ROBERT B. PARKER'S
DEBT TO PAY
He didn’t like exposing himself to video cameras when there were no crowds affording him his usual anonymity. His talent wasn’t just for killing, but for blending in as well. He was like a khaki-colored pixel in a camouflage pattern. Stare at the pattern long enough and the individual pixels disappear. Today he meant to put the world on notice that he was back and the time had come to repay his creditors. He very much wanted to do both, and had waited more than a year for this opportunity. Still, he couldn’t afford carelessness. He was seldom careless. He had taken precautions and the soaking rain was doing its part to cooperate. The gray was so heavy in the air that it seemed like its own weather condition separate from the rain and mist.

He parked the stolen Yaris out behind the building, because not even he could haul his intended cargo out the front door and hope to get very far. He went through his mental checklist, patted his pockets, and exited the car. He walked through the alleyway, turned right, and then right again. There were people on the street, many people, their heads down against the weather, too busy fussing with umbrellas to take notice of the little bearded man with the long gray

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hair and porkpie hat shuffling by them. Nor did they notice his large belly beneath the ill-fitting green mackintosh he’d bought at a church thrift shop outside Paradise. While he was unrecognizable, he made certain not to look directly into the security cameras as he entered the building.

He knocked at the office door, turned the handle, and let himself in. The young man sitting at the reception desk was really quite beautiful to look at. Dressed in an impeccably tailored designer suit of summer-weight wool, he had fine features, long lashes, eyes that matched the deep blue of his suit fabric, and perfectly coiffed dark blond hair. The light stubble on his face was shaved and shaped in such a way as to enhance the power of his angular jawline. He had an ingratiating smile full of straight white teeth. He stood up from behind his desk outside Gino Fish’s office to greet the odd-looking little man standing before him, water dripping off the hem of his coat and the brim of his silly hat. Takes all sorts, he thought, and Gino did do business with a lot of unsavory types. The little man took two steps toward the receptionist.

“How may I help—”

The beautiful young man never finished his sentence or took another breath. He had been so focused on the odd man’s bad gray wig and fake beard that he hadn’t seen the blade in the man’s small hand. He’d felt it, though, if only very briefly, as the assassin thrust the knife forward. Using his legs like a boxer to supply the necessary power, the little man plunged the razor-sharp blade through the receptionist’s tailored suit jacket, his shirt, his perfectly tanned skin, and his breastbone. The blade cut a fatal gash in the young man’s heart. With incredible speed and surprising dexterity, the killer removed the blade and thrust it deeply into the receptionist’s throat, making sure the mortally wounded man could not cry out. Careful
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to avoid getting bloody, the killer caught the body by the sleeve and eased it gently to the floor as if placing a sleeping baby in its cradle. There was blood, but not nearly as much as there would have been had the killer reversed the order of the wounds.

He knelt down beside the results of his handiwork, wiping the blade off on the wool suit before replacing the assault knife back in his pocket. He lingered, admiring the fine features and lovely blue eyes of his victim. He stroked the body’s still warm cheeks with the back of his hand. Ran his fingers over his dark blond hair. Shook his head in regret. Just because he lived to destroy didn’t mean he had no appreciation of beauty. On the contrary, he had an abiding appreciation for it, though he resented beauty far more deeply. To be human was to possess opposing feelings. In this instance, it wasn’t that he so much minded having to kill the man, but that circumstance dictated that he kill him quickly. How much more pleasure he could have derived from the experience had he been able to take his time? He took enormous delight in tearing beautiful things apart by the inch. Quelle domage, he thought. What a pity.

He stood; removed the beard, wig, and hat; and placed them all in a plastic bag, then tossed the bag in the trash. Law enforcement already had epithelial and hair samples from any number of his crime scenes. They had samples of his blood from the incidents with Stone’s deputy and Joe Breen, but it was of no consequence. They had no name, no face, no person to match them to, only a question mark and a despicable nickname. Sometimes he had to remind himself of his given name and to remember where he’d come from. Now was not the time to dwell on the past.

