

ROBERT B. PARKER'S

**COLOR
BLIND**

THE SPENSER NOVELS

Robert B. Parker's Little White Lies

(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Slow Burn

(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Kickback

(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Cheap Shot

(by Ace Atkins)

Silent Night

(with Helen Brann)

Robert B. Parker's Wonderland

(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Lullaby

(by Ace Atkins)

Sixkill

Painted Ladies

The Professional

Rough Weather

Now & Then

Hundred-Dollar Baby

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THE JESSE STONE NOVELS

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Robert B. Parker's Debt to Pay

(by Reed Farrel Coleman)

Robert B. Parker's The Devil Wins

(by Reed Farrel Coleman)

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(by Reed Farrel Coleman)

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Wilderness

Three Weeks in Spring

(with Joan H. Parker)

Training with Weights

(with John R. Marsh)

ROBERT B. PARKER'S

**COLOR
BLIND**

A JESSE STONE NOVEL

REED FARREL COLEMAN

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

PUTNAM

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FOR ACE ATKINS AND TOM SCHRECK

It is not flesh and blood, but heart which makes us fathers and sons.

—SCHILLER

She thought she might pass out from the ache in her side or that her heart might explode in her chest as she ran barefoot along the dunes. Her beautiful long beaded braids, of which she was rightfully proud, slapped against her shoulders, her face, and fell in front of her eyes. She stopped, trying to catch her breath and to listen for them, for their heavy footfalls, but the low roar of the waves swallowed up all the sounds of the night, much as they had overwhelmed her cries for help.

Too tired to think, she bent over at the waist, sucking in huge gulps of crisp sea air. Her throat was raw from screaming. Sweat rolled down her forehead, stinging her eyes. It covered her dark black skin and soaked through her sports bra, panties, and torn warm-up pants. As her wind returned to her and the stitch in her side subsided, she felt the burn of her sweat seeping into the nicks and cuts around her ankles caused by the brambles and sharp dune grasses. Her jaw was throbbing from where one of them had smashed his fist into her face. And as she pressed her fingers to the swelling, the absurdity of the situation rushed back in like the waves on the beach below. *This can't be happening to me. Things like this happen to other women.*

She reached into her pocket to feel for the cell phone that she knew wasn't there, the image of it on top of the nightstand as clear to her as if she were back in the room at the bed-and-breakfast. Her skin was

suddenly gooseflesh, her perspiration turning cold with fear, and she wished she'd listened to Steve and taken her phone, wished she'd been able to hang on to her Harvard hoodie. But the man who'd laid her out with that one punch, the man who'd torn at her pants and climbed on top of her, grunting, pawing her, had clutched it even after she'd kned him in the groin. It was only when she rolled out from under him and ran, hearing laughter in the night, that she realized the man who'd attacked her wasn't alone. She ran down to the beach, hoping, praying, that she'd come upon another runner or a couple, maybe some kids around a campfire. But there was no one, not in either direction, not as far as she could see.

There were tears in her eyes. She was shaking and her heart was doing a fluttery thing she wasn't sure she had ever felt before. She'd been able to hold it together until then, until she saw that she was very alone on that stretch of Massachusetts beach. She decided to double back and head north along the shore toward the B-and-B in Swan Harbor. She prayed the men chasing her had gone south, trying to get ahead of her to wall her off and pin her in. Besides, she had no idea what was down the beach beyond the edge of darkness. At least she had some sense of the beach in Swan Harbor and knew that at one point the beach became rocky. Maybe there was a cave or a cove she could hide herself in until sunup. The thought of that, of the sun rising over the Atlantic, stopped the tears and filled her with hope. It was short-lived.

There they were, above her, to her left along the dunes. She ran faster, then stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of a shadowy figure thirty yards ahead of her on the beach. She turned the other way, but it was no good. Two of them were there. She ran to the dunes, her churning feet sinking into the cool sand as they came around slowly behind her, their sneering laughter filling the night. One of them yanked her braids so that her head snapped back and she lost her balance, the sand slipping

out from under her feet. She fell awkwardly onto her neck and shoulder, landing so hard that pain shot down her whole left side, the jolt of it taking her breath away.

When she came back into the moment a few seconds later, she wished she hadn't. They had her pinned and he was on top of her again. Only this time his knees were on either side of her. She swung her head wildly from side to side, writhed beneath him, fighting to break free of the hands holding her down, but it was no good. He clamped a powerful hand under her chin to force her to look up at him.

