

Robert B. Parker's Booked

“I’ve given my memoirs far more thought than any of my marriages.”

-- Gloria Swanson

ONE

“I know what you’re going to ask me,” Spike said. “And the answer is yes.”

We were at his restaurant, Spike’s. We were sitting at our favorite table on a steamy July afternoon, enjoying the air conditioning and each other’s company. It was our first weekday lunch together in months.

Our food had just arrived – small Caesar salad for me, a massive portion of Spaghetti Bolognese for my best friend. Emphasis on *massive*. Maybe it was the fact that I hadn’t dined with him much over the winter and spring – I’d been spending most of the time at Richie’s place on the Jersey Shore – but when the server brought his plate, I did a double take. A carb-assault like that in the middle of the day would have put me right to sleep. But who was I to judge? Even at our (slowly, mind you) advancing age, Spike could still bench-press any member of his staff. That included his chef, Jorgen, a seven-foot-tall mountain of a man who probably weighed as much as my car. I’d seen Spike do it at the restaurant’s Christmas party. Jorgen had dared him. The big guy had been as shocked as anyone when he’d gone airborne.

“What am I going to ask you?” I said.

“No need to be coy,” Spike said.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Spike put down his fork and sighed heavily. “Yes, Sunny. I’ll be your best man.”

I nearly choked on my salad.

“What?” Spike said. “We both know I’m too butch for maid of honor.”

I gulped some water and took a breath. “Spike,” I said, “I’m not planning a wedding.”

“Why not?” he said.

“I’m engaged to be engaged,” I said. “End of story.”

“You got engaged to be engaged on New Year’s Eve. It’s almost July now.”

“Wow,” I said. “Who needs a calendar when I’ve got you?”

Spike went to work on his spaghetti, cutting it into bite-sized morsels. He was a spaghetti cutter, not a twirler, which struck me as odd for a restaurateur/gourmand – or, for that matter, a grown-up. It was nothing new. He’d always eaten his spaghetti like a ten-year-old. But all this time apart, I supposed, had made me start observing things more closely. Not just Spike and the way he consumed pasta, but my other friends, my hometown, my parents, who somehow seemed to have aged more in my absence than they had in the past ten years. I loved them all. I’d missed them all. So had my miniature bull terrier, Rosie, who was curled up on the curved banquette between Spike and me, munching a crust of bread Spike had slipped her, while staring up at him with such blatant adoration, it made me a little jealous.

“I’m assuming this delay is about you, not Richie,” Spike said.

“Why would you assume that?”

“You’re big on delays,” he said. “Richie isn’t.”

“Astute,” I said.

“I try.”

Spike took a bite of his chopped-up pasta. He broke off another piece of bread and passed it down to Rosie. She barked appreciatively. The two older women at the next table gaped at us, as though they’d never heard a dog barking in a restaurant before. “Move along,” I told them.

“Nothing to see here.”

One of them clicked her tongue at me. I can’t stand it when people click their tongues at me. I thought of several wise-ass remarks, but refrained from saying any of them. Who said I hadn’t

matured?

I turned to Spike. “No more treats after this. Rosie’s watching her figure.”

Rosie devoured the piece of bread and rested her chin on Spike’s knee. If she were a cat, she would have purred. Not for the first time, I envied my dog – her ability to find contentment in the simplest of things.

The truth was, Spike was right. The delay in wedding planning was about me. But it wasn’t for the reasons he was probably imagining. It had nothing to do with my feelings for Richie.

Throughout the winter, he and I had been in more in synch than we’d ever been, even at the happiest points of our marriage. It wasn’t because of my job, which I’d been able to handle quite well from my rented office space in Asbury Park, with my assistant Blake James holding down the fort in Boston most of the time. It wasn’t even my two biggest fears, change and commitment. I’d made peace with both of those monsters back on January 1, when I’d accepted the key to Richie’s apartment.

Something else was holding me back. Something that I hadn’t put into words until now.

“Peak Season,” I said.

“Pardon?”

I shoved a forkful of salad into my mouth. I could feel Rosie shifting under the table, her chin moving from Spike’s knee to mine – an emotional support animal if there ever was one. I slipped her a crouton. It was the least I could do.

“Peak Season down the Shore,” I said. “That’s what’s keeping me from planning a wedding.”

“Because...”

“Because I hate it.”

Spike put down his glass of iced tea.

“Hate might be a strong word,” I said. “But it’s a different place during the summer.”

He nodded. “Go on,” he said. Like a psychiatrist.

“I mean, there are so many people,” I said. “It’s noisy. You can’t get a dinner reservation...”

“To be fair, you could say the same things about Boston all year round.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t stink of coconut oil.”

Spike nodded again. “Good point.”

“Thank you.”

“On the other hand-”

“Always with the other hand.”

“You aren’t marrying the Jersey Shore. You’re marrying Richie.”