He removed the pillow from under his thrift-shop raincoat and, in a cruelly ironic gesture, placed the pillow beneath the murdered receptionist’s head. Amused, he checked his watch and smiled.
was very good. Less than a minute had elapsed from the time he’d come into the office until he’d placed the pillow beneath the dead man’s head. He retrieved his .22, stepped up to Gino Fish’s office door, and knocked.

“Come on in, Drew,” Gino said, his voice almost a purr.

The killer stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. The aging mobster’s head was buried in the Friday edition of *The Globe*.

“We should be okay for our weekend on the Cape,” Fish said, still not looking up. “Not supposed to rain again until late Sunday.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Fish,” the killer said, gun hand raised. “I’m afraid Drew won’t be accompanying you to the Cape this weekend, but don’t be sad. I have other more exciting plans for you for the weekend.”

Although Gino Fish had never seen or spoken directly to the man standing before him, he knew immediately who he was.

“Mr. Peepers. Fuck!”

The killer was tempted to put a bullet in a very painful but non-lethal area of Fish’s body, but he fought the impulse to do so.

“If you refer to me by that name again, Mr. Fish, I promise you your death will take even longer and be far more painful than you could possibly imagine.”

The old mobster tried to remain calm, though his left hand was trembling. “Then what should I call you?”

He thought about it, smiled a smug, self-congratulatory smile.

“Call me Mr. Mantis.”

Gino didn’t argue. “All right, Mr. Mantis. You killed the boy, huh? Did you have to do that?”

Mr. Mantis nodded. “A shame, I agree. Nice-looking man. My compliments on your taste.”
“This about that thing with Stone that went south?”
“What else? I warned the people who contacted me for you that if anything went wrong, you would pay the price for interfering in my affairs.”
“I don’t suppose there’s any bargaining room here?” Fish bowed his head at the gun in the killer’s hand. “I can offer you a big sum of cash to put that thing down and walk out of here. I’ll see to Drew.”
Mr. Mantis shook his head, smiling all the while.
“And I don’t figure telling you that Vinnie Morris won’t let this stand will intimidate you?”
Mr. Mantis continued shaking his head and smiling.
“Yeah, I didn’t think so.”
The killer motioned with his .22 for Gino Fish to stand.
“Slowly, Mr. Fish. You and I are going to take a walk down the hall and out the back door of the building.”
Gino Fish didn’t move. He was well aware of Mr. Mantis’s reputation for sadism. Fish had heard stories about how the man he knew as Mr. Peepers delighted in torturing his victims. He understood that if he left the office with this man, he would suffer a long and horrible death and that his body would probably never be found. For some reason that last part bothered him. Gino Fish was well past his prime, having grown too soft, too comfortable, and too careless, but he was no old fool. He hadn’t made it to the top echelons of the Boston mob and stayed there as long as he had by blind luck. He always had a backup plan. Always.
Mr. Mantis motioned again for Gino to stand, only this time Fish did as instructed. But as he rose, he reached into the open top drawer of his desk, grabbing the old Colt snubnose .38 he’d kept there for many years, just in case. Just in case was now, though he knew better than to try to engage his captor in a shootout. Instead,
in one swift motion, he pressed the revolver into the flesh beneath his chin and, without hesitation, pulled the trigger. He hung upright for what seemed a very long second, then collapsed into a lifeless pile of well-dressed skin and bones.

Mr. Mantis was impressed by the speed with which Fish had acted, but was furious at being robbed of his vengeance. He was also unnerved. Twice recently, he had let victims slip through his fingers, but he didn’t have the luxury of time to dwell on it. He knew exactly what to do and how to do it. He removed the assault knife from his coat pocket and moved toward the lifeless body of Gino Fish. Afterward, he retrieved the plastic bag from the trash.

