



Robert B. Parker's
**Blood
Feud**

A Sunny Randall Novel

Mike Lupica

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ONE

I SAID TO SPIKE, “Do I look as if I’m getting older?”

“This is some kind of trap,” he said.

“I’m being serious,” I said. “The UPS kid ma’amed me the other day.”

“I assume you shot him,” Spike said.

“No,” I said. “But I thought about it.”

We were seated at one of the middle tables in the front room at his restaurant, Spike’s, formerly known as Spike’s Place, on Marshall Street near Quincy Market. It had started out as a sawdust-on-the-floor saloon, before there even was a Quincy Market. It was still a comedy club when Spike and two partners took it over. Then Spike bought out the two partners, reimagined the place as an upscale dining establishment—“Complete with flora and fauna,” as he liked to say—and now he was making more money than he ever had in his life.

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It was an hour or so before he would open the door for what was usually a robust Sunday brunch crowd. We were both working on Bloody Marys even though it was only ten-thirty in the morning, being free, well past twenty-one, and willing to throw caution to the wind.

Spike took a bite of the celery stalk from his drink. I knew he was doing that only to buy time.

“Would you mind repeating the question?” he said.

“You heard me.”

“I believe,” he said, “that what you’ve asked is the age equivalent of asking if I think you look fat in those jeans.”

I looked down at my favorite pair of Seven whites. Actually, I had no way of knowing if they were my favorites, since I had four pairs in my closet exactly like them. When any one of them started to feel too tight, I doubled down on yoga and gym time, and cut back on the wine.

“You’re saying I’m fat, too?” I said.

“You know I’m not,” he said. “And in answer to the original question, you always look younger than springtime to me.”

“You’re sweet,” I said.

“That’s what all the girls say. But, sadly, only about half the guys.”

Spike was big, bearded, built like a bear that did a lot of gym time, and able to beat up the Back Bay if necessary. He was also gay, and my best friend in the world.

“Only half?” I said.

“I’m the one who’s getting old, sweetie,” he said. “And probably starting to look fat in my own skinny-ass jeans.”

My miniature English bull terrier, Rosie, was lounging on the floor in the puppy bed that Spike kept for her behind the bar, thinking

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food might be available at any moment, the way it usually was at Spike's. Spike called her Rosie Two. The original Rosie, the love of my life, had passed away the previous spring, far too soon. My father had always said that dogs were one of the few things that God got wrong, that they were the ones who ought to be able to live forever.

I'd asked Spike not to call her Rosie Two, telling him that it affected a girl's self-esteem.

"I love you," he'd say, "and by extension, that means I love your dog. But she's still a goddamn dog."

At which point I would shush him and tell him that now he was just being mean.

There was a sharp rap on the front window. Rosie immediately jumped to attention, growling, her default mechanism for strangers. There was a young couple peering in at us, the guy prettier than the woman he was with. They looked like J and Crew. Spike smiled brilliantly at them, pointed at his watch, shook his head. They moved on, their blondness intact.

"Where were we?" Spike said.

"Discussing my advancing age."

"We're not going to have one of those dreary conversations about your biological clock, are we?" he said. He trained his smile on me now. "It makes you sound *so* straight."

"Pretty sure I am, last time I checked."

"Well," Spike said, sighing theatrically. "You don't have to make a thing of it."

"You make it sound like we have these conversations all the time," I said.

"More lately now that you and your ex have started up again, or started over again, or whatever the hell it is you two are doing."

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My ex-husband was Richie Burke, and had long since turned Kathryn Burke into his second ex-wife. He'd finally admitted to her that he not only had never gotten over me, he likely never would.

At the time Spike said it was shocking, Kathryn being a bad sport about something like that, and racing him to see who could file for divorce first.

Now Richie and I were dating, as much as I thought it was stupid to think of it that way. But "seeing each other" sounded even worse. When we did spend a night together, something we never did more than once a week, we always slept at my new apartment on River Street Place so I didn't have to get a sitter for Rosie. So far there had been hardly any talk about the two of us moving back in together, something I wasn't sure could ever happen again. It wasn't because of Richie. It was because of me.