"You just had to go and knee me, didn't you?" he said, squeezing her face so hard that her teeth cut into the insides of her cheeks. The taste of copper and iron flashed across her tongue. Her body steadied as much out of exhaustion as anything else. "You made a mistake doing that. A very big mistake. Get her damned pants off. Time to teach her a lesson."

She was at it again, her muscles giving absolutely everything they had left to give, and she screamed for all it was worth. But her voice was nearly gone, as was all of her strength.

"You done now?" he said in a whisper, his lips close to her ear. "Are you done?"

She was crying too fiercely to answer him, and before she could even think what to do next she felt his fist crash into her face again and again. Her body went limp and her mind empty. When she roused, she'd retreated into a peaceful world so deep inside her own head that she wanted to stay there forever. It was strange, she thought, how she could still hear the sea and could feel them dragging her by the feet, the sand and dune grasses tearing at her face. Then, just before she slipped completely away, she remembered that tomorrow was Columbus Day. *The Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María. The Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María. The Niña . . .* She could no longer hear the ocean.

Everything was completely different, yet just the same. Paradise was as it had always been in the fall, the trees exploding with color, the wind blowing in off the Atlantic biting with sharper teeth. Jesse Stone wasn't a man given to deep philosophical thought. He knew up from down, which base to cover when throws came in from the outfield, and, most important, right from wrong. His sense of right and wrong was like his North Star, guiding him through the wilderness of a world that had lost its way. Yet as he looked at the windblown swirl of reds, yellows, browns, and greens on the trees outside his new condo that morning, he could not help but think it strange that the beauty of the leaves was an expression of their deaths. As far as he could tell, there was only inevitability in human death and not much beauty in it. There was certainly no beauty in murder, the kind of death he was most familiar with.

He didn't waste any more time contemplating the leaves or why the familiar now seemed strange. There was the fact that his house had been sold that summer and that he'd moved into a two-bedroom condo in a development at the edge of the Swap. That wasn't it. He had moved many times in his life without it shaking his foundation. Nor was it that today would be his first day back on the job after two months away. He had to admit that it had taken some getting used to, being away from

Paradise. Jesse hadn't taken any real time off since he'd been forced to walk away from baseball and joined the LAPD. That was strange, too, because it felt like it had happened both only yesterday and a million years ago. He knew exactly what it was that was causing him to see the world with new eyes, and he knew he was going to have to spend every day for the rest of his life getting used to it.

Patricia Cooper at the donut shop raised her right eyebrow at the sight of Jesse standing before her. For an old Yankee like Patricia, a raised eyebrow was tantamount to a fainting spell.

"Jeez, Jesse. Been a long time. Got so we were worried Molly would be warming your seat on a permanent basis."

"She would never let that happen."

One corner of Patricia's mouth turned up. "No, I s'pose not. An assorted dozen for you?"

"Better make that two dozen and a large cup of coffee. We've got that machine in the station now, but I've thought about the taste of your coffee every day since I've been gone."

The other corner of her mouth turned up.

MOLLY WAS SEATED at the front desk, not in Jesse's office as he'd expected. They'd spoken a few times since he'd returned, but like everything else since he'd come home, their conversations had been just a bit different. The usual rhythm of their banter seemed out of joint. He'd supposed that was a function of Molly's anger at him for sticking her in a job she never wanted and for staying away a few weeks longer than he'd planned to be gone.

Before he could open his mouth, Molly said, "Don't you ever do that to me again, Jesse Stone. God knows why I love you in the first place, but it won't last two more months of me sitting in that office." She pointed

over her shoulder at the door with CHIEF printed in black letters on the pebbled glass.

He placed the donuts in front of her. "Cross my heart, Crane."

"Put them in the break room yourself. Until you walk into that office back there, I'm still acting chief."

"Seems to me you're pretty comfortable with giving orders."

"Seems to me I hated every minute of it."

"How about the extra pay?"

When Molly smiled up at him, he knew things would be all right. Just as his sense of right and wrong had been his internal guide, Molly had long since become the person by whom he could set his watch.

Jesse took two donuts out of the box and left the rest right where they were. "I'm going into my office now, Crane. You can make an executive decision about what to do with the donuts." He turned and walked away.

"Jesse!" she called after him.

"What is it, Molly?"

"It's good to have you back."

"Good to be back. In ten minutes, come in and we'll talk over personnel and what's been going on while I've been gone."

