

# Robert B. Parker's Damned If You Do

A Jesse Stone Novel

Michael Brandman

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

Jesse Stone was sprawled out on the back porch love seat, having finished the last of his coffee, waiting for the caffeine to kick in.

The sun was steadily climbing toward its zenith in the cloudless sky. The spring air was flush with currents of warmth. In the distance, a pair of quarreling gulls screeched relentlessly, putting an end to the tranquil spring morning.

His cell phone rang, and he reached over and picked it up.

“We’ve got a body, Jesse,” Suitcase Simpson said. “Surf and Sand Motel. It’s bad.”

“I’m on my way,” Jesse said.

He press checked and holstered his Colt, closed up the house and headed out.

Jesse pulled his cruiser to a stop in front of the Surf & Sand Motel, a classic bungalow colony from the early 1950s, located a short walk from the beach.

At one time, the bungalows were a favorite vacation spot for middle-class families seeking a more affordable alternative to Paradise’s higher-end beach resorts. For decades it did a bustling summer business, but times changed. The bungalows fell into disfavor, then disrepair, and the tourist trade vanished.

Ownership had remained in the hands of the Sloan family. Jimmy Sloan, the eldest son of the original proprietors, still ran the place. He scraped by with the occasional bungalow rental and income from the motel’s bar and grill, which attracted a decidedly low-rent clientele. Jimmy was standing in front of the motel talking with Suitcase when Jesse arrived.

“Bungalow twelve,” Suitcase said. “Young woman. Stabbed to death.”

Jesse looked at Jimmy Sloan, who nodded his greeting.

“You knew her,” Jesse said.

“She’d been here before.”

“Hooker?”

“Yeah.”

“You see the john?”

“No. She paid for the room herself. He must have met her there.”

“Is it open?”

“Yeah.”

“Suit?”

“I came as soon as Jimmy phoned,” Suitcase said. “No one’s been in there except me.”

Jesse headed for bungalow twelve. Like its neighbors, it was a stand-alone unit, constructed at a time when redwood was inexpensive and plentiful. It had a shingled roof and a small porch with two metal rocking chairs and a table.

The flooring creaked audibly as Jesse climbed the three steps to the porch. The first thing he saw when he opened the door was a young woman’s body lying faceup on the bed. She appeared to have suffered a single stab wound to the heart that killed her instantly.

The bungalow’s interior was bleak. The patterned carpet was threadbare and the brass-framed double bed sagged in the middle from age and overuse. Fifties-era commercial furniture bore the scars of cigarette burns and spilled beverages. Yet despite the wear of the decades, the room was clean and orderly, as if someone had taken pains to make it presentable.

Jesse approached the body. The girl on the bed couldn’t have been much more than twenty. She might not have been beautiful in the classic sense, but she had certainly been attractive. Her dyed blond hair was cut in an early Jennifer Aniston–type shag, and a heavy hand with makeup made her seem older at first glance than she actually was. Powder attempted to camouflage skin blemishes, and bright red lipstick was now smeared across her face. She was naked, her slender body more that of a girl than a

woman.

Jesse looked at her more closely. Something about the girl caught his attention. He had the unsettling feeling that he had seen her before, but he couldn't quite place where. Which was unusual for him. He prided himself at being good with names and faces, and he generally remembered them all.

He stepped outside and took a deep breath. He looked at Suitcase.

"Call it in to State Homicide," he said. "We'll need a forensics team. See if Mel Snyderman is around and ask him to get here ASAP."

"I'm on it, Jesse."

Jesse walked over to Jimmy Sloan. Sloan was a tired-looking guy in his mid-sixties. He had thick bags beneath his eyes and his weak chin ran right into his thick neck. His paunch hung heavily over his belt. Angry veins on his nose hinted at a fondness for alcohol.

"She got a name," Jesse said.

"She's got the name she signed on the register," Sloan said. "I can't vouch for it being her real one, though."

"Credit card?"

"Cash."

"You said she was here before?"

"A couple of times."

"She use the same name each time?"

"I'd have to look it up."

Sloan started toward the motel office.

"Jimmy," Jesse said.

Sloan stopped.

"You playing host to hookers these days?"

He shrugged. "I gotta make a living, Jesse."

“So you look the other way?”

