

Robert B. Parker's Payback

ONE

I was in my brand new office over the P.F. Chang's at Park Plaza, around the corner from the Four Seasons and a block from the Public Garden, feeling almost as cool as Tina Fey.

I'd just walked through the door that had "Sunny Randall Investigations" written on the outside, put on some coffee, sat down behind my rustic wood Pottery Barn desk. All in all, I was everything a professional woman should be, if you didn't count the Glock in the top righthand drawer of my desk.

There were two chairs on the client side of the desk, a small couch against one wall, and a table on the other side of the room that I used for painting when I needed to take a break from world-class detecting. It housed my pads and boards and a palette and all the other tools of a world-class water colorist's trade.

"Forget about the gun," Jesse Stone said. "If somebody shows up and threatens you, just pull a paint brush on them."

"What about the boxing classes you made me take?" I said. "You should see how good my right hand has gotten."

I had signed up for a half-dozen at the gym an old boxer named Henry Cimoli owned over near the harbor.

"Here's hoping you never need to throw it," he said.

Jesse. Chief of Police, Paradise, Massachusetts. On-again, off-again boyfriend. Mostly on over the past year. I had given in and

started calling him that, my boyfriend, just because I hadn't found a better way to describe his role in my life. We were still together, anyway, even though we were mostly apart, our relationship having survived the virus. We were official, as the kids liked to say, even if we hadn't announced it on Instagram, or wherever kids announced such things these days, in a world where they found everything that happened to them completely fascinating. Jesse and I had been as close as we'd ever been before the virus caused the world to collapse on itself. Now we'd once again grown more used to our own social distancing, and for longer and longer periods of time, him up in Paradise, me in Boston.

But still official, at least in our own unofficial way.

"I feel like Jesse and I are happy," I said to Spike the night before, over drinks at Spike's.

"Low bar," he said. "For both of you."

"Come on," I said. "I've got a stress-free relationship going, money in the bank, my own office, I've still got Rosie the dog, I've even lost five pounds, not that you seem to have noticed."

"Just like a big girl," Spike said.

"Not as big as I was five pounds ago," I said.

"You also still have ex-husband issues," he said, referring to Richie Burke, still in Boston, still in my life as he raised his son from his second marriage.

"Do not," I said.

"Do so," Spike said.

"You sound childish," I said.

"Do not," he said. "Do not, do not, do not."

Spike and I had been celebrating the fact that I'd finally gotten paid by Robert Magowan, who owned the second-biggest insurance company in Boston. Magowan had hired me to prove that his wife had been cheating on him. This I did, well over two months ago. Then he refused to pay, and kept refusing, until Spike and I had finally shown up at his office and Spike threatened to shut a drawer with Magowan's head inside it. That was right before I handed Mr. Magowan my phone and showed him the images of him in bed in a suite at the Four Seasons, park view, with Lurleen from accounting, and wondered out loud who'd win the race to the divorce lawyers, him or the missus, once the missus got a load of what I thought were some very artsy photographs.

"You were only supposed to follow *her*," he said.

"Well," I said, "to put it in language you can understand, I thought I might need additional coverage."

He'd proceeded to transfer the money over speaker phone from an LA branch of Wells Fargo while Spike and I watched and listened.

On our way out of the office Magowan had said to me, "They told me you were a ballbreaker."

"Not like Lurleen," Spike had said.

I knew I could have handled Magowan myself. I'd brought Spike along just for fun. His, mostly. He'd gone through a bad time during the pandemic, nearly having lost Spike's at the worst of it. But he'd come up with the money he needed at the last minute, thanks to a loan

from one of his best customers, a young hedge fund guy named Alex Drysdale, who spent almost as much time in the place as I did.

Spike still wasn't back to being his old self, but threatening to kick the shit out of Robert Magowan, even if it hadn't come to that, had made him seem happier than he'd been in a year. And more like his old self.

He was about to pay off his loan this morning, having invited Drysdale to the restaurant so he could hand him the check in person. The thought of that made me smile, just not quite as much as the memory of the ashen look on Magowan's face when I showed him the pictures of him and Lurleen in one particular position that should have had its own name, like a new yoga move:

Downward dogs in heat.

The sound of my cell phone jolted me out of my reverie.

The screen said, "Spike."

"Sunny Randall Investigations," I said brightly. "Sunny Randall speaking. How may I help you?"

"I need to see you right away," he said.

His voice sounded like a guitar string about to snap. I realized I was standing.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Something's the matter. I can always tell."

"I just knocked Alex Drysdale on his ass, is what's the matter," he said.

"The guy who loaned you the money?" I said. "*That* Alex Drysdale?"

"I wanted to kill him," Spike said. "But I stopped after breaking his fucking nose."

"Spike," I said. "What the hell happened?"

"He stole my restaurant."

There was a pause.