The office was much as he had left it, if neater and a tad less dusty. But the essentials were in place: his worn glove and ball on his desk, the flags in the corner, the photos of the past chiefs on the wall, the slats of the old blinds open on the yacht club and Stiles Island. He sat behind his desk, his eyes immediately turning to the lower right-hand drawer, the drawer in which he had kept a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label since he first arrived in Paradise. There was no bottle in there now. He was determined that there would never be one there again. He wasn't just playing at not drinking anymore or, as Dix phrased it, holding his breath to prove to the world he didn't need to drink. He'd been to rehab,

finally, and had been sober for a few weeks. But he had been warned that the struggles might not begin in earnest until he got back to his familiar surroundings. Seeing the empty space where the bottle used to reside, smelling the scotch that wasn't there, he felt a phantom twinge, as if from a limb that had recently been removed.

Molly sat across the desk from him, a small pile of files between them. Jesse picked up the top file, opened it, and scanned the few sheets of paper within.

“How’s Suit?”

Molly shook her head. “Even more boring now that he’s married.”

“Alisha,” he said. “How’s she doing?”

Molly’s expression surprised him.

“What’s that face about?”

She said, “I guess Alisha’s feeling her oats.”

“C’mon, Molly, this isn’t *Modern Farmer*. What does that mean?”

“It’s just that she’s not the shy, quiet, obedient rookie anymore. She questioned the way a few of the older guys handled some things. They didn’t like it much.”

“Coming from a woman, you mean?”

Molly didn’t answer.

“Or from an African American woman?”

Hiring Alisha hadn’t been a popular move with the Board of Selectmen. Some of it had to do with her race, though Jesse suspected it had less to do with her gender or the color of her skin than budgetary concerns. They would have preferred he take on a retired big-city cop who already had a pension and medical benefits. But Jesse knew that hiring

a retired cop came with baggage. He didn't need a cop who had bad habits or thought he was doing Paradise a favor, someone who could walk away the first time things got rough or he got an order he didn't like. Jesse wanted someone he could train himself, someone who would be committed to Paradise. Jesse recognized that the town was changing, that people from Boston were moving in and commuting. He wanted a more diverse force and for his cops to reflect Paradise's future and not only its past.

"I don't think it's that, Jesse," Molly said. "She's young, and you know how guys set in their ways can get."

"Uh-huh."

"I was going to have to tell you anyway, so I might as well tell you now. For the last few weeks, we've been having some trouble with bikers, mostly in the Swap."

"Bikers as in biker gangs like Satan's Whores? I can deal with—"

She cut him off. "Not them, Jesse. These were skinhead types, beligerent, real troublemakers. They went into the Scupper and started squawking about how even lily-white places like Paradise were being overrun by 'mud people and inferior races.'"

"I've heard it all before. Same song, different day. We had them when I was a kid in Tucson and in L.A. Free speech comes in ugly forms, too. So what happened?"

"Joey the barman phoned it in to the station when some of the patrons took exception, and Alisha was in that sector. I sent Suit and Gabe as backup . . . just in case."

"Good decision. It's what I would have done."

"But when Suit and Gabe saw what was going on, they pulled seniority on Alisha and got between her and the skinheads. I wasn't there, but Gabe says it was getting pretty heated. Sounded to me like they did the right thing by taking charge."

Jesse asked, “You think I need to have a talk with her or with all three of them?”

“That’s up to you. Alisha’s had a bit of a chip on her shoulder since, but her work’s still excellent.”

“I’d have that chip there myself if the same thing happened to me, but I’ll keep an eye out. Anybody in the cells?”

“One guy, a twentysomething. Talk about a chip on your shoulder,” Molly said. “This guy’s got a whole city block on his. Showed up in town a few weeks after you left. Second time we’ve given him accommodations for the night.”

“Drunk?”

“And disorderly.”

“You charge him?”

“Not officially.”

Jesse smiled at her. He knew he had been right to trust her with his job and his town. And the fact that she hadn’t charged the kid only confirmed it. The PPD wasn’t about arrests and statistics. It was about keeping the peace and doing right by the people. The truth was that putting someone into the system was a decision not to be made lightly. The justice system was overburdened and it tended to grind up the people locked behind its bars. As far as Jesse could tell, very few people came out the other end of time in prison better citizens for the experience. It wasn’t a popular attitude these days, but Jesse believed a good kick in the ass and a little understanding often worked better than time inside.

“I’ll go have a talk with him. Name?”

“Cole Slayton.”

“We done?”

“You’re the chief. Your decision.”