The one time Richie had asked if I could ever see the two of us married again, I told him I'd rather run my hand through Trump's hair.

"I keep thinking that maybe this time you two crazy kids could live happily ever after," Spike said.

"I'm no good at either one," I said. "Happy. Or ever after."

"I thought you said you were happy with the way things were going?" Spike said.

"Not so much lately."

"Well, shitfuck," he said.

"*Shitfuck*?"

"It's something an old baseball manager used to say," he said.

Spike was obsessed with baseball in general and the Boston Red Sox in particular. He frequently reminded me that in Boston the

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Red Sox weren't a matter of life and death, because they were far more serious than that.

"You know baseball bores the hell out of me," I said.

"I can't believe they even allow you to live here," Spike said.

We both sipped our drinks, which were merely perfect. I used to tell friends all the time that they could call off the search for the best Bloody Mary on the planet once they got to Spike's.

"What's bothering you, really?" Spike said. "You only have to look in the mirror to see how beautiful you still are. And having been in the gym with you as often as I have, we both know you're as fit as a Navy SEAL."

"Remember when Richie told me it was officially over with Kathryn? He said it was because he wanted it all. And that 'all' meant me."

"I remember."

"But the problem," I continued, "is that I'm no better at figuring out what that means to me than I was when we were married. Or apart." I sighed. "Shitfuck," I said.

"You sound like the dog that caught the car," Spike said.

I smiled at him. "That's me," I said. "An old dog."

"I give up," he said.

"What you need to do is *open* up," I said, "and send me and my gorgeous dog politely and firmly on our way."

"You could stay for lunch," Spike said.

"And have Rosie scare off the decent people? Who needs that?"

"What *you* need," Spike said, "is a case. A private detective without clients is, like, what? Help me out here."

"You without a cute guy in your life?"

"Some of us don't need men to complete us," he said.

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We both laughed and stood up. I kissed him on the cheek.

“Go home and paint,” he said. “We both know that is something that actually does complete you. Then get up tomorrow and somehow find a way to get yourself a client.”

“What if the phone doesn’t ring?” I said.

Spike said, “It always has.”

It did.

TWO

I'D LOVED THE WATERFRONT loft in Fort Point that I'd shared with the original Rosie.

I'd loved the light it gave me to paint in the late afternoon, when I felt as if I usually did my best work. I'd loved that it was completely mine after Richie and I broke up, and even remained mine after some very bad and very dangerous men had done their best to ruin it when I was once protecting a runaway girl. Mine and the original Rosie's, before and after the repairs. Ours.

But once Rosie died, there were simply too many memories for me to endure staying there. There was no place for me to turn without expecting to see her. She was supposed to be in the small bed next to my easel, or sleeping at the foot of my real bed, or on the couch in the living room, or waiting at the door when Richie would come to get her for a weekend, back when the two of us shared custody of her.

So I'd moved, to a town house at the end of River Street, parallel to Charles, at the foot of Beacon Hill, a couple of blocks from the Public Garden and Boston Common, around the corner from the old Charles Street Meeting House. It was owned by my friend Melanie Joan Hall, an author for whom I'd once served as a body-guard on a book tour, and then saved from a stalker who happened to be one of her ex-husbands.

Melanie Joan had bought the place not long after all that, falling in love with it the way she so frequently fell in and out of love with men. But now she had remarried again, to a Hollywood producer, and had moved Out There. When I'd mentioned the new Rosie and I were moving, she'd insisted that we make 2 River Street Place our new home. At first she wanted to let me have it rent-free. I insisted that I couldn't do that. We'd finally agreed on a rent that was ridiculously low for the area, she'd put a lot of her stuff into storage, Rosie and I had moved in, with a lot of my stuff, but not all.

There were four floors. The place had been built in the nineteenth century, and legend had it that back then ship sails had been woven in the loft next door. It was all kind of funky and wonderful, built like an old railroad flat, not one of the floors more than twenty feet wide. Living room and kitchen on the first floor, master bedroom on the second, guest room on the third. The fourth floor became my art studio. I still thought of it all as Melanie Joan's house, as if it were a halfway house before I would find something more permanent eventually. But Rosie and I were still doing the best to make it ours. For now we were content, if in an impermanent way, in our twenty-by-fifteen rooms, and it was doing both of us just fine, Rosie more than me. As long as I was around, she didn't care if we lived in a shoe.

