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NORTHERN VIRGINIA

Balls and rackets

“I’VE GOT THE RACKET IF YOU’VE GOT THE BALLS”—Jade’s first words as she popped open the door of the squash court where I’d been pounding away by myself.

It was the voice, even more than the words or the knowing glint in her eyes, that set off a tingle that stretched from my ears down the spine to my . . . well, need I say?

Just as she intended.

And she meant exactly what she said: She definitely *did* have a racket, and I was about to be drawn into it . . . via the balls.

She held out her hand. I took it. She gave a tiny, almost imperceptible squeeze, and held it, holding my gaze as well, direct and unblinking.

She was tall, at least 5'9", with flowing chestnut hair, dark, impenetrable eyes, and wide lips. High cheekbones suggested a touch of Eurasia in her ancestry. At first I guessed her accent as Swedish, maybe Dutch. Much later I’d learn it was mainly Russian.

With no security clearance and hence no job I didn’t have much to do, so I’d gotten in the habit of jogging over to the club to pound off my frustration on one of the squash courts. Usually alone: the place was mostly deserted at that time of day. Most people around here had jobs.

Sherri had gotten me into squash, part of the fitness regimen she’d imposed. In less than a year, I’d dropped 93 pounds, and the fat, nerdy kid in the mirror had melted away.

Now I look in mirrors and see a jock, a hunk.

But the fat little nerd is usually lurking just behind the hunk, out of sight but not out of mind.

Jade was dazzling in her white court suit, lush hair billowing over her shoulders, tight jersey shirt. No wedding ring.

She stepped into the court and closed the door behind. “I’ve been watching you. It’s sad for a big man like you to be playing with himself.”

She let that hang in the air, then said, “Wouldn’t it be more fun to play with a woman?” She had me with that voice, husky and sensuous . . . with a hint of someplace foreign and exotic.

“I NEED A BREAK,” she puffed after a while. “I’m not in the shape you are. Do you come here often?”

She laughed, throaty, sensuous. “There I go again. ‘Do you come here often?’ I sound like a guy on the make in a singles’ bar. No matter. I might as well ask, What’s a nice guy like you doing in a place like this at this time of day?”

“I’m self-employed.” My first fib: I was unemployed, not self-employed.

“Self-employed? In what field?”

“Computers.” I didn’t want to get into that story. People didn’t take my specialty very seriously. And I didn’t want to get into the whole story of why I couldn’t get a security clearance, let alone the whole thing with Sherri and Florida.

“I think I’ve stumbled on a very interesting man,” she said. “You’re just the kind of guy I’ve been looking for.”

The kind of guy I’ve been looking for. Sherri had said the same, back when she shifted roles from personal trainer to lover.

We played another ten minutes or so, then collided, as if by chance, and her arms fell around me, her racket clattering across the floor.

Time stopped. Her scent—light and expensive, mixed with her aroma—filled my nostrils. Her tongue flicked across my lips. Her crotch ground against mine, and we shuffled over to a corner of the court, out of sight of the door.

AFTERWARDS, she shrugged her shorts back up. “My God! You *are something!* You really *are* the kind of guy I’ve been looking for!”

She held out her hand for me to pull her up. “I didn’t expect that to happen. Not here,” she said. “We’re both so sweaty. We need a shower. Is your place close by?”

Too good to be true! the fat little kid whispered in my ear.

We walked out together, hand in hand, and she led the way to her car. A gold Mercedes two-seater sports car, license plate JADE-38-D.

She paused. “I don’t even know your name.”

“People call me Rick.”

She looked into my eyes, deep in, and her tongue flicked over her lip as fast as a frog’s tongue grabs a fly. “Rick?” Her eyes flicked down my body before adding, “In my opinion, Dick—rather, *Big Dick*—suits you better. May I call you that?” she asked as her hand subtly passed across my front, lingering down there just long for a subtle squeeze.

“That’ll be fine, I managed, a little short of breath.

“And your last name?”

I took a breath. “Woodcock.” It always embarrassed me, though my father reveled in it.

“*Woodcock?* Are you serious?” she giggled. “Woodcock? Woodcock! Oh my God, you *are* perfectly named! Big Dick Lumberdick—I love it! That is so apt!”

She’d been an actress, as I’d discover later—among several other professions. And she had written today’s script, and delivered the lines perfectly.

