

EXCERPT FROM ROBERT B. PARKER'S GRUDGE MATCH

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Listen up while I explain to you how you hold a damn grudge, Sunny Randall," Tony Marcus said.

We were in his office at Buddy's Fox. Tony's two most trusted troopers, Junior and Ty Bop, had driven me over here like they were Uber drivers, but only if Uber were hiring shooters and thugs this week.

"Tony wants to talk to you," Junior had said at my front door. "And before you say something smart, like you can't never help yourself, it really ain't a request."

"Fortunately, my schedule is wide open the rest of the afternoon," I said. "So you're in luck."

Junior had turned to Ty Bop then. "See that right there," he said. "She can't never help herself."

It occurred to me on the way to the South End that it was the most I'd ever heard Junior talk. He was as big as the Back Bay and usually just stood mute and scared the living shit out of you.

Now here we all were.

"Should I take notes?" I said to Tony.

He closed his eyes as he shook his head. I knew it wasn't because he thought I was funny, even though we both knew I was.

"What's the expression you'd use for a girl, you wanted to tell her she has balls?" he said.

"That she's got balls," I said.

"Well, you still got some balls on you," Tony said.

"Stop or you'll make me blush," I said.

Junior and Ty Bop were on either side of the door that led out to the bar area at Buddy's Fox. Ty Bop, who was Tony's shooter, still looked as skinny as a hairpin and so jittery I was always surprised I couldn't hear a faint hum coming off him, somewhat like a tuning fork. Junior, Tony's body man for as long as I'd known them both, seemed to be staring out the window and perhaps all the way to Portugal.

As always, Tony Marcus brought the word bespoke to mind. He was wearing a light gray suit, the gray so light you could barely see the pinstripes in it, a matching gray shirt, and a maroon tie and a maroon pocket square. His palms were flat on the desk in front of him. I

couldn't help noticing his hands, and being more than somewhat jealous of his manicurist. In the constantly changing crime scene in Boston, Tony was somehow as powerful as he'd ever been, almost as if he were the beneficiary of crime-world gerrymandering. But he still played to and from his base, which had always been prostitution, in all its lousy and illegal forms.

"I believe you were talking about grudges," I said.

"Like the one we got going," he said, "since you jammed me up on that gun deal when I'd gone out of the way to help you save your former father-in-law's sorry old ass."

A few months ago I'd made a deal with Tony—he'd get a warehouse full of illegal guns in return for helping me save the life of Richie's father, Desmond Burke. But I'd never had any intention of letting Tony put that many guns on the street, and instead had tipped the warehouse location to the FBI.

"Most people," he said, "they think you got to act right away when somebody fucks you over the way you did me." He smiled. "Hell, that ain't how you hold a grudge."

I waited.

"What you do is, you wait," Tony said. "And then you wait a little more, until maybe the other person don't even remember how they did you in the first place. Then you find a way to settle accounts. And if they say, 'Why'd you fuck me up like that?' you say, 'See there, you forgot. We had a damn grudge.'"

He patted his hands lightly on the desk, as if to punctuate the thought. He smiled at me with about as much warmth as the small refrigerator next to Junior.

"You get my meaning?" he said.

"Tony," I said, "I'm as likely to forget that you're sideways with me as I would my email address."

He chuckled. "Balls on you," he said. "You forget all the other favors I did for you, back in the day. Remember that time I found out Jermaine Lister took a shot at you?"

Jermaine was a low-level pimp who'd once been Tony's brother-in-law. He had taken a shot at me, and ended up in jail because of that, if briefly.

"You remember what happened to Jermaine?" he said.

"You had him shanked in prison," I said. "And not because he took a shot at me. Because you were afraid he was going to tell the cops that you were the one who ordered him to take a shot at me."

"Did you a favor, that's the point of the story," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Go with that."

He picked up an expensive cup and sipped whatever was inside it. He'd asked if I wanted something to drink, coffee or tea or water or stronger. I had declined. This was the first time we'd been together since the Feds had confiscated guns that Tony thought were going to belong to him.

"You know I could've taken you out anytime I wanted to," Tony said, "even if it would've gotten the Burkes all up in my shit."

"The thought has occurred to me."

"Somebody else did me like you did, I would have taken them out," he said. "But I like to think our relationship has evolved since then."

"Aren't I the lucky girl," I said.

"So," he said. "You wondering why you here today?"

"You missed me?"

"Want to hire you," he said.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed, loud enough that I was briefly afraid that I'd startled Ty Bop, who went through life like a grenade with the pin already pulled.

"Look to you like I'm joking?" Tony Marcus said.

I was at a point in my professional life where I had the luxury of picking and choosing my cases. After I'd saved Desmond Burke's life, he had insisted on paying me a vulgar amount of money.

But I had to admit I was curious.

"I'm listening," I said.

Tony smiled again.

"See there?" he said. "We all whores in the end."

"Not me," I said.

"You must be the exception proves the damn rule," Tony Marcus said.

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The problem, he said, was that prostitution had gotten more complicated than the goddamn tax code.

"Boy," I said, "I wish I had a nickel for every time I've heard that."

He gave a quick shake of his head, like clearing the immediate air around him of a gnat.

"When I was coming up," he said, "you just put girls out over at the wharf, before they cleaned up that part a town, and in the Combat Zone, before they cleaned that up, and then you just sat back and counted your money. Was back when the girls was way more black than white."

Then he was telling me that he could still turn a better profit than I might think just putting girls on the street and with some of the high-end escort services he was running, but how more and more he was facing competition from gentlemen's clubs-he put air quotes around "gentlemen"-and online porn, and suburban madams who'd done everything with bored housewives except unionize them, and even what he called drive-through massage parlors. He said he was now dabbling in drugs, even though he said he didn't much like dealing in what he called that oxy-oid shit. And, he said, he kept a hand in the gun trade as well, even after the way I'd fucked him over.