I looked at Spike. He was right. I could imagine my therapist Susan Silverman using his exact words, if I’d ever been able to broach the topic during one of our sessions. But the thing was, it wasn’t just my own aversion to the Jersey Shore during Peak Season that was making me leery of taking the proverbial Next Big Step. It was that Richie loved the Jersey Shore during Peak Season. He adored the bustle of the restaurant/bar he managed, Candy’s Room. He didn’t mind waiting in line for movies or coffee because it meant business was booming -- not just at The Room, as the locals called it, but everywhere. He stopped and tipped even the least talented buskers on the boardwalk and he was unbothered by the beach traffic and, even though I hadn’t asked him about it, he probably loved the smell of coconut oil too. And while all of that combined wasn’t even close to a red flag, it did give me pause. Maybe Richie and I were more fundamentally unlike than I’d thought. Or maybe we were just at different places in our lives.

“I just want to make sure that this time around, it sticks,” I said.

He nodded. “Is Richie coming to Boston any time soon?”

“I asked him to come tonight,” I said.

“That’s soon.”

“Yeah, well. My parents invited us to dinner,” I said. “He has to make sure he’s got coverage at The Room, because they’ve got a band playing and even though it’s a weekday, it’s going to be busy, busy, busy.” I sighed. “As per fucking usual.”

“Wait. Parents? In the plural?”

“Yep. Elizabeth is coming too.”

“Hmm.”

“I hope he can make it,” I said. “I don’t want to deal with my mother and sister alone.”

Spike took another bite of his pasta. “Sauce needs more basil. Gotta talk to Jorgen.”

“Spike?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Does Flynn like anything that you find... ah... hard to take?”

He shrugged. “Well yeah,” Spike said. “He’s British.”

“But you’re still with him.”

“Sure I am.”

“You might marry him someday.”

“Hey, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’ve only known the guy for a few months.”

I laughed.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“It’s been a year,” I said.

Spike raised an eyebrow at me. “Wow,” he said. “Who needs calendars?”

I smiled. Spike smiled back. Rosie put a paw on my knee, and I felt the way I always did when I was with the two of them – like everything was going to be all right. “Maybe I just need to get used to the smell of coconut oil,” I said.

“Yep.”

“And if not, there’s no reason why Richie and I can’t remarry and maintain two residences.”

Spike nodded. “Just do me a favor. Let me know as soon as you get officially engaged.”

“Why?”

“Takes a long time to have a tux made properly,” he said, “when you’re a man of my proportions.”

I grinned. “Deal.”

As soon as I went back to my salad, my phone rang. Blake’s name was on my screen. “What now?” I whispered. It had been an especially busy morning, with two client meetings, plus a very lengthy zoom call with a potential client, a Beacon Hill attorney who loved to phrase and rephrase questions as though I were a hostile witness. Reluctantly, I answered the phone.

“Sunny?” Blake’s voice had a strange tone to it. Like someone was holding a gun to his head.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“A lady came in to see you about ten minutes ago,” he said. “I told her you were out and couldn’t be disturbed, but she wouldn’t listen and... I don’t know... She was pretty unhinged and I... I may have said something about Spike’s.”

I was about to ask Blake if this unhinged lady had told him her name, when an audiobook-ready voice bellowed, “*Sunny*.” I realized I didn’t need to.

“She’s here,” I told Blake.

“Oh man,” he said, “That was fast. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I know her.”

She was making a beeline for our table. I said goodbye to Blake and ended the call, so I could give my complete attention to the woman who demanded it.

Melanie Joan Hall. Bestselling author. Longtime friend of mine. World-class diva. She wore a black linen pantsuit, broad-brimmed black hat, enormous Prada sunglasses and the general attitude of an incoming missile.

Spike stood up and gave her a smile. “Melanie Jo-”

“Don’t say my name.” She leaned in close. “I need to talk with you both. In private.”

TWO

Melanie Joan asked Spike if there was a computer in his office. He said yes. She said, “Take me there. Now.”

Spike did as he was told.

One of the dog-averse women at the next table said, “Excuse me, are you Melanie Joan Hall?”

“You’re my favorite author,” said the other.

Melanie Joan ignored them. This was shocking to me. I’d known her for more than a decade and no matter how distracted or busy or in danger she was, Melanie Joan Hall always made time for her fans. Not now, though, apparently. Without so much as a glance at the women, she followed Spike, her shoulders squared, Louboutins clacking. “Come along, Sunny.”

I barely had time to attach Rosie’s leash.

Once we were in Spike’s office with the door closed and locked, Melanie Joan took off her hat, but not her sunglasses. She collapsed onto his leather desk chair. “I’m doomed,” she said.

“How so?” I said.

She emitted a sound – a blood-curdling mash-up of sigh, groan and scream.

Rosie growled. I picked her up and shushed her.

“Doomed is a serious word,” Spike said.

She made the sound again. I held Rosie close. For several seconds, Spike and I stood there, on the other side of his desk, waiting for her to elaborate.