"Wait, let me amend that," Spike said. "I mean *his* restaurant."

I told him I was on my way, ended the call, grabbed my leather shoulder bag, remembered to turn off the coffee machine, locked the door behind me, ran down the stairs.

I had started to believe that maybe God, at long last, had stopped being pissed off at everybody.

Obviously She hadn't.

TWO

"Payback really is a bitch," Spike said. "Only it turns out Drysdale's the bitch."

We were seated at the bar. Spike had a Bloody Mary in front of him so big it looked like a fire hydrant. He also had a glass filled with ice next to it, and would occasionally pluck out a cube and press it to his cheek. Spike said that after he hit Drysdale, the two guys with him --neither of whom, he said, looked like fund managers--hit

him back. I knew how hard it was to get the better of Spike in a fight, even when it was two against one. But they'd managed.

"At least you got your shot in," I said.

"I even managed to get in some good ones in on the extras from the Sopranos," he said, "before one of them kicked my legs out from underneath for me and the other just kicked the shit out of me."

"Literally kicking you while you were down," I said.

"My upper body is already starting to look more colorful than Pride month," he said.

Drysdale, he said, finally told them to stop, he didn't want Spike scaring the customers.

"Called them *our* customers," Spike said, and drank.

I asked then how Drysdale had done it, if he could explain it to me without trying to sound like Warren Buffet.

"I'm too stupid to sound like Warren Buffet," he said. "I'm the one who let him pick my fucking pocket in broad daylight."

Drysdale had been a regular at Spike's from the time he turned it from a sawdust-on-the-floor to an upscale restaurant on Marshall Street that had become one of the hottest places in town, not just because of the food, but because of the bar crowd, which could include professional athletes and local TV personalities and politicians and the lead singer from Dropkick Murphys and young women from the modeling agency that had opened around the corner. Drysdale was good-looking, a big tipper, often came in with a beautiful woman or left with one. And was rich as shit. He finally became aware that Spike,

even with the government loans and takeout business and furloughing of a lot of the staff, was about to shutter the place. So he offered Spike the loan that he needed at a two percent rate, on one condition:

He didn't tell anybody about the terms.

"I'm a one percenter," he joked to Spike, "but let's keep that two percent between us."

Spike had been a business major at UMass. When Drysdale presented him with the document, he told him to ignore all the bullshit language about floating rates and warrants and even what would happen if Spike somehow still had to declare bankruptcy down the road, that it was all boilerplate stuff and would never come into play until maybe the next pandemic in another hundred years or so.

"We're friends," Drysdale said. "We could have done this on a handshake. But my lawyers are making me."

Spike was one of the smartest people I knew, on every subject except maybe the periodic table. But desperation made him careless, and so did trust in what he considered a real friendship. The wolf was at the door and he needed his money, as he said, right fucking now.

"Stay with me," he said, knowing I was often challenged doing the math on a dinner check with girlfriends.

I stayed with him, but barely, as he began to speak of floating rates and cash positions that Spike said he never could have met, the ones Drysdale had assured him he didn't need to worry about. And interest coverage. And revenue targets for a business that had no chance to meet those until the pandemic was over. Spike never knew it,

but by the time Spike's started making money again, by the time he could finally see some daylight, it was too late.

"But the only one who knew that, from the start, was my pal Alex Drysdale," he said.

Then Drysdale came through the door a couple of hours ago with his bruisers and handed Spike his check back as soon as Spike handed it to him, saying he could keep it, he'd basically been in default on the loan from the beginning.

I said, "Are we getting anywhere near the bottom line?"

"He now owns Spike's is the bottom line," he said. "He even showed me the part of the agreement where he was entitled to a special dividend for what he called his consulting services."

Spike put air quotes around "consulting."

"Consulting on what?" I said.

"Fucking me over," Spike said. "It was at that point that I dropped him. Cost me a bunch of my new Doppio napkins because of all the blood. I was actually hoping he might bleed out and my problems would be solved."

Spike drank more of his Bloody Mary. I idly wondered if it was his first of the day. He rarely drank this early. But these were special circumstances. I was starting to think about asking him to build a Bloody for me.

"You know what he said when I asked him why?" Spike said. "He said it was for the same reason dogs lick their balls. Because they can."

At that point, Spike said, Drysdale turned and walked out.

"What am I going to do?" he said.

"I believe you mean what are we going to do?"

There was a flicker of light then in his eyes, for the first time since I'd arrived. Not much. A little. I was telling him what we both knew in that moment, that I was here for him the way he had always been for me. I was his wingman now. Just far cuter.

"Have it your way," he said. "What are we going to do?"

I smiled at him. It was as big as I had. Trying to tell him that things were going to be all right, even if I had no idea how.

"What the horny insurance guy said I did to him," I said. "We're going to *break* this dog's balls."