

Robert B. Parker's Showdown

ONE

Hawk was stretched out on the couch in my office, where I sometimes thought he had been since right after the Puritans had arrived.

He was wearing black exercise pants, Hoka sneakers with more colors in them than the Pride flag, and a Caitlin Clark t-shirt.

When I'd asked him about the t-shirt, he'd said, "Just my way of showing solidarity with that bad, bad girl."

The book he was currently reading -- *The Wingmen*, about the friendship between Ted Williams and John Glenn -- was currently closed and bookmarked across Caitlin Clark's No. 22. I'd long since accepted the fact that Hawk, when the spirit moved him, viewed my office as his personal reading room. Out of

friendship, I felt it more flattering than calling him a squatter.

I pointed at his book now and said, "You don't even like baseball."

"Not reading it for the baseball shit, reading it for the war shit," he said. "I always thought I would have been the ass as a fighter pilot."

"You're assuming the Marines would have gotten past your rap sheet?" I said.

"Only if they wanted to win," Hawk said.

I sipped more coffee from the temperature-controlled mug Susan Silverman had bought for me, having figured out just this morning how to keep the coaster charged, and already knowing that I probably wouldn't stay with it for the long haul. When I'd phoned to tell her that I finally did have it working the way it was supposed to, I'd also mentioned that it was a good thing, since I liked my coffee the way I liked my women: Hot.

Susan had said, "The 21st Century just called, big boy. They're still holding a table for you."

I didn't get the chance to ask what she was wearing, as I so often did, because she'd already ended the call.

To Hawk now I said, "You're at least aware that Ted Williams was considered the greatest hitter of all time, right?"

"Only reason I am," he said, "is on account of it having sunk in after the first thousand damn times you told me."

"They called him the Splendid Splinter, you know," I said. "Also the Thumper. And Teddy Ballgame."

Hawk turned slightly toward me on the couch, his eyes looking so hooded I thought he might be on the verge of a nap even though it was only mid-morning. But he'd pointed out on more than one occasion that baseball talk from me often acted as a powerful sedative for him.

"And down the rabbit hole we go," he said.

I had finally given in to peer pressure from him, even though Hawk constantly told me he had no peers, and purchased a longer couch, mostly so his feet no longer had to hang over the edge when he was reclining the way he was now. To my way of thinking, that made me at least as good a wingman as either Ted Williams or John Glenn had been. In my dreams, a larger couch also might be more functional in the future if I could ever again talk Susan into us using it for a midday flight of heavenly transport.

Or reasonable facsimile thereof.

I had been slowly making my way through the *Globe* while Hawk had been reading his book. I still liked having a newspaper

in my hands. But then I was someone who considered texting to be the devil's handiwork.

I looked over at Hawk, whose eyes now seemed to be all the way shut, and felt myself smiling at my own wingman as I did, thinking about all the wars the two of us had fought together. In almost the same moment, he had turned back to me as if reading my mind, and we'd already begun our next conversation. He could do that with alarming ease, much the way Susan Silverman could. It was concerning to me, if only because it chipped away at my notion of being a man of mystery.

"How long you figure we been doin' this, you and me?" he asked.

"By *this*," I said, "I assume you're referring to us doing our own patriotic bit to make the country a better and safer place."

Hawk smiled then, the smile coming up and out of him slowly and finally brilliantly, the way the sun did when it came up over the harbor.

"Not necessarily better," he said, "for the ones we keepin' it safe *from*."

"You make a solid point there," I said.

"As I so often do," he said.

"But being the trained detective that I am," I said, "I sense that you're about to make a larger point."

"As I so often am," he said.

"Don't make me come over there and beat it out of you," I said.

He was smiling again. "If you do," he said, "and I find out about it...."

He sat up then, placed his book on the end table behind him, walked over and poured himself a cup of coffee. I had offered to get him a temperature-controlled mug of his own. He had taken a hard pass on that, saying it would only make him drink more coffee. I told him that was the point.

"What I'm getting at," he said, "is if you ever wonder how long we're gonna keep doing whatever it is we've been doing for as long as we've been doing it."

"It sounds like you've been wondering about that very thing."

"Uh huh."

"Are you considering a career change?" I said. "Because I'm thinking it might be a little late in life for you to do the Top Gun thing."

"Turn and burn, like my boy Tommy Cruise says," Hawk said.

"Good God, Watson," I said in a British accent that wasn't nearly as good as the one Hawk liked to use when he switched conversational gears. "Are you actually considering retirement? I still see you as being in your prime, my dear man."

"Ain't never been anywhere *but* my prime," Hawk said. "You're the one needs to be the late bloomer, not me."

"There *is* that," I said.

"Just been thinking lately about all the fighting you and me been doing, in the ring and out the ring, and for such a long-assed time," he said. "And wondering if you ever get tired of fighting."

"I do," I said. "The problem is, I have no other skills."

"Got to have at least one other," he said, "or Susan staying with you this long makes no sense whatsoever."

"It's sweet for you to have noticed," I said.

"We both know you didn't just buy this couch for me, even though you say you did," he said.

"A man can dream, can't he?" I said.

He stared at me now, face both serious and solemn at the same time.

"Any asshole you wouldn't be willing to help they came through the door asking you for it?" he said.

"Asking for help, you mean?"

"Uh huh."

"Other than a New York Yankee?" I said.

"Other than that," Hawk said.

"It would have to be one raging asshole," I said. "And even then, you know me." I slid into my Bogart impression then, just to amuse myself. And because sometimes I couldn't help myself.

"Trouble is my business, *schweetheart*."

"Told you never to call me that," Hawk said.

His face was still serious as he look down at his book, all the usual irony and smart-ass completely absent, tapped the cover of his book with his index finger, looked back at me.

"Since I'm asking the questions today, here come one more your way, ball down the middle you could probably hit out the park like Ted Williams," Hawk said "You think there's anything in this world could ever *stop* us from being wingmen?"

"Not a chance," I said. Then winked broadly and added, "*Schweetheart*."

I was wrong about that, as it turned out.

And nearly dead wrong.

Wasn't the first time.