

Excerpt of Strike Anywhere

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When Rochelle refers to your brother Scott as "Sparks," which is his prison name, you feel certain you've lost her. She perches on the arm of your sofa, slender ankles crossed just below the hem of her sheer blue dress, neck craned toward Scott, who traipses through your off-white living room in work boots. He has been living with you for three months. You cannot, at this moment, remember the last time you spoke to him.

"Hey, Sparks," Rochelle says sweetly. Just like that--"Hey, Sparks." Her hands wring the playbill from Damn Yankees, which you and she have just gone to see at the Lazy Susan Dinner Theatre with Carl Summers from the office and his wife Penny. Rochelle likes to attend matinees and also to clip coupons and shop at discount stores. Never thrift stores. "I'm afraid I'll see something of mine. And it would be too weird. Like I was dead or something."

You didn't want to get involved with anyone after your wife, Jody, left six months ago, but the thing with Rochelle just sort of happened at a happy hour one day after work. You and Carl Summers were celebrating the yearly salary increase at your accounting firm, Duff & Beckman, and you spilled red wine spritzer on Rochelle's bare lower leg. Impulsively, you tried to brush it off with your hand. Rochelle giggled. "Shouldn't we at least have dinner first?"

"You've got a deal," you said and you bent down and dabbed at her shapely calf, imagining what you would know for certain later--the taste of it, the smell of it. Rochelle fills your days with electric and plaguing daydreams and some of your nights with the kind of passion you once had with Jody. You aren't sure when, during the last part of your nine-year marriage, you realized it was gone. Rochelle fills an empty space you had not understood as emptiness, a

space you dismissed as a temporary malaise, a rut, an abiding bad mood. Or, at least, she could fill it. If only you could ever be sure of her feelings for you.

But now. Now, she has referred to your brother Scott as "Sparks," even though you never call him that. It's a nickname that Scott got the first time he was in prison, because he smuggled cigarettes and matches to the other inmates. Why would Rochelle use that name? True, most of the people who phone for Scott, those who aren't parole officers, ask for "Sparks." (You always respond deliberately, "I'll be happy to give Scott a message" or "Yes, Scott's right here. Let me put him on." How will your brother, your older brother at that, ever get a salaried job or an apartment or simply refrain from thievery if he goes by a name like Sparks?) But Rochelle never answers your phone, and Scott rarely has friends over. Instead of looking at want ads or dealing with the questions you might ask about what he's been doing since April, when he got out, he typically spends his evenings at a bar called The El Corazon Disco Lounge, with God knows who.

As you see it, the only way Rochelle would know that name, "Sparks," is if she's been spending time with Scott that you don't know about. Right? you ask yourself.

How many times, in your teenage years, did you hear girls speak to Scott, in that way Rochelle just did, heads lowered, eyes raised winsomely, as if to say, "You. You alone have the power to hurt me." It isn't that you mind, but you wonder sometimes, in a scientific sense, why girls or women, even your wife, have never spoken to you that way. Perhaps you aren't rugged or daring enough. But that also means that you're not a risk to end up in prison, and shouldn't that be attractive? Or maybe (you cringe to think it) your wife was right that you ask too many questions and you're too literal, too precise. You take the mystery and fun out of everything: ballroom dancing lessons, dinner conversation, miniature golf, sex. Thinking of Jody's furious litanies, you can picture the way her freckled nose used to flatten slightly when she was angry.