Less than five minutes later, the odd-looking little man with the long gray hair, ragged beard, and porkpie hat walked out the front door of the building and back into the rain.
After last year’s spasm of blood, life in Paradise, Mass, had settled back into its predictable, small-town rhythms: steady as the tides, no waves cresting over the seawalls. There hadn’t been a single act of violence for months, the last one being a bar fight among four drunk musicians at the Gray Gull. Oh, there had been some snowfall, but nothing record-breaking, not even a hint of a nor’easter. The spring had passed as if following the script of old rhymes and adages. March had started out blustery and cold and ended on a week of sunny sixty-degree days. It had rained every two or three days in April, and by mid-May the gardens in town were so lush and colorful with early-spring blooms the place looked like . . . well, a paradise. What passed for a crime wave in Paradise these days was a spate of car vandalism. Somebody had lately taken to shooting out the rear tires of cars parked all over town.

“Anything?” Jesse asked Molly, coming through the station house door on Saturday morning.

“Nothing worth mentioning.”

“Mention it anyway.”

“No, really, Jesse, there’s—”
“Crane, can’t you ever make it easy?”
“Where’s the fun in that?”
“Fun for who, exactly?”
“Whom,” Molly corrected.

Jesse shook his head and laughed. “Are you sure it’s ‘whom’?”
“I’m not, but it’s fun to think you’re wrong. Did Diana come down from Boston last night in that rain?”
“Uh-huh. But don’t change subjects. What’s not worth mentioning?”
“Some water got into our basement and we had to turn on the pump.”
“For crissakes, Molly, is that—”
“I told you it wasn’t worth mentioning, didn’t I?”

Jesse raised his hands above his head. “I surrender.”
Molly frowned. “No fun in that, either.”
“No new flat tires?”
“No.”

Jesse turned and went into his office. He picked up his old baseball glove off the desk even before sitting down. He removed the hardball from the pocket of the glove where it resided, slid the glove over his left hand, and marveled that the glove was still in one piece after all this time. The glove had been his when he was a minor-league shortstop for the Dodgers, and he didn’t like thinking about how many years ago that was. Nor did he like thinking about why it was sitting on his desk in Paradise instead of in a display case at Cooperstown. For the moment he wasn’t worrying about his absence from the Hall of Fame, but rather about the big softball game tomorrow night against the fire department team.

He had other things on his mind, too. One, a fancy envelope inside the top drawer of his desk, and the recent rash of vandalism.
For the moment, he was focused on the latter. Although Mayor Walker and her merry band of selectmen were all over him to do something about it, it was Jesse’s experience that the perp was some stupid kid or a cranky old man with a grudge against the town or against Goodyear. He knew that this sort of thing would end soon enough, that the guy doing it would get bored or get sloppy and be caught. Of course there was always potential for things to turn bad. No good ever came of bullets in a populated area. So as Jesse pounded the ball into his glove—it helped him concentrate—he considered ways of catching the shooter in the act.

He heard the phone ring and Molly answer it. A few seconds later, she was sticking her head through the doorway.

“It’s Robbie Wilson. You want me to tell him you’re not here?”

“No,” he said, putting his glove and ball back down on his desk.

“I’ll take it.”

Jesse generally didn’t have much use for Wilson, the chief of the Paradise Fire Department, but he was happy for the distraction.

“Morning, Robbie.”

“Morning, Chief Stone.”

“So?”

“Fifty bucks on tomorrow’s game?”

“Gambling’s illegal, Robbie.”

“Dinner, then?”

“Field might be too sloppy to play on,” Jesse said.

“Don’t you worry about that. My guys are over there now taking care of it. So, are we on? Dinner to the winner?”

“How can I turn down an offer from a man who can rhyme dinner and winner? We’re on.”

Jesse put down the phone and stared at the top drawer of his desk.
He sat very low in the front seat of the Yaris, not because he was worried he would be recognized, but because caution and invisibility were words he lived by. The stolen car . . . no problem. As was his style, he had removed the nondescript subcompact late at night, from the garage of an elderly person away on a long cruise. He laughed his gloating, superior laugh, thinking about the stupidity of the masses. At how key codes made them feel safe and secure. How typical and how foolish. All he ever needed to do was find his mark, sit on her house for a few days before her trip, and use a long lens to watch her punch in the garage code. He always chose elderly widows because they lived alone, put very low mileage on their cars, and kept their cars well maintained. If he didn’t possess such a cautious nature, he believed he could simply trick most people into volunteering their key codes. Morons!

