

Robert B. Parker's Hot Property

ONE

It was early February and snowing again in Boston. I felt as if it had been snowing since Thanksgiving. Or perhaps since the autumn equinox. The TV meteorologists, talking excitedly every night about more record snowfall numbers, ten more inches than we'd gotten ten years ago, continued to treat the whole thing like porn.

Hawk, being Hawk, had his own analysis of the city's current weather conditions, void of any statistics about dew points and barometric pressure.

"Climate change," he said, "has now officially worn my ass out."

"It took a winter like this to get you there?" I said.

"Been building up to it for a while," he said. "Feeling like I'm living at the damn North Pole finally took me over the edge."
"

I stared out my window at the latest storm, the snow blowing sideways across Boylston St. The morning news shows had already announced another round of school closings. People were being advised to stay off the Pike and the Expressway and take public transportation if possible. They were also telling non-essential workers to stay home. I imagined people all over the greater Boston area declaring themselves more essential than the pilot landing a plane at Logan.

I remembered a Carl Sandburg line about fog being on silent haunches over the harbor and the city before moving on. Maybe fog. The snow in Boston wouldn't move on, from the Harbor or anywhere else. They said there hadn't been snowfall like this in ten years in Boston. It had reached the point where just going for donuts had started to feel as if it ought to be one of those cross-country events in the Winter Olympics.

I made myself a second cup of my own coffee and continued reading the *Globe* at my desk. Despite the weather they were still delivering the paper to my door most mornings, if a couple of hours late sometimes. I knew I could just as easily read it online, that it was a generational thing to refuse to do so. But it was a personal choice, as was continuing to use a landline.

"I'm actually surprised that phone on your desk isn't a rotary," Susan Silverman once told me.

"Don't think I didn't consider that," I said. "You can get them for thirty-nine ninety-nine on Amazon, I checked."

"T-Mobile will never take you alive," she said.

"By the way?" I said. "You know what never lost messages and texts the way my iPhone-one-thousand does? My old rotary phone."

Susan had smiled and said, "We really are going to need a much bigger complaints box."

I had the Sports section in front of me now, taking consolation in the fact that even with a new Ice Age upon us, pitchers and catchers would soon be reporting to the Red Sox spring training home in Fort Myers.

It meant that before too very long I would be experiencing the sight and sweet sound of line drives, on radio and TV, coming off the bat of Raffy Devers, our team's young star. It had taken some doing, but I had finally come to grips with the fact that Mookie Betts was never coming back to the Sox from the Dodgers.

I had now given my heart to another.

"They nearly added a fifth level of grief where you and Mookie were concerned," Susan had said the night before at dinner.

Hawk had been with us, at Torellina on Huntington Ave.

"How many years is it now you been talking about one pint-sized baseball player getting traded like he was your first dog run away from home?" he said.

"It was a very painful breakup," I said.

"Not for him," Hawk said.

I had then broached the idea of Susan perhaps taking a trip with me to the west coast of Florida when the Sox commenced playing spring training games.

"I'd rather just pay the ransom," she said.

"What if it hasn't stopped snowing by then?" I said.

"I'll just have to risk it," she said.

It had been an extremely slow winter for me professionally, to the point where I had begun to wonder when the glowing job reports the president kept talking about were going to apply to me again.

The last investigation I'd worked had been for Rita Fiore, work for which I had refused payment.

Rita had ended a relationship with a lawyer from another firm right before Christmas, at which point he had not just been an extremely bad sport about it, but also threatened to release naked pictures of her as a form of retaliation.

"Stop me if you've heard this one," Rita said. "But I once again put my money on the wrong horse's ass."

"Boy," I said, "who could have ever seen something like *that* coming?"

"Maybe the reason I keep making poor choices is because *you* continue to not choose me," Rita said.

"But I remain devoted to you in other meaningful ways," I said.

"Name one."

"Well, I always tell men who inquire about your availability that while they need to get in line, the good news is that the line moves," I said.

"Don't be mean," she said.

She told me that day that the pictures were just one of her concerns. She also believed the guy had begun stalking her. She'd waited too long, she said, to have the locks changed at her townhouse on Joy St., and was certain he'd used his key to get inside on at least one occasion, possibly more than that. I asked if he'd taken anything. She said she didn't think he had, he had rearranged things just enough to let her know he'd been there. And, in the process, make her feel violated.

