

Robert B. Parker's Bye Bye Baby

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The reelection headquarters for Carolina Garcia-Ramirez was deep in Roxbury at the corner of Proctor and Mass, wedged between an all-night liquor store and a Honduran restaurant that advertised the best *pollo frito* in Boston.

That afternoon, I was dressed appropriately for the dog days of summer. A light-weight khaki summer suit, white linen shirt, and polished wingtips sans socks. I caught a glimpse in the office window and thought I might give George Raft a run for his money.

“May I help you?” the receptionist said.

Despite my stunning entrance, the woman had yet to look up from her computer screen.

“Can you vouch for the Honduran place on the corner?” I said. “Is the *pollo frito* really the best in city?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Never been there.”

“Seems worth investigating.”

“Soul food joint down on Blue Hill’s much better,” she said. “If you’re into that kind of thing.”

The woman was of a plus size with a long black cornrows and large brown eyes. I smiled, offering half wattage so as not to distract her from her duties. She had on a white silk top with blue polka dots, a nifty little bow at the neck.

She hadn't smiled since I walked into the door. Women usually swoon or fall onto the floor with convulsions when I appear.

"Are you here to see someone?" the woman said. "Or just strolling around asking random-ass questions?"

"Might as well do both," I said. "The congresswoman is expecting me."

"The congresswoman isn't here," she said. "Is there something else I can help you with?"

"My name is Spenser," I said. "Kyle Rosen arranged a meeting."

"Spenser?" she said. "Is that your first name or last?"

"Last."

She asked me my first name and I told her. The woman stopped clicking the keyboard and picked up the phone, speaking so quietly I could barely understand what was being said. After a few moments, she nodded and pointed out a group of vinyl chairs that looked to have been swiped from a Ramada Inn lobby.

"Gonna be a minute."

I took a seat by a large plate glass window. The chair's split seams had been repaired with silver duct tape.

As I waited, a staff of a dozen or so milled about second-hand desks and wobbly chairs. The paneled wood walls brightened with posters of Congresswoman Carolina Garcia-Ramirez looking as bold and confident as Che Guevara. *Change, Now*, and *For the People* written in block lettering. It sounded like most of the staff was cold calling potential voters about next month's primary.

One exasperated young man kept repeating the congresswoman's name before finally relaying the sad news: Tip O'Neil had died long ago.

Fifteen minutes later, I spotted Kyle Rosen through the plate glass window. We had never actually met but I'd seen his picture and read his profile in the *Globe*.

I watched him crawl from a black SUV and hold the door open for another passenger. I stood as Carolina Garcia-Ramirez stepped out, dressed in a black pantsuit, hair in a tight bun, with a phone firmly clamped on her ear. She was tall, black, and striking. Even if you didn't know who she was, she looked like somebody.

Another man, small and thin with hair bleached nearly as white as Tedy Sapp, followed from the front passenger seat, carrying a very large leather bag. He struggled to get ahead and open the door.

I looked to the receptionist. She smiled and nodded in their direction.

"Mr. Spenser," Rosen said. "I'm sorry we're late. The flight from D.C. was delayed twice."

Rosen was a young guy, late twenties or early thirties, with wild, frizzy brown hair and black framed glasses that hadn't been hip since Buddy Holly died. He was medium height and skinny, wearing jeans and an oversized black T-shirt that said BE THE CHANGE.

I followed Rosen into a private conference room filled with floor to ceiling boxes and large stacks of posters. A long oval table was cluttered with coffee cups and fast-food containers, a few legal notepads and office supplies. A sign on the wall read, *I'm Not your Mother, Kids. Please Clean Up Your Damn Mess.*

"Thank you for coming," Rosen said.

“Any friend of Rita’s.”

“I met Miss Fiore at a fundraiser last month,” he said. “What a dynamite lady. She told me there’s no one better at what you do.”

“Besides having a pair of million-dollar legs, she also happens to have a top-notch legal mind.”

The mention of Rita’s legs caused Kyle’s to flush. Although tough and sexy as hell, she was probably the same age as his mother.

“Please excuse our offices,” he said. “When you have a reelection every two years, no one wants to sign a long-term lease.”

“I once had an office in the Combat Zone.”

“Really?” he said. “I’ve heard stories.”

“Grown men still weep recalling the Teddy Bare Lounge.”

Carolina Garcia-Ramirez walked into the room and stopped cold before tucking her cell back into her purse. When Rosen introduced me, she seemed a bit confused.

“I thought we covered this,” she said.

Rosen held up a hand to let him speak. He got as far as opening his mouth.

“I do not want, nor do I need, a bodyguard.”