He knew he was in almost no danger of being recognized because there were only two men in all of Paradise and, quite possibly, the entire world, who might know his face. And those two were busy playing softball on the other side of town. He had made sure of that.
as he had made sure that the mess he had left behind in Boston had yet to be discovered. That was what he did, he made sure of things, controlling as many factors in any given situation as he could. Until the unfortunate incidents in the wake of his crossing paths with Jesse Stone, his record of success had been impeccable. He had been able to kill with impunity, at will, and the way he most enjoyed it: slowly, torturously, and profitably. But the two men at the softball field had taught him a valuable lesson about the limits of control. For that lesson, the little man sitting low in the front seat of the stolen car felt he had a debt to pay. He meant to pay it on his own terms and in blood—their blood and that of their loved ones.

For now, he was playing a bit of cat-and-mouse with the Paradise PD by shooting out the tires of cars around town. Of course he could easily have killed the chief or that idiot deputy of his at a distance, but where was the sport in that? Where was the pleasure in killing anonymously? He wanted them to know, as Gino Fish had known, who was doing this to them and why. He shook his head, upset that Fish had robbed him of his enjoyment the way he had. He wanted to see them helpless and begging, powerless to stop him from grinding their loved ones into dust as they watched.

Although it was that moose Simpson who had shot him, he would take his greatest delight in paying his debt to Jesse Stone. Stone had lied to him and it was Stone who had toppled the first domino in his run of misfortune. If Stone hadn’t stuck his nose in where it didn’t belong, none of his other troubles would have followed. And Stone, like Fish, had called him Mr. Peepers, a name he detested beyond all reason. Only Stone had lived to tell the tale. Even now, long after his encounter with the chief, he felt fury welling up inside him, his cheeks flushing with rage. Reaching up, he
readjusted the rearview mirror to see his reflection. The ashen skin and unremarkable features of his face turned an ugly shade of red beneath his wire-rim glasses.

In spite of his rage, he had a measured respect for Stone. A host of agencies and organizations on both sides of the law had tried unsuccessfully to put an end to him. They might as well have tried to lasso a ghost or to capture shadows in a box. No one had ever seen him for who he was until it was too late. With Stone, it had been different. But some of the respect he had for the chief was diminishing by the day. He thought for sure that by now Stone would have figured out the admittedly subtle message he had been leaving for him in the rear driver's-side tires of used cars all over Paradise. He was about to leave another two hints.

The street was quiet. Not a single car had driven past his location in forty-five minutes and not a soul had strolled along Scrimshaw Street in twice that amount of time. Dusk was deepening, and there were dark, threatening clouds in the sky. He sat up as tall as he could in the driver's seat and reached over to the passenger seat. He lifted the edge of a plaid blanket and folded it over on itself. On the seat beneath the blanket sat a handsome .22 pistol, the one he had waved at Gino Fish. He laced his fingers around the custom wood grip of the Smith & Wesson Model 41 and thought what he always thought at moments like these: A great artist uses great tools. And this gun was a work of art itself. Then he felt a twinge of pain in his shoulder and the rage rose up in him again. There had been a time not too long ago he could have put a man's eye out from twice the distance he could now, but Luther Simpson had ruined that with a single lucky shot to his right shoulder.