"I'm still managing to get by, is my point," he said.

"I'll bet."

"But I've been forced to, ah, expand my management structure somewhat," he said. "Used to be just me and the pimps and the whores and hotel work and the high-end houses I run and whatnot. But now there's way more shit to keep track of."

Only Tony Marcus, I thought, could sound this nostalgic about this particular profession, as if he were talking about the covers Norman Rockwell used to do for The Saturday Evening Post.

"So," he said, "not only have I had to expand my operation to keep up with the goddamn times, I've had to do something else I never really done before." He sighed. "Delegate," he said.

I waited again. He always had to tell things at his own pace, there was no way to rush him.

"And now what's happened is I've got myself into an unfortunate situation with one of my delegates," he said.

"Man or woman?"

"Woman," he said. "Moved up off the streets and even ended up running one of those high-end houses I mentioned, over near Symphony Hall. Calls herself Lisa Morneau. Like she French instead of Baltimore. That's what she calls herself now, anyways. No idea what it was when she first come to work for me."

"I don't mean to sound cynical," I said, "but often a move like that up through the ranks is facilitated by sleeping with the boss."

Tony smiled. "Hell, yeah."

"You care about this woman?" I said.

"I like this one more than most I've had, not gonna lie," he said. "Even got to where I was spending as much time at the place I put her up as in my primary damn place, leastways until she up and left."

"Left and went where?"

"Where you come in," Tony said.

I idly looked over to the door. Ty Bop's eyes looked closed, even though I knew they weren't. He had earbuds, and was moving his head up and down. He wore red-white-and-black high-top sneakers that I assumed had caught some sort of fashion wave, and a black hoodie with hollister written unevenly across the front, and black jeans. He looked, as always, as if he needed a hot meal.

Junior just leaned against the wall, arms crossed, as if Buddy's Fox might come crashing down on all of us if he moved even a foot in either direction.

"Only woman ever left me before is Natalie, and that only on account of her switching leagues," he said.

His ex-wife.

"When you say Lisa left," I said, "does that mean she simply moved out?"

"Moved out, disappeared," he said.

"How long ago?"

"'Bout a week," he said. "Didn't empty the place. But the second bedroom she used as an office, she cleaned out the desk. Took her laptop, too."

"Clothes?" I said.

"Girl got so many, I can't tell how much she might've taken with her," he said. "Looking at her closet is like looking at the beach and deciding if there's less sand since the last time you looked. Only thing she likes more than shopping is running. Should see her. Runs like she the anchor leg in the Olympics."

"Luggage?"

"She took Louis and Vuitton with her, far as I can tell."

"So you don't think she was taken against her will?"

"By someone asked her to pack a bag?" Tony said.

"Why'd she leave?"

I thought I saw something pass across his face, as impassive as he tried to keep it. Something in the eyes, there and gone. Like Lisa Morneau.

"We never had that talk," he said. "But I can't lie. Thought we was happy. Happy in our relationship, happy with our business arrangement. Girl knows almost as much about my damn business as I do. She know who's doing what, where they doing it, how much they taking in, where I got strength, where I don't. She even had me using goddamn spreadsheets. People know me started to call her my other brain."

"If she's as smart as you say she is, she'd never use what she knows about you against you," I said. "That would make her an idiot."

"Doesn't mean the competition couldn't try to hire her," he said.

"I thought you had about as much serious competition these days as Amazon," I said.

"Might be a guy thinks he can change that up."

"Name, please?"

"Boy named Gabriel Jabari," Tony said. "Looks a little like that brother they was talking about playing James Bond."

"Idris Elba," I said.

Tony nodded. "Tries to act high-class," he said. "Talks like he some Ivy League motherfucker. But behind all the big words he's as street as me. Showed up in town 'bout six months ago, opened a high-class titty bar on Tremont, over there right 'fore it turns into Chinatown."

The place, Tony said, was called Suite. He spelled it for me.

"Cute," I said.

"Well, Gabriel Jabari ain't," Tony said. "'Fore long, I started to hear how the real reason he come here was to knock me off my perch. Like he was the one with a grudge, even though I don't even know where the fuck he was 'fore he got to Boston."

"Have you met him?" I said.

"I took Lisa with me over to Suite one time, just to check the place out," Tony said. "This boy Jabari finds out we there, he show us upstairs to the VIP area, comp us the best champagne, act like he wants to be my best friend. But while he blowing all that smoke up my ass, I see him looking at Lisa, and maybe her looking back at him. Then I find out she went back there on her own."

"Without telling you," I said.

He nodded. "Like I don't got people on the ground. What's it they say in Vegas? Somebody always watching? In Boston, the one watching is me."

"Did you ask her about it?"

"Never got the chance," he said. "I go over to her place later that night, and she's gone."

"And you're sure there was no precipitating event?" I said.

"There was a young girl got found OD'd a couple weeks ago," he said. "Looked like she got beat up before she did. Made Lisa real upset, had her asking me if I knew what'd happened. Turned out she was one of ours."

"How young?" I said.

"Younger than Lisa wanted me running," he said. "She told me I didn't need them that young. Said we didn't. Said that girl could have been her once."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that was fine with me, I didn't need those traffic cops up in my shit."

"You mean trafficking?" I said.

"Whatever," he said.

"You think what happened to that girl might have made Lisa run?"

"You the detective," he said.

"Aren't I though," I said.

He shrugged again.

"Anyway, Lisa's been off the grid since she did up and run," Tony said. "It's hard to do nowadays. But you can do it, long as you stop using your phone or spending money like the world about to come to an end."