“Carolina.”

“Damn it, Kyle,” she said. “I’m exhausted. Our schedule is backed up for the rest of the week. And I don’t have the time.”

Rosen took in a long breath and seemed to be seeking a moment of Zen. He offered me a reassuring smile as he himself appeared to be slightly less assured.

I smiled back. Good ole friendly Spenser.

“Mr. Spenser does a lot more than just security.”

“I’m also a song and dance man,” I said. “May I serenade you with a bit of ‘Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered?’”

The congresswoman offered a sour expression. “No,” she said. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

The congresswoman was tall and athletic with light coppery skin, delicate bone structure, and a longish neck. She was what many would call pretty if it were not offensive to judge a lawmaker solely based on her appearance. Her black pantsuit was stylish and neat, an American flag pin on the collar. She wore gold jewelry subtle enough that even Susan Silverman would approve. The toes of her pumps pointed enough to strike fear in cockroaches everywhere.

“I really think you need to hear us out,” Kyle said.

“I’ve heard all of you and I said no.”

“Well,” I said, shrugging. “It’s been a delight.”

“Carolina, please,” Rosen said. “If you’re going to win this thing, you need to focus on the damn issues and quit having to look over your shoulder every five minutes.”

“How am I supposed to explain personal security to my donors?” she said. “That’s an extravagance we can’t afford right now.”

“We will work it out,” he said.

“And damn it, it makes me look weak,” she said.

Rosen wrapped his arms tight around his body and screwed up his mouth to show it was tightly shut. He looked to me and then back to Carolina. I looked back and forth to both of them.

I felt like a kid standing between feuding parents. I leaned against the wall and felt into my suit pocket for a silver coin to flip. George Raft would've brought a coin.

"I don't make sales pitches," I said. "But perhaps you might tell me a little more about the issue at hand?"

"Can you help a country deeply divided by sexism, homophobia, and systemic racism?" Carolina said.

"It's all on the business card."

"I hire someone that looks like you and I look like I'm running scared."

"And what exactly do I look like?"

"Like a leg breaker from Southie."

"If it helps, I live in Charlestown with my German short-haired pointer Pearl," I said. "Sometimes I reside in Cambridge with my significant other. Usually the weekends."

Carolina leaned into the table, the conference room hushed and quiet. She seemed unfazed by the mess as she took a sip from a stainless-steel water bottle.

"I've had haters on me since I announced my candidacy," she said. "They more than doubled when I got enough signatures to be on the ballot and went off the charts when we actually won. I've been called a wetback, a nigger, a dyke bitch, a whore and a communist. What I'm saying is that I don't care. I don't worry about the threats, because this bitch is too damn busy getting work done."

"People are threatening to physically harm you?" I said.

The congresswoman started to laugh so hard, she nearly did a spit take with the water.

“Physical harm?” she said. She looked over to Kyle Rosen and shook her head. “Are you fucking kidding me? They want to kill me in so many different ways. Shoot me. Electrocute me. Poison me. Hang me and then rape my corpse. Come on. I knew what I was getting into.”

“So why now?” I said. “Why does this feel any different?”

Carolina stared at me while Rosen stared at her. She slowly nodded and Rosen turned in my direction. “Some recent threats show some inside knowledge of Carolina’s schedule in Boston. That’s worrisome.”

“You think it’s someone on her staff?” I said.

“We don’t know,” he said. “We think maybe our computers have been hacked.”

Carolina Garcia-Ramirez continued to stare at me, looking me up and down. Her face had a slight sheen of sweat. The dog days of summer were upon all of us.

“May I see the messages?” I said.

“I can print out the emails,” Rosen said. “They were sent direct to the congresswoman’s private account. We had a tech guy from MIT take a look, but they’ve been bounced around to different accounts under different names. But they’re always the same. Written in the same style and asking the same thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“For Carolina to drop out of the primary or they’ll kill her,” he said. “The emails are a reminder each day of what an easy of a target she is.”

“Do you have protection of any kind?” I said.

“It depends on where we are,” Rosen said. “She has full protection of the Capitol police in D.C.”

“But back in Boston,” I said, “you’re pretty much on your own.”

Carolina had yet to speak since she ran down all the offered methods of her assassination. She continued to stare at me in a way that would make most mortal men uncomfortable. I stared back. After a while, I widened my smile.

She couldn’t help herself. The congresswoman smiled back.

“OK,” she said. “What exactly can you offer?”

“Personal protection,” I said. “And when I’m not doing that, I can offer my sleuthing services.”

“Excuse me for asking,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “But how can you investigate threats sent from an unknown person from unknown sources and sent in a way even a kid at MIT can’t figure it out?”