In the late afternoon she slept in a bed near the table where I was

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painting the small stone cottage Richie and I had come upon in the Concord woods last fall, when we had gone hiking up there. It was at the far end of a huge piece of property that belonged to a high school friend of Richie's who had gotten extremely wealthy in the real estate business.

"He's always telling me that there's a Thoreau inside me waiting to bust out," Richie said that day.

I told him that knowing what I knew about my city-boy ex-husband, busting out of a prison would be easier.

Richie's friend had told him about the cottage, which he said had been originally built in the early part of the twentieth century by a writer whose name Richie couldn't remember, and had gone empty for years. But I thought it was perfect, the masonry still beautiful, the place framed by autumn leaves and birch trees, and, beyond that, sky and God.

I had snapped some photographs with my iPhone but hadn't gotten around to finally painting the cottage until a month ago. I was still going slowly with it, still experimenting with which colors I wanted to dominate the background and which ones I wanted to mute, how dark I wanted the gray of the cottage to be setting off the leaves around it, how much contrast I needed between the stones of the cottage and the lone stone wall in front.

For the next few hours, I existed only in that world, trying to imagine what it must have been like to live in those woods nearly a hundred years ago, lost in the satisfied feeling of the work finally coming together, the shapes and color and proportion almost assembling themselves, as if exploring all of their own possibilities.

Over the years I had managed to sell a fair amount of my paintings. But it had never felt like a job to me, or work. It was nothing I

would ever say out loud, not to Spike or to Richie or to anyone, but it was about the art in me. It had always been about the joy the feeling of a brush in my hand and then on the paper had always brought to me once I had gone back to working with watercolors.

There was also the sense of clarity and purpose it gave me, a completeness that my real job had never brought to my life, or my marriage.

“Rosie,” I said when I finally put down my brush, pleased with the work I had done today, “why can’t the whole world be like this?”

Rosie raised her head. Sometimes I thought that whatever I said to her always sounded the same, as if I were asking her if she wanted a treat.

I cleaned my brushes, put them away, took one last look at what I’d accomplished today. And smiled.

“Sunny Randall,” I said, “you *may* be getting older. But this is one goddamn area where you’re getting better.”

I showered, changed into a T-shirt and new skinny denims, rewarded myself for a good day’s work with a generous pour of pinot grigio. Then I inserted one of my favorite jazz CDs into Melanie Joan’s player, John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk at Carnegie Hall.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t thought about dinner until just now. It was, I decided, a good thing. Spike said another marker for getting older was when you started thinking about what you wanted to have for dinner as soon as you finished lunch.

“Once you’re doing that,” he said, “the next stop is the home.”

I reviewed my takeout options in the neighborhood, finally settled on chowder and a Cobb salad from the Beacon Hill Hotel and Bistro.

I took Rosie with me when it was time to pick it up, brought the

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bag back to Melanie Joan's, and ate at the small kitchen table closest to the television in the downstairs living room. I stayed strong and didn't turn on the TV until I'd finished eating. I wasn't an animal.

When I finished cleaning up, I poured myself another glass of wine. There was no music now, just the sound of Rosie's snoring. And an aloneness, an aloneness that I had chosen for myself, that still swallowed me up sometimes in the night.

I thought about calling Spike, knowing he would find a way to make me laugh and feel less alone. I could call Richie, but I knew better than doing that. You had to have a purpose for calling him, he was built less for small talk than anyone I had ever known.

Did I want him to come over? Did I want him to drink wine with me and make love later and share the ridiculously big bed upstairs? There was a part of me that did. But I knew that sometimes being with him that way made me feel even more alone afterward. As if there was an impermanence to that happiness, too.

I called Spike.

"Are you calling to tell me that since we parted you have somehow found gainful employment," he said, "even on a Sunday?"

"I am calling to tell you that I love you," I said.

