

The Professional Grounder (Sweet Science Fiction)

Written by Aaron Tallent
Monday, 08 January 2007 19:00

“Of course he’s probably broke,” said Frank. “All those boxers are. I remember I was at a wrestling match one time when I was a kid in Knoxville and Primo Carnera was the main event. After the match, he had to ask his manager for a nickel to go buy a soda!”

“Think he’s got a drug habit?” asked Ben.

“Probably,” said Frank.

Danielle rolled her eyes. Frank was the agent for A-List action movie star Scott James, her boss. Frank was persuasive enough to convince an aspiring actress that couch favors were necessary to garner the role of Victim #4 in “Zombie Hookers from Outer Space.” Even though his knowledge of athletes was severely lacking, however, it did not stop him from speaking on the subject with authority. Ben, Scott’s personal photographer, appeared to be eating it up. For renowned boxing trainer Bobby Dee, the drug speculation had been enough.

“Moon is one of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet,” he said, “but for the life of me, I can’t figure out why he is doing this.”

“You think Scott has a chance?” asked Frank.

Bobby laughed.

“Even if Moon was suffering from heroin withdrawal, he would still tear Scott to pieces,” said Bobby.

Danielle had been Scott’s personal assistant for eight months, ever since her old boss, magician Wendell Mosser, had lost his network television contract. Despite the switch from magician to action movie star, she was still miles away from an inside track to the film industry. Yet her eight months with Scott had been refreshing. While Wendell had required her to work long hours, seven days a week, fulfilling the most miniscule and whimsical demands, Scott had allowed her to work from 10 am to 6 pm Monday through Friday and her only duty was to fulfill his one addiction: risk.

In the past eight months, she had coordinated his climb to the summit of Denali, an iron man competition in Hawaii, and a \$20 million winner-take-all Texas Hold ‘Em game in Geneva. The job had been taxing on occasion, but her main worry was that her boss came back from all his jaunts in one piece.

Three months earlier, Scott had blackberried her with a message that said, “I want to fight a former fighter at my home in Maryland. I don’t care who. Just make sure he’s a heavyweight around my size and has fought the best. Set the fight up for October.”

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When she coordinated Scott's climb of Denali, she had no idea that it and Mount McKinley were one in the same. In setting up the fight, she learned a great deal about heavyweight boxing as well. After extensive research, she finally found www.moonmozier.com

Moon Mozier was a former fighter who had compiled a record of 35-3 throughout his career with 30 knockouts. He had also unsuccessfully challenged for the heavyweight title on two occasions. His last title shot ended with him being knocked out in the ninth round by Kwame Orange. The knockout was forever embedded in the memories of sports fans by a Katya Sorenson photograph that showed an unconscious Moon lying on the canvas while Kwame leaped in the air with his arms raised in victory. The picture earned the prestige of being part of Sportsweek's top 15 photographs of the 20th Century. After the loss, Moon retired at the age of 32. That had been eight years earlier.

Danielle had learned that most fighters who retire in their early 30s usually live pretty comfortably. That is why she was shocked to see that Moon had a "Challenge Moon" page on his website that read:

Think you can take Moon? For a fee, Moon will give you a shot at besting the greatest heavyweight to never win a title. If you are interested, please [click here](#).

She was the assistant to the number three box-office star in America and felt that she was above using the "contact me" icon on a website. However, the website did not offer a number. The next day, she received the response:

Dear Ms. Holden,

Thank you for you contacting us. We are huge fans of Mr. James' work. Moon is available during October. His fee for a sparring session is \$100,000. Also, Mr. James would be required to cover Moon's transportation, accommodation, medical examinations, and licensing fees. Please get back to us on this as soon as possible as Moon's schedule fills very quickly. Thank you.

Jacob Kilrain

Moon Mozier, Inc.

(404) 555-1717

When she brought the information to Scott and Frank, all she received was criticism.

"Why did you mention Scott's name?" asked Frank. "This guy probably has a group of attorneys pimping him out. The minute you mentioned his name, they are trying to shake us down for a hundred grand. We probably could've gotten him for much cheaper had you not given him so much information."

However, Scott was 6'2" and weighed 190 pounds. Moon weighed around 215 but was 5'11".

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Scott thought that this may have allowed him to have an advantage when Moon closed in. After letting Frank berate her for a few more minutes, Scott told Danielle to have his attorneys finalize the deal with Moon.

Moon arrived alone at Scott's Aberdeen mansion around 2:00 that afternoon, and Danielle led him to one of Scott's many bedrooms to use as a dressing room. In street clothes, he did not look like a broken man in need of a paycheck. However, she had seen many a well-groomed actor who concealed their hand-to-mouth lifestyle with charged designer clothing.