Swiveling his head and using the car's mirrors, he took one last careful look at the street to make sure he wouldn't be spotted. It was
safe. Turning in his seat, he raised his pistol up and rested the bottom of the grip in the niche of his bent left arm atop the door sill. He took aim and fired. The tire flattened in short order. He laid the pistol in his lap, started the car, and rolled farther up the street to repeat the process. With the last two hints left behind, he drove toward the turnpike. He made sure not to speed or do anything else that might bring undue attention to himself. If Stone didn’t get the message by now, he would as soon as the bodies were discovered in Boston.
Jesse Stone didn’t strike out, not in softball, yet he was in danger of doing just that. He stepped out of the batter’s box with a two-strike count against him. Resting the knob of the bat against his left thigh, he tugged at the left shoulder of his jersey, squeezed his shoulder blades together, stretched his neck, and closed his eyes. He took three deep breaths, trying to refocus his mind on the task at hand. Because Jesse had once been a phone call away from starting at shortstop for the L.A. Dodgers, he understood better than most that physical gifts were only part of the equation. Aside from talent, the other element separating highly skilled athletes from everyone else was the power of concentration.

Whether he was in the midst of a hostage crisis or standing in the middle of the infield during a Pacific Coast League championship game, Jesse could shut out the rest of the world. Suit had once asked Jesse if the crowd noise ever bothered him during a big game. Jesse laughed. Not at Suit. At himself.

“You know, Suit,” he’d said. “I never heard the crowd.”

And as Jesse dug his back foot into the dirt of the batter’s box, preparing to wait for the next pitch, he laughed at himself again.
Many years and many miles separated Jesse from those big games. This was the Paradise slow-pitch beer league, and the crowd, if you could call it that, consisted of wives and kids and girlfriends and a few drunk guys whose games were already over. Still, try as he might to collect his thoughts, Jesse couldn’t focus. He had his reasons.

One of them was the former FBI special agent sitting in the stands on the first-base side of the diamond. She was a stunning, sharp-witted blonde named Diana Evans. If Jesse had been given the power to create his perfect woman, he would have created Diana. They’d first met in New York City at the ill-fated reunion of Jesse’s Triple-A baseball team. Although it had taken a long time for them to end up together, together they were... sort of. Diana wasn’t the settling-down type, and even if she had been, small-town New England wasn’t where she would have picked to do it. For the time being, she was working as a security consultant for a high-tech firm in Boston. She came up to Paradise most weekends and Jesse spent his free weeknights at her Cambridge apartment. The arrangement seemed to work for them both.

Then there was Jesse’s drinking—or, rather, his lack of it. He had stopped for long periods in his life before now, but as Dix had said, those other times were like Jesse holding his breath. Sooner or later he was going to breathe again. Not this time, he thought. Not this time. He stopped drinking for himself and not to prove a point to someone else. Maybe because he had attached the notion of forever to his farewell to Johnnie Walker Black Label, stopping hadn’t been as easy as during his earlier periods of sobriety. There were days his lack of alcohol really screwed with his usual calm demeanor. His patience was more easily worn thin and he snapped at Suit and Molly on occasion.

But Jesse had no illusions as to why he couldn’t focus today. It
was the fancy, embossed wedding invitation sitting on his desk back at the Paradise PD. Molly had whistled at the sight of it and told him that the gilding on the invitation was the real deal, twenty-four-karat gold leaf. The invitation was irksome enough by itself, but it was the RSVP card and the answer he would have to put on it that haunted his thoughts. That and the conversation he would need to have with Jenn about it.

“Play ball!” the ump said, jarring Jesse out of his trance. “Come on, Chief, sometime before midnight.”

Jesse got back in the batter’s box, gripped the bat, and took a few practice swings. Robbie Wilson, the squat fire chief and pitcher for the Paradise Pumpers, stared in at the catcher and went into his windup. Jesse locked eyes on the release point of Wilson’s pitch, followed its high arc, waiting for the ball to come to him. He repeated to himself the mantra of every batting coach he’d ever had. *Let the pitch come to you. Let the pitch come to you.* Yet somewhere between the zenith of the pitch and its fall toward home plate, Jesse got lost in his own head again. Whether it was muscle memory or pure instinct, he swung the bat without actually seeing the ball.