“So, Mr. Lumberdick, let’s go to your place and take a nice long shower. Oh, by the way, I’m Jade, Jade Greene, as you can guess from my license plate.”

“What’s the 38-D stand for?” I asked, then wished I hadn’t.

She looked up at me. “You’re not naive. You figure it out.”

Now and then

THAT WAS THEN—two weeks, three days ago.

Now I get back to my place, exhausted. It’s after eight, and dark, and starting to rain, and I haven’t had anything to eat since a power bar hours ago. I’m tired, I’m cut and scratched on the face and arms, my clothes are bloody, and all I want is a shower and something to eat.

Five calls on my answering machine. I’m tempted to let them go till morning, but there was always the chance that one of them might be a job offer. I’m about a month away from flat broke.

The first is Jade, calling at 6:12: “Call me when you get back. It’s urgent, really urgent.”

Jade, at 6:49: “Where *are* you? Call me.”

Jade, at 7:07: “You *must* be back by now. There’s been some *very* bad news. We need to talk.”

Jade at 7:24: “Are you hiding from me? What’s going on? Why haven’t you called? We need to talk, now.”

Jade, at 7:48, her voice even huskier. I wondered if she was crying. “Why aren’t you picking up? We’ve got a problem, a really big one.”

We’ve got a problem? Not *we*—I’m the one with the problem, and the problem is Jade. I don’t want to talk to her, I don’t want to get any further involved than I already am. I want to break it off.

I'm not comfortable with it now, not after I found out that she was married. Actually, I didn't *find* out: she *told* me, yesterday, after two weeks.

Jade at 7:59: "Dammit, will you please pick up? I know you're there. It's urgent, we've got to get our stories straight so we're consistent when we talk to the police."

Police?

I step into the bathroom and pull off my biking gear. There's blood all over the jersey. If I wash it now maybe it'll come out.

The phone rings again. I check caller ID. Jade. I hear her voice from the answering machine. "Look, I know you're there, will you just have the courtesy to pick up? Our necks are on the line. Pick up. *Pick up!*"

I pick up. As I do, I check myself over in the mirror. Scratched and bruised, worse than I'd realized.

"We need to talk, right now. Come on over, you know the way."

"I need a shower and something to eat. Can't we talk about this tomorrow?"

"There's trouble, a *huge* problem. Come right now, I'll give you something to eat."

"Where? Your place? But your—your husband . . ."

"He won't be here. He's dead."

I stumble back against the shower door. "What do you mean, dead?"

"What do you think dead means? As I said, we've got a problem and we need to talk. Before the police arrive asking questions."

JADE'S HOUSE is in a development modestly called Grande Potomack Estates, arrayed amongst the last remains of a forest that had once spread back from the Potomac River, a half-mile away.

Jade had given me the code for the front gate yesterday when she'd driven me around the development, when it finally came out that she was married.

I drive slowly through the quiet streets, not wanting to draw attention.

Windsor Castle Way is the main drag, and the Greene place is on Olde Hastings Road.

Ironically, just yesterday, after she finally admitted it, I'd gone to the Safeway and bumped into her coming out with Mr. Greene. He was maybe 50, going gray, paunchy, hunched-over, obviously no athlete. A very ordinary-looking guy, Mr. Anonymous. The only thing distinctive about him was a pronounced limp, one leg shorter than the other.

And now he was dead. With that paunch, he'd been a coronary waiting to happen. But why would the cops want to talk to me?

I'm not comfortable coming here now; there are security cameras discreetly situated in the trees, with one facing directly down Olde Hastings from the Greene mansion.

No matter that the whole community was gated, the Greenes also had their own gate—the code was easy enough: jade38D. As I punch it in, I notice still another pair of security cameras, one catching my face, the other my car license plate.

The house is in the Federalist mansion style, and only a bit smaller than George Washington's at Mount Vernon.

Jade's gold Mercedes coupe is parked out front, top up. No other cars. No police cars.

She'd told me that Mr. Greene—Edgar— was an accountant and financial planner. None of it was true, I'd soon learn, not even their names.

Though he *was* a financial planner . . . of a certain sort, catering to a very unusual clientele.

"Don't ring, the door will be open, just let yourself in." I step into a grand entry like Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, only more grandiose, with a winding staircase leading to the upper level, and above that a glass dome.

I catch a whiff of smoke. Jade doesn't smoke. Who else is here? What am I walking into?