“Wisass,” he said, standing. “Time for me to meet Mr. Slayton.”

“Good luck with that. Talking with him is like talking to a wall. He’s about as charming as you after a bender. Sorry, Jesse, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay, Molly. No tiptoeing around about this between me and you. I didn’t go to rehab because I drank too much Earl Grey.”

Jesse was surprised at the sight of the kid pacing back and forth behind the bars. He thought he'd find a hipster on a road trip, playing at being cool, or some asocial drifter with dead eyes, but that's not who he found in the cell at all. This kid was scruffy, his black hair a mess and his face unshaven for a week, but he was an athlete. He had the build and the look. Even pacing the ten feet from one side of the cell to the other, he moved with fluidity and grace. Part of Jesse's skill set as a ballplayer was the ability to spot your own kind, picking out the guy on the other team who was just a little quicker on the base paths or the one who could manipulate the bat and hit the ball where he wanted to.

"Cole," he said, standing out of the kid's reach. "I'm Jesse Stone, the chief of police here."

The kid stopped dead, turned to face Jesse through the bars. He stared at him hard in the eyes. It was an intense, assessing stare, almost as if he was trying to look inside Jesse or through him.

The kid sneered, said, "So you're Jesse Stone, huh?"

Jesse laughed. "I am. Why do you say it like that?"

"Never mind." The kid went back to pacing.

"You want to stop that? We need to talk."

The kid thought about it, hesitated, stopped. "Okay, talk." He gave Jesse a cold look.

Molly was right about this guy. He had a sizable chip on his shoulder and seemed incapable of uttering a word that didn't sound or feel like a challenge.

"Officer Crane tells me this is the second time we've had to put you up for the night since you came into town."

"You going to threaten me now? Tell me I can get out of town or—"

"Easy, kid—"

"I'm not a kid."

"Sorry," Jesse said. "At my age, everyone under thirty is a kid. But no one's threatening anybody." Jesse cleared his throat. "Listen, Cole, I'm going to kick you loose and we're going to forget about the drunk and disorderly charges for now. But I don't want to see you back in here again and I don't want one of my officers to have to give you anything more than a parking ticket."

"Or else, huh?"

Jesse said, "Look, I don't know what your deal is or why you seem to want to provoke me, but all I'm doing for you is a favor."

Slayton glared at him. "You expecting gratitude?"

"From you, probably not. My experience is that people with as much attitude as you don't give thanks, because they think the world owes them something."

"I've got a long list of things I'm owed."

"No doubt." Jesse reached for the cell key. "Remember, I don't want to see you in here again."

Before Jesse could open the cell door, Suit Simpson came into the jail corridor. Suit waved Jesse over. They shook hands and slapped each other on the shoulder. Suit motioned for Jesse to step away from the cells and back into the hallway.

"It's great to see you, Jesse. I missed you. Man, don't ever leave Molly in charge again. She gets really grumpy when you're not around."

“You look good, Suit. You lose some weight?”

“Yeah,” he said, slapping his belly proudly. “Elena feeds me right and makes me go to the gym.”

“I knew I liked that woman.”

Suit’s expression turned serious. “You okay, Jesse? I mean, I know things were rough there after Diana . . . you know. And you were away for a long time. I was worried about you. We all were.”

“Thanks, Suit, but I’m fine. So why’d you come in here instead of waiting for me to come out?”

“Molly got a call from the Swan Harbor PD. They got a serious assault there and Chief Forster wants you to have a look. You know those guys over there, they don’t like getting their nails dirty.”

“Any details?”

“No. They want you to hurry. Lundquist’ll meet you at the Swan Memorial Junior-Senior High School parking lot.”

“Okay, thanks. Do me a favor, Suit. Cut Mr. Slayton loose.”

“You sure about that, Jesse?” he said in a quiet voice. “I’m the one that brought this guy in . . . twice. He started the fight both times. All the witnesses said he was almost begging to get arrested.”

“Did he use any weapons? A broken bottle or anything like that?”

Suit shook his head. “No. It wasn’t like that.”

“Okay, then. It’s his last chance.”

“Whatever you say, Jesse.”

As Jesse drove his Explorer to Swan Harbor, he thought about Cole Slayton. It had been a long time since he’d run into a character with that much attitude. Cole seemed determined to prove something to the world or to himself. Jesse hoped he’d do it without hurting himself or someone else and that he’d do it in another cop’s town.