Instead of the usual crisp ping of metal alloy making flush contact with the ball, there was a rubbery dull thud. And when Jesse snapped back into the moment, he was pumping his arms, running hard as he could toward first base. He caught sight of the ball centered among the pitcher’s mound, the foul line, and first. The ball was spinning sideways like a cue ball, the way it does when hit off the very end of the bat. Robbie Wilson bent down to field it and, tripping over his own feet, collided with his first baseman. The first baseman swiped at the ball as he fell, knocking it away from both men and into foul territory. Jesse reached first safely and Suit Simpson scored from third.
Jesse hadn’t struck out. The winning run had crossed home on what had been very generously scored an infield hit and RBI for the chief. Yet even as the team swarmed around him, slapping his back, hugging him, shaking his hand, the reality of what had happened wasn’t lost on him. No, he hadn’t struck out, but he’d come pretty damn close. And when he looked up into the stands for Diana, he noticed a roiling line of lead-gray clouds stretching across the horizon. The meaning of those clouds wasn’t lost on him, either.
Jesse skipped the customary postgame team trip to the Gull. Part of it was that he didn’t want to be in a crowd of drinkers. He had never been a celebratory kind of drinker, anyway. For Jesse, imbibing was kind of like a boxer’s roadwork: something to do every day whether he felt like it or not. It was part of him. Ritual. In this instance, Jesse’s decision was less about the drinking than his recent distraction. That little squib he hit toward the pitcher’s mound was bothering the hell out of him.

Jesse was a quietly confident man by nature, not a vain one. Though, like everyone else, he had his small vanities, and baseball was one. Playing ball, no matter that it was in a slow-pitch softball league, kept him connected to his glory days. Even at his age, he was by far the best player around. Reality had long ago forced him to accept that the shoulder injury he had suffered in Pueblo had finished his dreams of a major-league career, but his love of the game and the what-ifs stayed with him. Secretly he worried that whatever skills he still possessed might finally be fading. Now, pulling his old Explorer up to the station house, Jesse thought that fading skills might have been easier to deal with if he was still on friendly terms
with Johnnie Walker. He didn’t share that thought with Diana, sitting there right next to him.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said.

Molly was at the front desk. When she saw Jesse, she gave him a puzzled look.

“What are you doing here?”

Jesse pointed at his office door. “See, Crane, it says the words Chief’s Office on the glass? Every now and then I like to pretend that means something.”

She made a face. “But I heard you guys beat the fire department.”

She pumped her fist. “I bet Robbie Wilson is somewhere drowning his sorrows right about now.”

In every city and town, large or small, there was a natural rivalry between the police department and the fire department. Usually it’s as friendly a rivalry as that between lions and hyenas. And it was even less friendly in Paradise. Molly, in particular, despised Robbie Wilson.

Molly smiled. “And I heard you drove in the winning run. Sweet.”

Those words stung Jesse more than Molly could know. “Uh-huh.”

He changed the subject. “Anything going on?”

He expected no for an answer. As to the general lack of crime, Jesse chalked that up to good fortune and an uptick in the economy. Manpower was also a factor. After several months on patrol, Molly was back in her old spot, working the desk. Suit had fully recovered from his gunshot wounds and had taken Molly’s place on patrol. Gabe Weathers had finally returned after his long, painful rehab. And, most surprising of all, the town had let him take on a new officer.

“Yeah,” Molly said. “We had some more vandalism along Scrimshaw.”
“Tires again?”
Molly nodded. “Two cars parked a block apart.”
“Anyone see anything?”
“Nothing.”
“Who’s over there?”
“Alisha.”
“The new kid,” Jesse said. “What do you think of her?”
“Hey, if you think I’m going to bad-mouth another female officer—”
He cut her off. “Come on, Molly.”
“She’s very good, Jesse. I hate to say it, but you’ve got the knack for spotting people cut out for this work.”
“Thanks. Okay, I’m heading home. I’ll be in early. Who’s on the desk in the morning?”
“Alisha. I’m doing what you said, scheduling her so she learns the whole job.”
He nodded his approval, then turned with a wave good night. As he headed out to the Explorer, he didn’t like the feeling in his gut. Something about the vandalism was bothering him, something like the sight of those clouds at the softball field. Just as he reached his SUV, the sky opened up.
Full control of her body still eluded Diana Evans, not that she was so anxious to have it back. The intensity and frequency of these tremors and aftershocks were one of the perks of loving Jesse Stone. She had always enjoyed sex. But it had been this way with Jesse ever since that first drunken encounter in New York. Now that she was with him, she had trouble believing she had been willing to risk losing him. For the moment, though, she was content to feel his strong arms around her, to feel his body pressed to her back, and to listen to the crackle of far-off thunder. Rain pelted the windows as her muscles began to finally relax. She watched the wind make the tree shadows dance against bedroom walls.