"Red or white wine?" he said.

"White."

"I knew it!"

"How, might I ask?"

"White usually makes you sentimental," Spike said.

"What about a good bottle of red?"

"Melancholy," he said. "Or maybe it's horny."

Neither one of us spoke. He said he'd left the restaurant early.

"I'll die on the hill of you needing a client to make you feel

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better about things,” Spike said. “But you’ll never need a man to be fabulous.”

“How come when you say ‘fabulous’ it doesn’t sound gay?” I said.

“Because I’m fabulous!” he said, gaying it up as much as he possibly could.

I laughed.

“Now take two more slugs of wine and call Dr. Spike in the morning if you’re not feeling better.”

I didn’t drink more wine, took Rosie out for one last walk, washed up, got Rosie settled in at the end of a bed that really did look large enough to be a helicopter pad, turned off the lights.

I slept until Richie’s uncle Felix called me from Mass General a little after two in the morning to tell me that someone had shot Richie in the back.

I sat up in bed, feeling all of the air come out of me at once, instantly awake, knowing this wasn’t a dream, knowing the nightmare was real, processing what I had just been told.

Richie.

Shot.

“Alive?” I said to Felix Burke, my voice loud and brittle.

I could see Rosie up and staring at me from the end of the bed.

“Alive.”

I told him I would be there in twenty minutes, got dressed, blew up Storrow Drive and parked at the Emergency entrance to the hospital, and realized I had made it in fifteen.

Richie.

Shot.

But alive.

THREE

TO BE ANY CLOSER to Mass General when he was shot, Richie would have had to have taken a bullet at the front door.

The distance from his saloon to the hospital was less than a mile. Maybe a few minutes with no traffic and if you hit all the lights.

The doctors were still working on closing up the wounds, front and back, when I got there. Richie's father, Desmond, and his uncle Felix were in the ER's waiting area. They immediately walked me past the admittance desk and through some double doors, nobody saying anything to us, nobody making any attempt to stop us. It was as if the most famous hospital in Boston, one of the most famous in the world, was now being run by them.

"My son's wife," Desmond said to the first nurse he saw, as if somehow that explained everything.

The last thing Felix Burke had told me before we'd ended our phone call was "Through and through."

Meaning the bullet.

Now Felix said, "It was underneath his right shoulder. He was walking to where he'd parked his car after he closed up."

"Why was he even there on a Sunday night?" I said.

I was trying to process all of this at once. Why Richie was even at the saloon was a good enough place to start.

"Mickey, his regular weekend guy, called in sick. Richie knew he could watch the Sunday-night football game and thought it would be fun to work the stick."

We were about twenty feet down the hall from the room where Richie was.

"They cleaned him out with the kind of rod they use if the bullet doesn't stay in you," Felix Burke said.

"When the cops finished, they came over and asked if they could talk to Felix and me," Desmond Burke said. "I told them there was a better chance of Jesus stopping by tonight."

He was staring past me with his dark eyes, toward the room where his son was, or maybe past that, and into the darkness of his entire adult life, a life from which I knew he had worked mightily to insulate his only son. I had always thought he looked like some pale Irish priest.

Felix Burke was different. Richie had shown me pictures of his father and Felix when they were teenagers, skinny, slicked-back black hair, all the brio in both of them staring out at you from the grainy black-and-white photographs. They could have passed for twins in those days. But that was a lifetime ago. While there was such an ascetic look to Desmond now, somehow Felix had grown

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broader as Desmond had become all hard angles and planes. He had been a heavyweight boxer in his youth, and you didn't have to look very closely to see the scarring around the eyes and that his nose was far more crooked than the one with which he had been born.

"One shot," Felix said. "Richie never heard him coming."

Desmond Burke said, "The shooter spoke to Richie after he put him down."

"The fucking fuck," Felix said.

I looked at Desmond. "What did he say?"

"Sins of the father," Desmond Burke said. "He didn't want to kill him. If he had, he would have put one in the back of his head. He wanted to send a message. To me. About my sins."

"Tell the fucking fuck to send an email next time," Felix said.

In a quiet voice Desmond Burke said, "Richard has never been a part of this."