“I don’t see nothin’ wrong with it. Consenting adults. I rent rooms here. I don’t ask what goes on inside them.”

“The law doesn’t see it that way.”

Sloan didn’t say anything.

“She have a pimp?”

“I wouldn’t know. Girl paid for the room. I left her alone.”

“You might not ask what goes on inside your rooms, but you should know just the same. Hell, Jimmy, there’s a dead kid in there.”

“I’m one guy just trying to hang on, Jesse. Business isn’t good. The place is a hole. I’m this close to bankruptcy. What the fuck you want me to do?”

The sound of approaching sirens grew louder.

“Homicide might have an answer for that question.”

“What, they’re gonna put me out of business?”

“You should probably ask if they’re going to put you behind bars.”

“Behind bars? That’s a load of crap. Nothin’ like this ever happened before. I ain’t runnin’ no whorehouse here, Jesse. It’s still a respectable place. I didn’t kill anyone.”

Jesse didn’t say anything.

“I grew up in this motel. I worked hard here my entire life. I kept my nose clean. This place is all I got to show for it. The American dream? That’s for the bankers and the mortgage brokers. The unregulated big shots. For guys like me, it’s a nightmare.”

Sloan kicked at the patch of dirt in front of him.

“Fuck it,” he said. “Let ’em put me in jail. At least in jail I won’t have to worry about how I’m gonna pay my bills.”

“I’ll do what I can, Jimmy,” Jesse said.

“Yeah. I know you will, Jesse,” Sloan said.

Jesse was in his office, talking on the phone with Captain Healy.

“I’m drawing blanks,” Healy said. “I got nothin’.”

“Prints?”

“She doesn’t appear to be in the system.”

“Car?”

“Stolen. In Boston. Six months ago. Plates were lifted from a vehicle in Framingham.”

“Missing persons?”

“One or two possibles that turned out to be duds. She’s a Jane Doe, Jesse, and likely to remain one. My guys are rousting the pimps and making inquiries everywhere. Early results suggest she was an independent.”

“No leads regarding the john?”

“None. No one saw anything. No one heard anything. Guy probably parked off-site and hoofed it. So as to avoid being IDed.”

“I’ll sniff around up here,” Jesse said.

“I’m checking schools, apartments, anything that might be relevant, but this one feels like a dead end.”

“You’ll let me know if you find anything?”

“I will. But I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you,” Healy said and ended the call.

Jesse slowly returned the receiver to its cradle. He hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that he had seen the dead girl before.

“Is it possible that I knew her,” he mused.

He couldn’t come up with the answer.

He leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his cold coffee.

“Molly,” he said.

“No,” she said, calling out from her desk.

“No what?”

“Get your own.”

“How did you know what I was going to ask?”

“I know.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

She got up and walked into his office.

“You think I was born yesterday,” she said. “You think I don’t know that your coffee’s cold?”

“So?”

“So I made fresh.”

“I know. I can smell it.”

They looked at each other for a while. Neither of them made a move.

Jesse then stood and went for the coffeemaker. Once there, he poured himself a fresh cup and grabbed the last remaining donut from the box. He returned to his office to find Molly seated in the chair opposite his desk.

“Thanks,” he said.

“My pleasure. I see you couldn’t resist the stale donut.”

“A donut is a donut. Stale doesn’t necessarily mean bad.”

“Certainly not in your case.”

“Was there something you wanted, Molly?”

Jesse dunked the donut in his coffee and took a rather large bite of it. Molly sat watching him.



Finally she said, "I think you should know that Donnie Jacobs has gone missing. He wandered out last night and never came back."

"Anyone try to find him?"

"The security guards at the home had a shot at it."

"A bunch of morons," Jesse said.

"Needless to say, they didn't find him."

Jesse dunked his donut again and then finished it.

"Want me to run up to Winkie's and get you another box," she said.

"Would you?"

"Not in this lifetime."

Jesse looked at her.

Then he said, "I think I know where to find him."

"I had a feeling you might."

Jesse parked his cruiser in front of the yellow Cape Cod cottage on Peterman Drive. It was as he had last seen it, deserted and forlorn, the victim of a failing real estate market, unsold for nearly a year.

Donnie Jacobs had originally bought it for his bride, Dolly. Their daughter, Emma, grew up in it. Now it was empty.