Scott built a boxing ring in his gargantuan basement, hired Bobby, made sure Ben would be there to photograph the event, and trained for two months. He had played a prizefighter early in his film career and had learned the fundamentals of the sport then. Despite the prior knowledge, Bobby did not hesitate to tell him he was making a big mistake fighting Moon.

The contract between Scott and Moon had stipulated that both fighters be in the ring by 3:15 that afternoon. At 3:10, Scott walked down to the basement wearing a red silk robe. Danielle bit her upper lip to keep from laughing as he posed for Ben.

"Well, that's real practical," said Bobby.

Scott laughed.

"I don't care," said Scott. "I've always wanted one of these. Hey Frank, check this out."

He turned around to reveal a patch on the back his robe reading, "Shamrock Meats, Inc." Frank shook his head.

"I always figured Rocky was your inspiration for this," he said.

Frank looked his watch. 3:12.

"Moon better get out here soon," he said. "The contract stated 3:15."

"Don't worry," said Bobby. "I taped him up 15 minutes ago. He'll be out any minute."

Seconds after Bobby spoke, Moon walked down the stairs into the basement wearing only boxing trunks and shoes. He did not resemble a former athlete who had buried his Adonis-like body under frequent trips to the buffet table nor did he look as if he was skipping many meals. His physique was not chiseled, but it had country boy healthiness. Moon stepped into the ring and walked over to Scott's corner and shook the star's hand.

"Mr. Mozier," said Scott. "Thank you for the opportunity."

"It's your money," said Moon.

He studied Scott's robe and smirked, as Bobby placed the headgear on his head. After Scott

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put on his headgear, both fighters went to their respective corners.

Round one of their four-round sparring session got underway at 3:30. Moon walked out of his corner and slowly circled the ring. Scott kept his distance and stayed parallel with him. Occasionally, Moon would fire a soft jab, which Scott would either slip or slap away. A little more than two minutes into the round, Moon threw a loopy left hook, and Scott ducked under it and pounded a right into his side. Moon winced and tottered a bit and backed against the ropes. Scott closed in and threw wild rights and lefts at his opponent, who had built himself a cocoon of gloves and limbs. With about ten seconds left in the round, Moon glided out from under Scott's attacks and threw a right hand lead at his shoulder. The bell rang with Moon backpedaling.

In Scott's corner, Bobby quickly went to work on his elated employer.

"He didn't become the number heavyweight contender in the world for nothing," said Bobby. "Don't get cocky, and only punch when you have an opening."

When the bell rang for round two, Scott charged out of his corner.

"Don't go after him!" screamed Bobby.

Scott stopped three feet in front of Moon and stepped backwards. Moon continued to throw a very weak jab and spoke while he did.

"You ain't too bad," he said. "But you got a lot to learn. When you fight for the heavyweight title, come talk to me then."

Danielle frowned as Moon threw another limp jab. Frank leaned in next to her.

"It's a testament to boxing if this old pug was once considered to be a star," he whispered into Danielle's ear.

She shuddered and moved away from him. Moon once again tossed a left hook with the velocity of a wet noodle, and Scott was again able to slip under it. However, this time he was met with a bone-crushing right uppercut under his chin. Scott's head snapped back and he dazedly staggered backwards. Danielle closed her eyes. Moon followed up with a quick left and right into his chest sending him back into the ropes. Scott did not fall, but his arms were dropped at his sides. Moon looked over at Scott's corner.

"Think he's done, Bobby?" asked Moon.

"Yeah, he's done," said Bobby as he climbed into the ring to help Scott.

Ben set his camera down and helped Scott to his feet as well, as did Frank. As they helped lead Scott upstairs to a bedroom, Frank turned around to look at Danielle and Moon.

"Mr. Mozier, Scott would say goodbye, but he's too woozy," he said. "Danielle, what time is your

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flight back to L.A.?"

"7:00."

"Ride with Mr. Mozier to BWI and see that he gets situated," said Frank.

It took Moon about 30 minutes to shower and change clothes. Danielle met him in one of Scott's many hallways. As they walked to the front door, they passed a large detailed print of the famous photo of Moon and Kwame. He stopped, stared at it, and shook his head.

"Wonder if any photos of me and Scott will go up next to that?" he asked.

The limo ride was mostly quiet. Three years ago, Danielle would have had difficulty concentrating if she had been alone in a car with a beastly prizefighter, but now she just passed the time reading The Baltimore Sun.

Moon's cell phone rang when they were five miles away from the BWI exit. He pulled it off the holder attached to the belt holding his jeans up.

"Hello."

A few moments passed.

"Thanks for calling me back, Bill. I can make that show on the 13th. And I'll be happy to sit with Kwame and sign that darn picture. The only thing is that I want \$150 for every one that I do."

