guy with a couple chins in need of a shave. He wore baseball hat, too small for his big head, boasting an embroidered law enforcement star. I waited in the doorway until he could summon the energy to look up at me. To call his appearance sloth-like was a true insult to the animal kingdom.

“Fill out the form,” he said. “You can drop it at the front desk.”

He had yet to look up.

I didn’t speak. Finally he lifted his eyes, refocusing.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not here for the form.”

“Aren’t you a sub?”

“Do I look like a sub?”

“You look like me,” he said. “A guy who loads trucks.”

“Well, I’m not here to award you officer of the year.”

“Ha, ha,” he said. “Then what the hell do you want?”

I took a seat without being asked. His miniscule office was very sloppy, filled with stacks of newspapers, old copies of *Guns & Ammo*, and a shelf full of playbook binders. He’d fitted cardboard in the windows to keep out any light. He assessed me through smudged metal-frame glasses and shifted on his sizable rump.

I handed him a card across the desk. He took a very long time to read my name, occupation, and phone number.

“Yeah?” he said.

“I work for Sheila Yates,” I said. “Earlier this year, you arrested her son Dillon for setting up a Twitter profile for Vice Principal Waters. You charged him with aggravated stalking and terrorism.”

“God damn right I did,” he said, crossing his meaty arms across his chest. “That’s all done with.”

“Not for Dillon,” I said. “He’s cooling his heels out on

Fortune Island, which I gather isn't *Boys Town*."

"Not my business," he said. "The kid was nuts. He's got mental problems."

"How so?"

Officer Lorenzo leaned forward, took a sip from a plastic Coke bottle, and leaned back into his seat. His chair was under considerable duress and creaked loudly during the process. "You clear this? Because you can't just walk in here and start asking me a lot of questions."

"I checked in at the office," I said. "They told me all law enforcement matters were your turf."

He smiled, eyeing me with new enthusiasm. The man in charge. The top dog. Still, I wanted to reach over and clean his glasses.

"You ever been a cop, Spenser?"

"Sure."

"Then you know what kind of crap these kids are capable of," he said. "I back down an inch, show I'm weak, and they'll take advantage of it. I see them looking at me like I'm just some fat doofus. They think protecting this school is a joke. I start laughing with them and the next thing I know some kid like Dillon Yates is running down the halls with an AR-15."

"Quite a step up from cracking jokes."

"You can't give an inch," Lorenzo said. "Not a fucking inch."

"No one wants to see a fat doofus in charge."

"Damn right."

I couldn't tell if he was doing Eastwood or Wayne. He seemed more along the lines of Roscoe Arbuckle. "OK," I said. "So tell me what concerned you about what he did."

"Have you met Luke Waters?" he said.

I shook my head.

"He's a class guy," he said. "You know? Grew up in Blackburn and loves this town. He coaches the ninth grade football team. Lives his life for these kids. This guy went from being respected to kids snickering behind his back because of

that Yates kid. Last time he held an assembly he couldn't even get kids to sit still and listen. It broke his heart."

"Wow."

"What did Dillon's mom tell you? That these were just some smart alec remarks?"

"Pretty much."

"The kid wrote some highly disturbing things on that tweeter thing," he said. "You know what I'm talking about? All the kids mess with that crap."

"My fans run my account."

"Well, I saw what he wrote. He kept on running down Vice President Waters. He wrote about crazy sexual shit and mutilations. We took it as a genuine threat."

Lorenzo widened his eyes as if the vagueness was enough. I nodded a few times in mock understanding. "For instance?"

"I don't have to discuss all this with you," he said. "Go talk with Blackburn PD. I charged the kid and it was up to the judge to decide what to do."

"Nine months is a bit excessive," I said. "For something written online."

"Kid's sentencing isn't my department," he said. "You think I'm tough? You hadn't met Judge Scali. He's the true ball buster in this town."

"I can't wait."

"He doesn't care what you think, or the parents think, or any of the bleeding hearts," he said. "The judge was elected on *Zero Tolerance* and he means it. Since he's taken the bench, he's cut juvenile crime in half. He doesn't let shit slide like you people in Boston. He knows if he doesn't reach kids now, they're gonna be sticking a gun in someone's face tomorrow. It's tough love, but it works. I seen it happen."

"Even if there's no crime committed?"

Lorenzo shook his head. "You got sold a bill of goods, Boston," he said. "You got a couple parents around here who won't get with the program and they say life is unfair. I don't feel sorry for them in the least."

“Can I see the report?”

“No,” he said.

“That’s fine,” I said. “I’ve got a release from his mother.”

“Good luck, then,” he said. “Why’d you want to see me?”

“I wanted to meet the man who started all this.”

The fat man stood, showing he was much shorter than expected, which was perhaps the source of his irritability. He put his hands on his hips as if to show our conversation was over. He adjusted his cap and tried in vain to suck in his gut. “Don’t expect a lot of cooperation in Blackburn,” he said. “All your liberal crap doesn’t fly here. It’s a tough town to grow up in, and tough love is the only way we keep things safe. Understand now?”

I saluted him. He scowled back.

“How about you tell me this. Just what exactly did Dillon Yates write that got the vice principal so upset?”

“No way.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “I can look it up. I just thought you’d stand behind your charge.”

“Goddamn right I do,” Lorenzo said, and reached up with his right hand to rub both chins. “What the hell. I’ll tell you.”

I waited.

Lorenzo ran a finger under his nose and sniffed. He took a couple breaths. I tried to ease my quickening heart.

“He said Luke Waters got his dick stuck in a VCR.”