"Can you get him to stop?" she asked.

"You're in luck," I said, "as convincing men not to behave badly remains one of my specialties."

"I keep thinking that one of these days I might experience some of your other specialties if I catch you in a weak moment."

"I have no weak moments," I said. "Just a stubbornness that can never bear to be frightened at the will of others."

"Which tough guy said that?" she asked.

"Jane Austen," I said.

TWO

The lawyer's name was Donald Harrigan, he of Harrigan and Sons, a white-shoe Boston firm, whiter than the endless snow of the Boston winter and one I assumed had started locking in clients around the time when the Mayflower landed.

It had only taken me a few days of following him around to realize that he was indeed following Rita. I wasn't certain if he might be moving up on something more dangerous, and how much of a threat he actually posed, but I wasn't going to wait around to find out. Mostly what I wanted to uncover was how and where he had stored these pictures, and make sure that at some point they didn't end up splashed all over social media from here to Nepal.

Eventually there came the Friday night after Rita had first called me about him, and Hawk and I were waiting for Donald Harrigan inside his own Beacon Hill townhouse when he arrived home from the office.

"What the fuck," he said.

"Not to make too fine a point of things, Donald," Hawk said, "but the one fucked here appears to be you."

"We are here to collect any and all, ah, compromising photographs of Rita Fiore," I said.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said.

There was still snow on the shoulders of his overcoat. He casually hung it on a rack near the front door.

When he turned back to us, Hawk had already moved across the room. He then effortlessly backhanded him across the face, the sound like the crack of a baseball bat, the force of the blow putting Donald Harrington on his ass.

Hawk knelt next to him.

"Rita's my friend," he said softly. "Been a friend to my trusty sidekick here even longer than me. So what you're going to do, Donald, is go get those pictures of her off your phone or your laptop or your damn iPad or wherever the fuck you stored them away. You're going to get yourself up and do that lippity-lop, or the next time I hit you it will be hard enough to turn you into a Democrat."

Harrigan put his hand to his mouth, took it away, saw the blood on it.

"You can't just come into my house-."

Hawk reached toward him. Harrigan flinched. But all Hawk did was touch a finger to Harrington's bloody lip.

"Shhhh," Hawk said. "Now let's start with you handing over your phone."

"I'm not giving you my phone."

Hawk smiled, and shook his head sadly, and backhanded him again, putting him on his back this time.

While Harrigan was on the floor, now looking more than a little glassy-eyed, he fumbled inside the jacket of his pinstriped suit and handed Hawk the phone.

"Pass code," Hawk said.

Harrigan told him without hesitation. Hawk sat back down in the chair next to mine and began tapping away.

To me Hawk said, "You delete pictures from this, dirty or otherwise, you delete it from all his devices."

"And you know this how?"

"Everybody except a Luddite like you knows," Hawk said.

"Yeah, well at least I know what a Luddite is."

Harrigan was seated on his couch by then. Hawk walked over and handed the phone back to him.

"Where are the printed copies?" Hawk said.

"There aren't any."

"Sho' there are," Hawk said pleasantly.

He turned to me.

"I'm betting Donald here is an old school perv," Hawk said.

"Agreed," I said.

"Just so you know," Harrigan said, "Rita wanted me to take those pictures of her."

I said, "And now you're going to give them back before I get some swings of my own in, Donald. And you need to know in advance that I hit harder than my friend."

"Do not," Hawk said.

"Do to," I said.

Harrigan looked at me, then back at Hawk. There was still blood on his lip that had spilled down to his chin.

"Wait here," he said.

"I think not," I said.

"Have it your way," he said.

We followed him up the stairs and into his bedroom and watched him take down a Monet print from the wall. There was a safe behind it. Harrigan worked the combination, opened the door, and came out with a manila envelope. Handed it wordlessly to me. Some of the photographs inside were in color, some in black-and-white.

Old school prints indeed.

"Is this all of them?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

I handed the envelope to Hawk and grabbed Harrigan by the lapels of his jacket, pulling him close enough to me that I could smell his cologne.

"You need to understand the consequences of you lying to us about this," I said. "Because if you have lied, your life at that point will become vastly more difficult than it currently is. Are we clear on that? Nod if you understand what I just told you."

He nodded.

"And if you ever go near Rita Fiore or her home ever again, we will be back," I said.