When she felt Jesse stir, she said, “Could you get me a drink?”

“Sure.”

He rolled out of bed and headed downstairs to the bar. There was no protest about how he wasn’t drinking anymore. No complaints about how her drinking made it harder on him. That was one of the other things she loved about Jesse, his oneness. Molly called it his self-containment. But whatever you called it, Diana realized that some women would have been put off or intimidated by it. Not her.
She wasn’t looking for a man to complete her. She’d been looking for a complete man and she’d found him. And Jesse seemed as content with her as she was with him, seemed to love in her the same things she loved in him. Yet as she lay there in the dark, the room full of the raw scent of sex, of their sweat and her crushed herbs and cut-grass perfume, she worried about losing him. Losing him not to another woman, but to the memory of another woman. She wasn’t afraid about competing with a real woman, but it’s impossible to compete with a memory.

When Jesse walked back through the bedroom doorway, the ice rattling around in the glass, she sat up in bed. She shook out her hair, gathered it in her hand, and tossed it over one shoulder. He handed her the scotch.

“Don’t lick your fingers,” she said, a smile in her voice.

“No worries.”

Diana took a sip, sighed. “Jesse . . . I . . .” Her voice faded into the noise of the rain.

She had tried to have this conversation with him a couple of times since the invitation had arrived a few weeks back, but whenever she tried to put words to her fears, she felt a fool. She had tried waiting Jesse out, hoping he would bring it up to her. That wasn’t going to happen. If there was a negative to Jesse’s oneness, it was his silence. He was a man who kept his cards close to his vest, a man who liked to work things out for himself. Still, Diana was a trained investigator and, in her own way, as competent as Jesse. She couldn’t help but notice that Jesse had been different since he’d gotten the invitation to Jenn’s wedding.

She’d never been married, so she could only imagine what Jesse was going through. It wasn’t like Diana hadn’t gotten offers. She’d
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been tempted by some of them. She’d been in love before, just not like this. At the Bureau she had struggled so hard to get ahead, to be noticed for something other than her looks. In the end she had thrown it all away, but not unhappily.

“Come on, Evans,” Jesse said. “You want to say something. Say it.”

“Jenn.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uh-huh! What’s that even mean?”

“Okay,” he said. “What about Jenn?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Chief Stone. Ever since you got the invitation, you’ve been different.”

He didn’t answer right away because he didn’t want to sound defensive and because she was right. He’d spoken to Diana about Jenn, but superficially. He never enjoyed being around people who went on about their exes. He certainly tried not to do it. And in spite of all the hard work he’d done with Dix on his relationship with Jenn, he was also unsure of how to explain the tangled, dysfunctional two-step they had done for so many years. He still wasn’t completely sure he understood it himself.

“It’s complicated.”

She laughed. “No kidding. But you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Not tonight,” he said, cupping his hand behind her head and pulling her mouth to his.


He knew she was right. She guzzled her drink.

“Listen, Jesse, I’m going to use the facilities and brush my teeth. We don’t have to talk about Jenn tonight, but you do have to talk to her and answer the invitation for my sake, if not for yours.”
“How’s that?”

“There’s only room for two in my bed, Jesse: me and you. No room for memories and ghosts.”

She put the empty glass on the nightstand and stepped out of bed.