Moon held the phone away from his ear. She could not decipher any of it, but Danielle could hear very intense verbiage coming from his cell phone.

"Bill, I hear you and I'm sure Kwame will be upset if I make more money than him on this. But Kwame has to understand that I'm the draw here. He'll sign that picture any old day of the week. I won't. The swallowing of my pride should be worth a few extra bucks. Also, more people want Kwame's autograph than they do mine so in the end, he will make more money anyway."

Ten seconds passed before Danielle could hear some noise from the phone.

"Thank you. I appreciate you understanding. We are pulling into the airport so I will touch base with you in the next couple of weeks about logistics for the 13th. Take care."

The lines at Baltimore-Washington International Airport were slim and Danielle and Moon quickly got their boarding passes and made their way through the security checkpoints. As they walked to their respective gates in Terminal C, Moon turned to her.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

Danielle could not find an ulterior motive.

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“Sure,” she said.

They went to the Beer Garden and sat at the bar. A tanned man with salt and pepper hair was chiding the bartender as he poured a Guinness.

“Do you not put a spoon in it?” he asked. “It ruins it when you don’t put a spoon in it.”

The bartender paid him no mind and continued.

“Go to any pub in Ireland, or even New York for that matter and you’ll see.”

Moon rolled his eyes.

“Where’d you learn that from? Guinness.com?” said Moon.

There was silence as the bartender handed him his beer and approached Danielle and Moon.

“I’ll have a double Johnny Walker Black on the rocks,” said Moon. “You know I went to a Johnny Walker taste-testing once and learned that it’s blended from 40 different scotches. If I were a jackass, I would tell every bartender that poured me one about it.”

The finicky man took his Guinness and moved to a table. The bartender turned to Danielle who was trying her best to keep from laughing.

“Dirty Martini.”

“You got it,” said the bartender as he quickly went to work on the drinks.

Moon rolled up the sleeves on his button-down shirt.

“I wasn’t going to do anything,” said Moon. “I just hate to see people act that way.”

She nonchalantly held up her hand letting him know it was okay.

“So is Scott from Maryland originally?” he asked.

Danielle nodded.

“He grew up in Rockville,” she said. “After he signed his first million dollar contract for Under the Knife, he bought that house in Aberdeen so he would have a place to go to get away from it all.”

“Nice place.”

The bartender delivered the drinks. They clinked their glasses together and Danielle took a sip.

“I don’t know what it is with him though,” she said, “with these endeavors. He actually thought

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he could beat you. It's like these guys have things fall the right way for them movie-wise and they all of the sudden think that they are invincible."

Moon smiled.

"A lot of guys of his stature – guys with money to burn – let their ego get the best of them," said Moon. "It's how I make most of my living. Guys like Kwame Orange are too proud to waste their time boxing with some pampered movie star or flash-in-the-pan wide receiver. For me, it's an easy way to make money and an excuse to stay in halfway decent shape. And at the end of the day I think I give them a greater respect for the sport and a bit of a humbling experience at the same time. I like to think of myself as a professional grounder."

Danielle almost spit up her drink.

"Come on," she said. "You carried him for an entire round."

"I gotta keep business coming in," he said. "If I really unloaded on him in the ring – and I'm not saying this to toot my own horn – he wouldn't last thirty seconds and he would likely get seriously hurt. Taking someone with no experience and putting him in the ring with a professional fighter is like sending a guy with no mountain climbing experience up K2."

"Then why would Bobby Dee do it?" she asked.

Moon winked at her.

"Because Bobby and all the other trainers these rich boys hire aren't fools," said Moon. "If I destroy someone inside a round, I'll never get another gig like this and neither will they. So what I do is spend a round, maybe two, figuring out their glaring weaknesses or just baiting them. Once I've done that, I can finish them off in four punches or less. I get paid and they get a bit of self satisfaction."

Danielle tilted her head in disbelief.

"You just wait," continued Moon. "Scott will come back in a couple of days bragging about how he lasted almost two rounds with Moon Mozier. Someone else will hear that and think they can do even better."

They finished their drinks and walked out of the bar into the concourse.

"Thanks for joining me," he said.

"Thank you for the drink," she said as she gave him a slight hug.

They started to walk their separate ways before Danielle remembered the money.

"Oh," she said. "Do you want me to contact Jacob Kilrain about wiring you the rest of the

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money?”

“Naw,” he said. “Just contact me. Jake Kilrain was an old bareknuckle boxer from the 1800s. I just use his name so y’all won’t think you are dealing with some sad sack with a website.”

She bit her bottom lip and smiled.

“Take care,” he said. “Have a safe flight.”

Danielle smiled as she walked to the gate. She wondered if Scott’s next adventure would teach her as much as this one had.