Paradise was a town founded by merchants and fishermen. The town fathers would have also had you believe that whaling was a part of the town's past. Jesse never quite bought the whaling stuff, but it made for a good narrative for the tourists. Mostly it helped local shopkeepers hawk their replica harpoons, oil lamps, and oars. Swan Harbor, the tony town just north of Paradise, was a place that wore its pilgrim roots like a neon sign. Though, of course, neon signs were strictly forbidden within town limits.

Swan Memorial was a picture-postcard old school building of red brick and ivy, with a majestic white bell tower rising up from the center of its sloped gray roof. Jesse followed the curve of Commonwealth Way past the front of the school's granite steps and stone columns, and around to the athletic fields and parking lot beyond. The bucolic New England scene was shattered by the sight of ambulances, police cruisers, and trooper SUVs arranged at odd angles on the knoll outside the lot. All their blue, red, white, and yellow light bars whirled, strobed, and flashed in moot silence. Not even the gorgeous backdrop of turning trees and the ocean beyond could camouflage the tear in the fabric of serenity.

Jesse pulled up onto the knoll alongside Brian Lundquist's unmarked Ford. It was officially Captain Lundquist now that he'd gotten the bump and taken over for Healy as the state's chief homicide investigator.

"Jesse," Lundquist said, offering his hand.

“Brian.” Jesse took his hand and shook it. “Congratulations on it being official.”

Lundquist, a big man who looked more like a Minnesota farm boy than a cop, nodded his thanks.

“It’s not pretty, Jesse. Her face is a mess and there are nasty bruises around her throat. There’s some signs of sexual assault. She’s unconscious and the EMTs say it doesn’t look good. The assault had to take place somewhere else, though, and she was dumped here. Name’s Felicity Wileford, thirty-two. She’s up here from Boston for the weekend with a boyfriend to see the foliage.”

“Boyfriend a suspect?”

Lundquist shrugged. “Can’t say.”

“Any security footage?”

“The security company says no, but I’ve got someone over at their headquarters reviewing whatever footage they’ve got. C’mon, let’s go take a look.”

As they turned to enter the lot, stepping under the crime scene tape, Jesse asked, “Why am I here, Brian? Not my town, not my jurisdiction. What are you doing here, anyway? This isn’t a homicide.”

“Not yet,” Lundquist said. “But it looks like it will be. Besides, they don’t have any detectives on their PD and I was in the area.”

“I heard it was the chief who asked me to come have a look.”

“It was my idea, but it’s not officially my case. I had to cajole the rusty-nuts chief here to invite you over. I’ll tell you what, Jesse, the cops in this town are acting like they’ve never seen this kind of thing before.”

“They probably haven’t. No shame in that. I wish none of my cops had ever seen one.”

“Occupational hazard, I guess, me making assumptions like that. I’ve already seen too many damaged bodies.”

“Me, too. But that’s no answer to my question, Brian. Why am I here?”

“Come on, let’s hurry up before they move her. You’ll see.”

That was more of an answer. Jesse understood that there must be something about the appearance of the victim or the crime scene that would spark his memory. Either that or there was something about the victim and the nature of the assault that only an ex-LAPD Robbery Homicide detective would comprehend. But the moment he saw the way Felicity Wilford’s brutalized body had been positioned, Jesse knew it was the former.

She was a dark-skinned African American woman with long, beautifully braided hair. Her face was so battered that her eyes were swollen shut. A plastic oxygen mask covered her smashed nose and bloodied mouth. As they rolled the gurney toward the waiting ambulance, Lundquist demanded the EMTs stop and lower the sheet that covered her body from neck to toe. They weren’t happy about it, but they did as they were told. The swelling and bruising around her throat was obvious. Someone had written the word *slut* across her belly in lurid red lipstick.

As the EMTs hurried her into the ambulance, Jesse turned to Lundquist and said, “The first murder scene I ever dealt with in Paradise was very similar to this, but you couldn’t have known about that. You were still chasing speeders down on the Mass Pike back then. Who spotted the similarity?”

Lundquist pointed to a uniformed Swan Harbor cop standing with a group of troopers and cops about twenty yards to the other side of the body. “Name’s Drake Daniels. Been on the job here for twenty-plus years. He told his chief, the chief told me . . . You know how it works.”

“Uh-huh.” He knew how it worked, but he didn’t like it.

“Brian, I’m going to take a walk over to my Explorer. Send Officer Daniels over without drawing attention. I need to have a talk with that man.”

Jesse didn’t wait for Lundquist’s response. He just turned and walked toward his SUV.