She appears at the top of the staircase and comes down slowly. She's wearing a sheer silk robe, a see-through with nothing beneath it. And holding a cigarette that seems as long as a pencil.

"I . . . I didn't think you smoked."

"I don't. *Usually* don't. I quit years ago. But this, this is so upsetting, it just—" She throws her arms around me and squeezes tight. I feel her body shaking with sobs.

I push away, gently. This isn't feeling right, not at all. She leads the way into a living room, a huge room, almost barren of furniture. That seems strange, as she'd said they'd lived in this house "for years."

Two more lies, I'll learn later: they don't own the house, only rent it. And they've been here not quite two years.

She walks over to a table and pours vodka into a glass, nearly to the top, then tips in a little tonic and a slice of lime and hands it to me. The lime had already been sliced into wedges. She tops off her own glass.

"To our future," she says, touching glasses.

Future? "Look," I say, "I can't be drinking, I haven't had anything to eat, just some power-bars along the way. It'd knock me out on an empty stomach."

"Drink a little, then I'll get you something to eat. I can't drink alone. But I need something to calm me down."

I take a sip. The raw vodka burns all the way down. I drop in a couple more ice cubes.

She sits on a white leather sofa and pats the cushion beside. I take a chair instead.

“You’re very distant, just when I need you most. I need your support; this is a very . . . very wrenching time.”

“You said your . . . He’s dead?”

“I . . . I *think* he’s dead. I mean, I’m *sure* he is.”

“I . . . I don’t know what to say. I’m . . . sorry to hear it.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m not. He was a bastard. But a very rich bastard. And you and I need to work together.”

“How did it happen? Where?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t found the body yet.”

I sit there, staring at her, trying to figure out what to say, what to do. Already the vodka is hitting. “Then how do you know . . . know he’s dead?”

“I *know*, Dick, I just know.”

”Why? How do you know?”

“They found his car, the Mercedes, the big black sedan. It was parked for hours along the C&O Canal, beyond Harper’s Ferry.”

The big Mercedes, one step shy of being a limo.

I’d been biking along the canal, past Harper’s Ferry. “Maybe he just parked it and got delayed in a meeting,” I say, wanting it to work out that way. I wanted out, to get away from all of this. But the body beneath that sheer robe was pulling me.

“Never mind that, we can talk about all that later. Now we need to work together, there’s no time to lose.”

“Work together? On what?”

“He was married before me, in case you didn’t know. She was a bitch, that I know, and she hated me. You can be sure she’ll have her lawyers in here in the morning to do an inventory and try to grab it all from us.”

From us? “Wasn’t he divorced from her? Didn’t he have a will?”

“Of course, I made sure of all that. But she’ll contest it, and that’s why I need you to move some things out so nobody finds them. Then we can go away. We’ll be great together. You’re just the guy I’ve spent my life looking for.”

Her boobs bounce under the silk as she talks. I force my eyes away. Not a time for distractions.

“I’m still not clear,” I say. “How did he die? Is there anything—”

“I *told* you, I don’t *know* how, I just *know*. I was shocked when the Maryland police called to tell me about his car. But then I knew he was dead, I felt it.”

“But why call me? It’ll look very strange when the police—”

“I won’t give the go-ahead yet, won’t tell the police to act on it, until morning. We need to work out a plan, to get our stories together, so they’re consistent. And why did I call you? Because I needed you. *You, only you.*”

My brain is fuzzy, and I realize I've been automatically sipping the drink. It's already half-gone. I want to set it down, get it out of my hand, somewhere out of reach. There's no table by this chair. I stand and walk over to the drinks table and set it down. I turn. She's behind me. The silk robe has fallen open, and she pushes her body against me, and I respond.

"This isn't a good idea," I mumble, her lips on mine. She pulls me over to the leather couch and begins fumbling with my belt.

"This is . . . crazy," I say, standing. She doesn't let go, and tugs on my pants.

Favor

"I NEED A FAVOR," she says afterward, coming back from cleaning herself. She's wearing that sheer robe again.

Some of the scratches I got earlier have opened up. I dab them with damp paper towels in the kitchen, making a note to come back and check the sofa for blood.

She leads me down to the basement, touches a hidden catch, and stands back when one wall of the wine cellar swings out, revealing a safe.

She'd written the combination, and I open it and take out the leather briefcase she described.