Yes, Melanie Joan Hall was a drama queen – a condition that had become a good deal worse as she’d grown older and more catered to. But when the woman said she was doomed, I knew enough to take her seriously. Our paths had first crossed when she hired me to protect her from her ex-husband John Melvin, a psychiatrist who made Hannibal Lecter look like Dr. Ruth. More recently, she’d retained my services to track down yet another stalker, whose threats to derail her career and her life made the both of us yearn for Melvin.

“What’s wrong, MJ?” Spike said.

Finally, Melanie Joan snapped out of her paralysis. “This,” she said.

She turned on Spike’s computer and clacked away at the keyboard. When she found what she was searching for, she made that awful sound yet again.

Rosie squirmed in my arms. Spike kept a dog bed in the corner of his office, just for her. I put Rosie down on the floor and she scurried over to it, hopped inside and curled up like a giant pill-bug. I couldn’t say that I blamed her.

“Look at this,” Melanie Joan said. “Just *look at it.*”

Spike and I moved around his desk and focused our attention on the screen.

“Hmmp,” Spike said.

It was a one-star reader review of Melanie Joan's upcoming book, *Stronger Alone*. I skimmed it. I'd seen a lot of press about the book, which was set to come out in late fall – her very first memoir. In an interview with the *Globe*, Melanie Joan had described it as, *the most difficult and important project I've ever undertaken*. But the reviewer had used language that was, shall we say, not as flattering.

I looked at Melanie Joan. This was what she'd interrupted my lunch over? A one-star review by some rando on a site called... I looked at the name again. "What is ReadAnon?"

Melanie Joan let out a massive sigh. "ReadAnon is the most important website in the publishing business."

I glanced at Spike.

"It's a book review site, like Goodreads, only it's all anonymous," Spike said. "Think 4Chan, but for people who are able to read."

"How do you know about this?" I asked. "You hate the internet almost as much as I do."

"Flynn loves ReadAnon," Spike said. "He can post cookbook reviews and be as honest as he wants without anyone coming for him on his Instagram."

"What's his screen-name?"

"If I told you, he'd have to kill me," Spike said.

I chuckled.

"*Excuse me*," Melanie Joan said.

I turned to her. "Okay, look," I said. "I'm sorry you got a bad review, Melanie Joan. But come on. You're a successful author. Doesn't that kind of thing come with the territory?"

"This is different," she said.

“How?” Spike said.

Melanie Joan took off her sunglasses. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, dark circles visible beneath layers of concealer. I’d never seen her look this un-photogenic. “Book Babe has more followers than anyone on ReadAnon,” Melanie Joan said. “That’s power. Real power.”

“You’re tougher than this, MJ,” Spike said. “It’s just a review.”

“A horrible review,” she said. “Did you read it?”

“People are assholes,” I said, “especially when they can be anonymous about it.”

“Did you *read* the *review*, though? It doesn’t just trash my writing. God knows I’m used to that. It trashes *me*, Sunny. It brutalizes Melanie Joan Hall, the human being. It took a lot of courage for me to write a memoir. You put something personal out there, you expect a little common decency from someone who calls themselves a critic, but *no*....” She went on for a while. A long while. I waited for her to take a breath.

“Pardon my ignorance, Melanie Joan,” I said. “But what does all of this have to do with Spike and me?”

She stood up, and took one of my hands in both of hers. Her grip was vicelike. “I need you to track down the person behind the Book Babe account,” she said.

I blinked at her.

“I need to talk to her. Him. Whatever. I need to get Book Babe to listen to reason. Say something nice about me. Or my life as an author will be over. I won’t be able to show my face anywhere.”

Finally she let my hand go. She grasped her knees, deep-breathing as though she’d just finished a marathon. I stared at her. A million thoughts ran through my mind, the top one being,

my God, she's finally lost it. “Melanie Joan,” I said, as gently as I could. “Don’t you think you might be overreacting?”

“You don’t understand,” she said.

“Sure I do,” I said.

“You don’t,” she said. “You’re a luddite. Your dog has a more active social media presence than you.”

I was starting to get annoyed. “Look, your book isn’t coming out for months. People have short attention spans. One bad ReadAnon review can’t tank your entire career, no matter how important you think this Book Babe person is.”

“You don’t get it at all,” Melanie Joan said.

“Maybe not,” I said. “But there are things I do get, and they’re called the right to privacy and freedom of speech. I’m not going to doxa private citizen for you, just because they’ve typed some mean things about your book.”

Melanie Joan looked at Spike imploringly.

“Sorry, MJ, but I agree with Sunny,” Spike said.

She started to make the sound again. I asked her to stop. She did. It was a small victory.

“If you don’t dox Book Babe,” Melanie Joan said, “my career is over.”

“Oh come on.”

“I’m telling you the truth. Bookstores are already cancelling their orders.”

“Seriously?” Spike said.

“*Why?*” I said. “It makes no sense.”

Melanie Joan put her sunglasses back on and collapsed onto Spike’s chair. Spike and I sat

down on the couch against the wall and waited for her to answer. For several seconds, the room was silent, save the gentle sound of Rosie's snoring.

"I did something stupid, you guys," Melanie Joan said finally. "Really, really stupid."