We left then. When we were back inside Hawk's new Jaguar, Hawk said, "Maybe I should hold on to the envelope, just for safekeeping."

"Because there might be something in those pictures you haven't already seen?"

"You got no way of knowing whether Rita and I acted on our mutual attraction or not," he said.

"More like something I intuited," I said.

"So what you gonna do with the pictures?"

"Make a fire when I get home," I said.

I could see him smiling as he noiselessly put the car in motion.

"Your loss," he said.

Rita had once again insisted on paying me when I told her what Hawk and I had done, and once again I refused.

"Just my luck," she said. "You still won't take yes for an answer."

Since then, I had steadfastly remained in the ranks of the unemployed. And like the snow, my winter of discontent showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

"Pretty sure you stole the discontent line," Susan said.

The snow outside came harder. They were predicting six more inches by the end of the day. I was already starting to think about how far I would be willing to walk in these conditions to get lunch when Martin Quirk called.

"Somebody shot Rita Fiore," he said.

THREE

I felt my chest constricting like a fist closing.

"Maybe a hit," Quirk added. "Maybe not. Too early to tell."

"Is she....?"

He cut me off.

"No," he said, then told me where to meet him at the Critical Care Center, on Fruit St.

"I'll be there as soon as I can get to my car," I said.

"It's back of my building and I may need to dig myself out."

"You're at your office?"

He'd called on my cell instead of the landline.

"Yeah."

"One of my cars will pick you up in five minutes," Quirk said.

I told him I'd be waiting downstairs and called Hawk. Then I did go downstairs to stand in the cold, feeling a much tighter fist around my heart, as I waited for Quirk and considered the possibility that Rita Fiore might die.

I took great pride, and had from the time I had been raised by my father and my uncles and taught self-reliance almost as soon as they had taught me how to read, to only be afraid of things I could not control.

But I was afraid now.

Quirk, Frank Belson, Hawk, and I were in the waiting area of the Trauma, Emergency Surgery & Critical Care Center. It was part of Mass. General, and part of the hospital's Gun Violence Unit, which only helped with that kind of violence after the fact.

"You know where she lives on Beacon Hill?" Quirk said to me.

"Joy St."

"What are the odds, Rita ending up with an address like that?"

He said there had been a gym bag found next to her. I nodded.

"She works out at Beacon Hill Athletic," I said. "She was probably on her way there."

"Maybe half-mile away from her house," Belson said. "On Friend."

"She took me with her there one time. Was a Rita thing, for her own amusement. Taking me. Her way of fucking with the tight asses," Hawk said.

The short trip from my office to the hospital in Quirk's car had felt like a bobsled run, as slowly as the cop behind the wheel was trying to drive. And there had been a few detours because of some streets that hadn't been plowed. But we had made it, if not as soon as I wanted to.

She was still upstairs in surgery. Quirk, being Quirk, had just come back downstairs, even though he wasn't supposed to be upstairs. But it sounded as if he'd gotten close to the operating room.

Somehow he already knew that the bullet had missed Rita's heart and liver, but that there had been significant damage to her stomach and intestine. A lot of blood loss, almost too much to save her, in the snow. He said she was likely alive because a FedEx driver happened to come around the corner practically before she'd hit the ground, and had decided not to wait to call 911, making the decision to drive her straight to the Emergency Room himself.

"Turns out the guy is a former EMS," Quirk said, "and knew what he was doing."

The FedEx guy said he'd actually seen the shooter's gun still out the window of some kind of black SUV. As soon as he saw

that, and Rita on the ground, he started blowing his horn like a madman, spooking the shooter enough that he didn't get off another shot, just gunned the SUV and headed in the other direction instead, his car nearly sliding into a snowbank.

"Second shot would probably have finished her," Quirk said. "Maybe been a head shot."

"Driver see anybody else in the SUV?" I asked.

Quirk said, "He didn't think so, but it all happened pretty freaking fast."

"Figures," Hawk said. "Pro hitter wouldn't need a second guy. Loose end for him to worry about later."

"I talked to the FedEx guy," Belson said. "He got her into the back of his truck as carefully as he could, did his best to stanch the chest wound with his First Aid kit. Then hauled ass even in these conditions. Says he's pretty sure he got her here in under ten minutes."

"Heroes still walk among us," I said.

"FedEx," Martin Quirk said. "They live to deliver."

"Or deliver to live," I said.