"The family business," I said.

"Which has now brought him to this night and this place," Desmond said.

"Which will bring consequences," Felix said.

It went without saying. Felix had decided to say it anyway.

FOUR

“FANCY MEETING YOU HERE,” Richie said when we were finally alone.

He was in a room of his own. I didn’t know how many private rooms were available in Emergency at Mass General at this time of night, but I assumed that even if it had been an issue, Desmond and Felix would have handled it. If they’d gotten it into their minds to put Richie’s bed in the office of the chief of staff, I further assumed they would have made that happen, too.

By now I knew that the doctor who had cleaned out the wound and done the stitching preferred that Richie at least stay around for a couple hours. Richie had told him that wasn’t happening and to please start the paperwork.

“Did you actually say ‘please’?” I said.

“It was more an implied type of thing.”

I had pulled a chair over near his bed and was holding his hand.

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“They said you were lucky that the angle of the shot was up and not down,” I said. “If he’d fired down, the damage could have been much worse.”

“I gather luck had very little to do with this,” Richie said.

“Meaning?”

“You know my meaning,” he said. “If he’d wanted me dead I’d be dead.”

We both let that settle until I smiled at him and said, “I thought we had an understanding that I’m the one who gets shot at.”

“Shot at,” he said, “but never hit.”

“Yet.”

“You know how I like to be first,” he said.

“Are we still talking about shooting bullets?” I said.

Richie offered a weak smile of his own.

“Tell me what happened,” I said. “Your father and Uncle Felix told me what they know. Now you tell me.”

“It’s not a case, Sunny.”

“Isn’t it?” I said.

He started from the beginning, with Mickey Dunphy calling in sick. Richie said that because his social calendar happened to be wide open on a Sunday night, he decided it might be fun to cover for him. Sunday night was for regulars and, besides, he said, he still liked to bartend from time to time to keep himself in the game.

He had closed up, counted up, put the cash part of the evening’s take in his office safe, set the alarm, and was walking to where he’d parked his car at the corner of Portland and Staniford.

“And you heard nothing.”

“Saw nothing,” he said. “But I wasn’t looking.”

“And when you were on the ground he said what he said about the sins of the father.”

Richie nodded.

“Is there any current trouble between your family and, uh, competing interests?” I asked.

“My father says no.”

“But this was no random shooting,” I said. “This was done with purpose, and planning.”

“Evidently.”

“He had to have followed you to the bar and waited,” I said. “Because he had no way of knowing that you’d even be there on a Sunday night.”

“Maybe he had been to the bar before,” Richie said. “He picked a spot on the street with no cameras, according to the police. After I was hit, I tried to roll over to get a glimpse of him, or maybe a car. But he had just walked off into the night.”

I leaned closer and said, “Who would do this? You’ve never been a part of that world.”

“But I’m a part of their life,” Richie said.

“You know what I mean.”

“I do,” Richie said. “My father always talked about boundaries. Now someone has decided to cross them.”

“As a way of sending a message,” I said.

“Evidently,” Richie said.

“But about what?”

“Maybe that someone is coming for him,” Richie said. “But we’re not going to figure that out right now.”

“Let me drive you home,” I said.

“My father and my uncle have already insisted, I’m afraid.”

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Another weak smile.

“But feel free to engage them in a lively debate about that.”

I squeezed his hand, in the quiet room in the quiet of the big hospital in the time before dawn. “Pass,” I said.

“And you always tough enough to charge at an automatic weapon,” Richie said.

“There are boundaries that even I won’t cross,” I said.

“You should go,” Richie said.

“When you go, big boy.”

“Okay.”

“Do you need anything?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Name it,” I said. “As long as it doesn’t involve me locking the door and disrobing.”

“Some Florence Nightingale you are,” he said. “I’m just going to assume you dressing up like a candy striper is out of the question as well.”

“Seriously,” I said. “Is there anything you need?”

“For you to leave this alone,” Richie said.

“You know I can’t do that.”

“I mean it,” Richie said.

“Me, too,” I said.

But the good news now that he was a client, I told him, is that he was looking at a whopping family discount.