Jesse climbed the steps to the porch where Donnie was sitting on an ancient wicker rocking chair. He looked older than his years. He had on blue-and-yellow golf pants, a faded short-sleeved polo shirt, and a worn Red Sox windbreaker with a slight tear in the right shoulder. His large brown eyes, once full of life, now reflected the freight of an illness that was inexorably robbing him of his essence.

“Morning, Donnie,” Jesse said, resting against the porch railing.

“Jesse?”

“None other than.”

“I thought it was you.”

“What are you doing here, Donnie?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t really know.”

“You came here on your own?”

“I guess I must have.”

“You walked?”

Donnie shrugged.

“I don’t remember, Jesse. My memory’s not worth a damn these days. Why are you here?”

“I got a call from Golden Horizons saying you had disappeared. I figured this was where you might be.”

“Damn. I must not have told them. Emma’s gonna be pissed.”

“You can’t just walk off like that, Donnie.”

“I’m trying, Jesse. It’s just that I get so confused sometimes. Last week I got dressed to go to the office and then I remembered that I don’t have an office anymore. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’m terrified by the thought of me sitting alone in some fucking home, not even knowing who I am.”

“No one’s going to allow that to happen, Donnie. That’s the reason you’re at Golden Horizons.”

“So that the people there can remind me of who I am?”

Jesse nodded.

“It’s so pathetic, Jesse. I used to be somebody. Everyone knew my name. Now half the time I don’t even know it myself.”

Tears started to roll down his cheeks.

“Does Emma know about this,” Donnie said.

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s so embarrassing. I’m her father, for God’s sakes. She shouldn’t have to be taking care of her father.”

“It is what it is, Donnie. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“If only Dolly were still alive, we’d still be here in the house and everything would be as it used to be.”

Donnie took a soiled handkerchief from the pocket of his golf pants and dabbed his eyes with it.

“So much for invincibility, huh, Jesse. All the years I spent as a CPA, making my living

using my mind, and then it turns out that my mind is the first thing to go. God's got some sense of humor, doesn't he?"

Jesse smiled.

"It's time to go back, Donnie."

"I don't want to go back, Jesse," he said. "I hate it there."

"Why would you hate it there?"

"I don't know. Sometimes they're not so good to me."

"How so?"

"One of the guys there. He doesn't like me. He does bad things to me."

"What kind of bad things?"

"Sometimes he ties me to the bed. By my wrists and my ankles. He leaves me like that for hours."

"Jesus."

"He forces me to take the pills."

"What pills?"

"The ones that make me sleep."

"At night?"

"During the day, too. I'm confused enough as it is. The pills make it worse."

"Can you point this man out to me," Jesse said.

"I think so."

"You point him out to me and I'll have a talk with him."

"How can that do any good?"

"Because I'm the police chief, that's how."

Donnie looked at him.

"How many years did I do your taxes, Jesse?"

"Except for this one, you did them every year since I've been in Paradise."

“And were you ever audited?”

“Never.”

“I guess I wasn’t so bad, huh.”

“You were a wizard, Donnie.”

Donnie smiled. Jesse glanced at his watch.

“I have to go,” he said. “Get your sorry ass out of that chair and I’ll drive you back.”

Donnie stood. Jesse noticed that he’d lost considerable weight from his nearly six-foot frame, which at one time had carried more than two hundred pounds. His once-full face was now gaunt-looking, and he moved slowly, exhibiting little confidence in his step.

“Jesus,” he said, stretching his arms above his head. “I’m as stiff as a board. I feel like I ran a marathon.”

“You practically did.”

“Did what?”

“You must have walked nearly ten miles.”

“I did? No wonder I’m so sore.”

Jesse smiled.

“It’s not going to get any better, is it, Jesse?”

“I don’t know, Donnie. I keep reading about all these newfangled meds that are meant to arrest the progress of the disease. Anything’s possible. I wouldn’t give up hope just yet.”

“That’s what Emma says.”

“Me, too,” Jesse said.

They headed for Jesse’s cruiser.

“Where are we going again,” Donnie said.

“Golden Horizons.”

“Is Dolly there?”

Jesse didn’t say anything.

“Oh. Yeah,” Donnie said.

Jesse took hold of Donnie’s arm and gently shielded his head as he helped him into the passenger seat and belted him in. He walked around the car to the driver’s side, got in, and together they drove away.