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SPARRING
PARTNERS


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It was one of those raw, windy, dreary Monday afternoons in February when gloom settled over the land and seasonal depression was rampant. Court was not in session. The phone wasn't ringing. Petty criminals and other potential clients were busy elsewhere with no thoughts whatsoever of hiring lawyers. The occasional caller was more likely to be a man or woman still reeling from holiday overspending and seeking advice about unpaid credit card accounts. Those were quickly sent next door, or across the square, or anywhere.

Jake was at his desk upstairs, making little progress with the stack of paperwork he'd been neglecting for weeks, even months. With no court or hearings scheduled for days, it should have been a good time to catch up with the old stuff—the fish files that every lawyer had for some reason said yes to a year ago and now just wanted to go away. The upside of a small-town law practice, especially in your hometown, was that everyone knew your name, and that was what you wanted. It was important to be well thought of and well liked, with a good reputation. When your neighbors got in trouble, you wanted to be the man they called. The downside was that their cases were always mundane and rarely profitable. But, you couldn't say no. The gossip was

fierce and unrelenting, and a lawyer who turned his back on his friends would not last long.

His funk was interrupted when Alicia, his current part-time secretary, chimed in through his desk phone. "Jake, there's a couple here to see you."

A couple. Married but wanting to get unmarried. Another cheap divorce. He glanced at his daily planner though he knew there was nothing.

"Do they have an appointment?" he asked, but only to remind Alicia that she shouldn't be bothering him with the foot traffic.

"No. But they're very nice and they say it's really urgent. They're not going away, said it wouldn't take but a few minutes."

Jake loathed being bullied in his own office. On a busier day he would take a stand and get rid of them. "Do they appear to have any money?" The answer was always no.

"Well, they do seem rather affluent."

Affluent? In Ford County. Somewhat intriguing.

Alicia continued, "They're from Memphis and just passing through, but, again, they say it's very important."

"Any idea what it is?"

"No."

Well, it wouldn't be a divorce if they lived in Memphis. He ran through a list of possibilities—Grandma's will, some old family land, maybe a kid busted for drugs over at Ole Miss. Since he was bored and mildly curious and needed an excuse to avoid the paperwork, he asked, "Did you tell them that I'm tied up in a settlement conference call with a dozen lawyers?"

"No."

"Did you tell them I'm due in federal court over in Oxford and can only spare a moment or two?"

"No."

“Did you tell them that I’m slammed with other appointments?”

“No. It’s pretty obvious the place is empty and the phone isn’t ringing.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the kitchen, so I can talk.”

“Okay, okay. Make some fresh coffee and put ’em in the conference room. I’ll be down in ten minutes.”

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The first thing Jake noticed was their tans. They had obviously been somewhere in the sun. No one else in Clanton had a tan in February. The second thing he noticed was the woman’s smart short haircut, with a touch of gray, stylish and obviously expensive. He noticed the handsome sports coat on the gentleman. Both were well dressed and nicely groomed, a departure from the usual walk-ins.

He shook their hands as he got their names. Gene and Kathy Roupp, from Memphis. Late fifties, quite pleasant, with confident smiles showing rows of well-maintained teeth. Jake could easily picture them on a Florida golf course living the good life behind gates and guards.

“What can I do for you folks?” Jake asked.

Gene flashed a smile and went first. “Well, sad to say, but we’re not here as potential clients.”

Jake kept it loose with a fake smile and an aw-shucks shrug, as if to say, *What the hell? What lawyer needs to get paid for his time?* He’d give them about ten more minutes and one cup before showing them the door.

“We just got back from a month in Costa Rica, one of our favorites. Ever been to Costa Rica?”

“No. I hear it’s great.” He’d heard nothing of the sort but what else could he say? He would never admit that he had left the United States exactly once in his thirty-eight years. Foreign travel was only a dream.

“We love it down there, a real paradise. Beautiful beaches, mountains, rain forests, great food. We have some friends who own houses—real estate is pretty cheap. The people are delightful, educated, almost all speak English.”

Jake loathed the game of travel trivia because he’d never been anywhere. The local doctors were the worst—always bragging about the hottest new resorts.

Kathy was itching to move along the narrative and chimed in with “The golf is incredible, so many fabulous courses.”

Jake didn’t play golf because he was not a member of the Clanton Country Club. Its membership included too many doctors and climbers and families with old money.

He smiled and nodded at her and waited for one of them to continue. From a bag he couldn’t see she whipped out a pound of coffee in a shiny can and said, “Here’s a little gift, San Pedro Select, our favorite. Incredible. We haul it back by the case.”

Jake took it to be polite. In lieu of cash fees, he had been paid with watermelons, fresh venison, firewood, repairs to his cars, and more bartered goods and services than he cared to remember. His best lawyer buddy, Harry Rex Vonner, had once taken a John Deere mower as a fee, though it soon broke down. Another lawyer, one who was no longer practicing, had taken sexual favors from a divorce client. When he lost the case, she filed an ethics complaint alleging “substandard performance.”

Anyway, Jake admired the can and tried to read the Spanish. He noticed they had not touched their coffee, and he was suddenly worried that perhaps they were connoisseurs and his office brew wasn’t quite up to their standards.

Gene resumed with “So, two weeks ago we were at one of our favorite eco-lodges, high in the mountains, deep in the rain forest, a small place with only thirty rooms, incredible views.”

How many times might they use the word “incredible”?

“And we were having breakfast outdoors, watching the spider monkeys and parakeets, when a waiter stopped by our table to pour some more coffee. He was very friendly—”

“People are so friendly down there and they love Americans,” Kathy interjected.

How could they not?

Gene nodded at the interruption and continued, “We chatted him up for a spell, said his name was Jason and that he was from Florida, been living down there for twenty years. We saw him again at lunch and talked to him some more. We saw him around after that and always enjoyed a friendly chat. The day before we were to check out, he asked us to join him for a glass of champagne in a little tree-house bar. He was off-duty and said the drinks were on him. The sunsets over the mountains are incredible, and we were having a good time, when all of a sudden he got serious.”

Gene paused and looked at Kathy, who was ready to pounce with “He said he had something to tell us, something very confidential. Said his name was not really Jason and he wasn’t from Florida. He apologized for not being truthful. Said his name was really Mack Stafford, and that he was from Clanton, Mississippi.”

Jake tried to remain nonchalant but it was impossible. His mouth dropped open and his eyes widened.

The Roupps were watching closely for his reaction. Gene said, “I take it you know Mack Stafford.”

Jake exhaled and wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“He said you guys were old friends,” Gene added.

Stunned, Jake was still grasping for words. “I’m just glad he’s alive.”

“So you know him well?”

“Oh yes, quite well.”