I don't know why I'm doing this, it's insane, I should be out of here, far away, not getting drawn in deeper and deeper. But the vodka on an empty stomach makes the voice of reason sound like a very faint whisper in the distance.

BACK UPSTAIRS, she refills our glasses. I say I don't want any more, but does she have some nuts, some cheese, anything?

"I'll make you a sandwich in just a minute," she says. "But first we need to talk."

"Talk about what?" I say, hearing my words slur.

"The fact is, you and I were having an affair, a very torrid affair. That's going to come out, like it or not, so we need to get our stories straight, where we were today. I was here all day, and there were phone calls and workmen stopping by, so I'm okay. But it's you—"

A phone chirps in another room, a cell phone, from the sound of it, but's not the ring-tone I'm used to with her. She jumps up, grabs cigarettes and a lighter from her purse, and half-runs into another room. If she's as drunk as I am, I wonder how she can be so coordinated.

I hear a clunk. Her purse has fallen onto the floor, and I hear something skitter across the hardwood floor. I stuff the things back in the bag, then get down on my hands and knees to see what fell under the sofa.

At first I think it's a tube of lipstick, then realize it's a memory stick. That is strange. She's told me more than once that she's hopeless with computers.

I have a couple of memory sticks like this—PNY. Could she have taken it when she was over at my place? Simpler explanation: it fell out of my pants, not her purse.

I hear her coming back. I slip the memory stick into my pocket, then stand and squeeze a slice of lime into my glass and fill it with tonic water.

"Listen, Big Dick, something has happened. That was my friend. She's coming over. You need to go right now, so she doesn't see us together."

"Our stories," I mumble, my lips numb. I can barely get the words out. "You said we needed to get our stories—"

"There's no time for that, not right now. I'll call you later. You need to go."

I'm at the door. She calls me back. She's snaps open the leather brief-case I retrieved from the safe and pulls out a thick, sealed manila envelope. "Take this, hide it somewhere, keep it very safe. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Why? What's in it?"

"Don't open it, whatever you do. Not until we have the chance to talk some more. But take it and go, quickly. We'll have . . . Once we get past this . . . this episode . . . we can spend our lives together. And we'll be very, very rich."

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I notice a bruise on her inner arm, just insider the elbow. I point to it. "You haven't been shooting up, have you?" I ask, half as a drunken joke.

"Of course not," she snaps. "I was at the doctor's today. They drew some blood samples."

I'M AT THE DOOR when I think to ask: "It was the Maryland police who found his car? Any idea what he was doing in Maryland?"

"Edgar has some strange clients, clients he meets at odd places, clients who don't want to be seen. I don't ask questions about his business. I told the trooper it was okay, he'd been planning to meet someone there. So there's no search under-way. Not yet. But I know it's going to hit soon, and you and I need to be speaking the same language when the police came asking questions."

"It's not unusual for someone to drive to Maryland, park the car for a few hours. Why would the police—"

"Listen, my friend's coming, we mustn't be seen together, not now, not tonight."

"It doesn't make sense to me," I say, maybe the one time I was making sense. "Why would the Maryland police even notice a parked car?"

“Because it was along the canal, at a parking area where one of the access roads lead to the canal. It had been there for hours, they said, and found it unusual for someone to leave such an expensive Mercedes in a vulnerable place like that.”

My mouth is suddenly bone dry. “What canal?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“The C&O. Way out, past Harper’s Ferry.”

It’s as if a brick slams into my chest.

Finally I say, “I was biking that area today. That’s where you and I had planned to go. I probably biked past his car.”

The plan had been that Jade and I would spend the day biking. It’s a nice ride on a gravel path along the canal, the path where the mules and mule-drivers walked in the old days, the canal boats coming and going from West Virginia to the port at Washington. Back before the railroads took over the business. That canal path, and the W&OD bikeway in Virginia, in the roadbed of what had been a railroad, drew thousands of bikers and hikers on weekends.

I’d figured that would be the perfect place to break it off. It would be easier to talk out there, in the open air. Away from a bed.

But she’d called this morning, saying her knee hurt, but that I should go anyway and scout it out for another time when we could go together.

I went anyway. I didn’t have anything else to do. No prospects of a job coming up any time soon.

Her phone rings again. She closes the door and leaves me standing on the top step.

End of this sample of THE MAN WHO CREATED GHOSTS

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