I stifled a laugh. Lorenzo didn’t like it.

“You think that’s fucking funny?” he said.

“I do,” I said. “Man versus technology is always comedy gold.”

He glowered. It made me want to laugh even more.

On the way out, I winked at him and walked out into the hall, nearly knocking down a gawky girl fiddling with a locker. She looked embarrassed and smiled at me, pulling back a blackened streak from her otherwise white-blond hair.

I peered back into the open door, just in time to see Lorenzo tossing my business card in the trash.

3

The criminal courthouse was on Blackburn's highest hill, across from the city cemetery and a public housing complex. The building was old and stately, as it should be, with a lot of brass, marble and dark oak inside. Cavernous, with the air quality of a museum or a summer house shut up for the winter. On the first floor, an art nouveau bronze statue of blind Lady Justice stood proud but tarnished with courtrooms on both sides of an open staircase leading to the clerk's office. I bypassed a curving staircase for an elevator. I'd recently had surgery on my right knee.

A life's work of busting heads and kicking butts could be hard on the joints.

Upstairs, I found a frizzy-headed blondish woman not so hard at work at a computer. The building wasn't well heated nor insulated. The frizzy-headed woman wore a blue overcoat and fingerless gloves at her desk. When I leaned in, I saw she was checking her Facebook account.

I gave her a high-wattage, dynamite smile and slid across a faxed release from Sheila Yates. She glanced up at me, somehow immune to my charm, and then down at the paper. I considered arching an eyebrow but I didn't want her falling out of her chair.

"What's that?" she said.

"A parental release."

"For what?"

"For all police and court files related to one Dillon Yates."

"Is he a minor?"

"Indeed he is."

"Well, all juvenile records are sealed," she said with little

remorse. Clicking away.

“Not to parents,” I said.

“Are you the parent?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Law enforcement?”

“Not for a long while,” I said. “I don’t like to wake up early.”

“Sorry,” she said, with even less remorse. “I really can’t help you.”

I reached into my wallet and showed her that I’d been licensed by the Commonwealth as a private investigator. She glanced down at it, unimpressed. I wondered what she’d have thought of my Napoleon Solo all-access badge. As she looked back at me, I arched the eyebrow. Oh, what the hell.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “The parent may view the file. But may not take the file with them or make copies.”

“The parent has signed the release,” I said. “The release is now on your desk.”

“You can’t just go and transfer parental rights.”

“I am not seeking to be the kid’s parent,” I said. “I am seeking access to the files to help with his court case.”

She looked at her screen, not switching over to a database, keeping it on her personal Facebook page. “Has the case been adjudicated?”

“Yep.”

“Then how are you going to help?”

“Ever heard of an appeal?” I said.

She didn’t answer, returning to her Facebook page, clicking away. I glanced down and saw her smile at a photo of a couple of kittens in a basket of flowers.

“Always cute seeing tax dollars at work,” I said and left.

I ungracefully took the marble steps down to the lobby, past Lady Justice, my work boots echoing through the giant courthouse with each methodical step. The courthouse seemed empty, oddly quiet and with all the personality of a mausoleum. I would have to return with some legal saber-rattling from Cone

Oakes. Sometimes a threatening letter was better than a .357.

Back out into the spitting snow, I found a Blackburn PD patrol car had parked behind my Ford Explorer. A cop was examining my license tag and writing down the numbers. This town was just getting better and better.

The cemetery stretched out far and wide behind where we both stood. Last week's snow sat piled up high and dirty on the curbs.

I crossed the street, leaned against my SUV, and waited. The cop was a young, thin guy with the high-and-tight haircut of ex-military. If he hadn't been in the Army, he needed a refund from the barber. He wore wraparound sunglasses and one of those satiny blue cop jackets with a Sherpa collar. His prowl car idled, throwing out a lot of exhaust in the cold. When he finished writing down what he needed, he turned to spit.

I didn't offer to shake hands.

"Sir, were you at Blackburn High School this morning?" he said.

"Yep."

"Why was that?"

"Signing up for Glee Club," I said.

"A little old for that," he said. "Aren't you?" He stared at me with the black bug lenses of his sunglasses.

I smiled back and said, "I do a mean Lady Gaga."

"Vice Principal Waters said you were found roaming the halls," he said. "We take school security very seriously in Blackburn. Now, you want to tell me what you were doing?"

"I met with Officer Lorenzo about a legal matter. Why don't you call him?"

"That's not what we heard from Mr. Waters."

"Maybe Luke Waters is still sore after his encounter with the VCR."

The young cop changed up his stance a little, called into dispatch from a mic he wore on his heavy jacket. The dispatcher came back with a rundown of my vehicle registration. I hoped my parking ticket collection didn't show up. I hadn't paid a

ticket since the Flynn administration. The cop stared at me as he listened to dispatch.

“We could get you for trespassing,” he said. “But I let you off with a warning.”

“Terrific,” I said. “Thanks so much.”

“You think I’m kidding, sir?” he said, giving me his best hard look.

“No,” I said. “But someone’s giving you some bum information.”

He turned his head and spit again. He held the notebook in his hand and just stared at me. The patrol car continued to idle. I smiled at him. “I’d stay clear of Blackburn, sir,” he said. “Just please go on back to Boston.”

“I’m a just a rambling boy who won’t settle down,” I said. “This just ain’t my kind of town.”

The young cop didn’t react, only turned and walked back to his prowlie, flipped it into drive, and drove off. I watched his taillights disappear over the hill.

One degree of separation from the local cops. Blackburn was going to be more fun than I thought.