“Faith it does me,” I said. “Though it discolors the complexion of my greatness to acknowledge it.”

“Are you shitting me?” the esteemed congresswoman said. “Shakespeare?”

“I also cook.”

She looked over at Rosen and then back at me. She shook her head.

“I hope you’re as good as you are cocky,” she said.

The congresswoman watched me as if I were the center of a sprawling congressional inquiry. I felt the sudden need to lean into a microphone.

I cleared my throat and said, “I’m even better.”

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“Well,” Susan said. “You have to do it.”

“Is that an ultimatum?”

“That’s a fact,” Susan said. “Carolina Garcia-Ramirez is the best thing to happen to Boston since the colonists tossed sacks of black tea into the bay.”

Susan plucked an olive from her martini and took a bite. We were both sitting at the bar at Grill 23 drinking cocktails and patiently waiting for dinner. My martini was gin. Hers was vodka. It wasn’t that I disliked vodka, I just didn’t think it should be called a true martini. Susan and I had argued on the subject while the waiter refereed.

“I heard her speak at a Raising a Reader event last year,” I said.

“And?”

“She appears to be committed to the cause,” I said.

“I admire a woman who’s small on talk and big on action.”

“As do I,” I said, raising an eyebrow at her.

Susan rolled her eyes. “Sometimes I think you are a thirteen-year-old trapped in a grown man’s body.”

“When I was thirteen, the only thing I knew about women was what I saw in my Uncle Bob’s *Playboy* collection.”

Susan reached for my martini and took a sip. She scrunched up her face and set it back onto the bar.

“And?”

“Ick.”

“The gin is handmade by British monks,” I said.

“My grandmother would’ve called that bathtub hooch.”

Grill 23 was all polished wood and brass with leather seating and marble accents. The lighting was soft and pleasant with the restaurant having the added bonus of being within walking distance of my office. The bartender set a filet in front of me and scallops in front of Susan. Susan looked at the filet and then looked at me. She asked the bartender to switch the plates.

He switched plates. I handed her a knife.

“I didn’t realize we were sharing,” I said.

“Neither did I.”

Susan looked and smelled lovely sitting next to me. She had on a fitted black motorcycle jacket over a red sheath dress. Her black hair was pinned up and she wore diamond earrings along with an antique silver bracelet I’d given her for her birthday. I stared at her while she cut off a small bite of steak.

“We should save some for Pearl.”

“Need I remind you that is a petit filet?” I said.

“Selfish.”

Susan nodded to the bartender and asked for a glass of pinot noir. He poured her a glass and looked to me. I ordered a second martini.

“Gin?” he said, smiling.

“Is there anything else?”

Susan chewed for a moment and swallowed. She took a sip of wine. “When would you start?”

“Tomorrow,” I said. “They’re going to email me a schedule. It’ll be early. I was told the congresswoman has an aggressive campaign schedule.”

“Against that putz Tommy Flaherty.”

“He wasn’t a bad congressman,” I said. “Served the district for many years.”

“He’s a chauvinist pig,” she said. “I hope she trounces him in the primary.”

“What’s your definition of a chauvinist pig?”

“Haven’t you seen the ads?” he said. “He’s trying to bring back the old Boston establishment. The private men’s club. I don’t think he knows what year it is.”

I named the year. Susan said I wasn’t even close.

“Her campaign manager could be our kid.”

“Hell,” Susan said. “The congresswoman could be our kid. If we’d been a little reckless when we first met.”

“I recall many reckless nights.”

I smiled and cut into my scallops. They’d been artfully arranged with asparagus and a broiled tomato and appeared slightly larger than Gronk’s fists.

“You know she refuses to take corporate money or handouts from billionaires?”

“I was told this wouldn’t be a lucrative endeavor.”

“I think you’ll like her,” Susan said. “She’s like you. She has a code.”

“A luxury few politicians can afford.”

Susan cut into her artfully arranged asparagus. Before taking a bite, she took a sip of wine. Every movement meaningful and precise.

“Success hasn’t seemed to have changed her,” Susan said. “She’s kept focused on those who got her elected. People of color. Lower income neighborhoods. I read her father was a mechanic. Her mother a hotel maid. Both Dominican.”

“Funny,” I said. “In all my years of sleuthing, this is the first time you’ve been impressed with a potential client.”

“I guess I admire her chutzpah,” she said.

“I love it when you talk Yiddish to me.”

“Play your cards right, mister, and I’ll help you enlarge your vocabulary.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“You’ll drink to anything.”

“True,” I said. “But some things are more cause for celebration.”