

ROBERT B. PARKER'S

**THE
HANGMAN'S
SONNET**

A JESSE STONE NOVEL

REED FARREL COLEMAN

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
New York

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

In death's black-lined womb I seek her grace.
The mirror has revealed my hangman's face.

—FROM *THE HANGMAN'S SONNET*

1

FULLY SOBER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN WEEKS, JESSE STONE WAS POUNDING THE ball into the worn pocket of his old glove. As he slammed the ball into the glove over and over again, he stared out his office window at Stiles Island and the morning sunlight reflecting off the dark blue waters surrounding it. He was trying to steady his hands and empty his mind.

Some men prayed the rosary. Some meditated. He wasn't one to overthink things. At least he hadn't been until Mr. Peepers had shot Suit. Jesse could trace his self-doubt and second-guessing back to that bloody day. How many times in the last few months had he traced a jagged red line from the day Suit was wounded to the day Diana was killed? How many times had he rehashed the events between those two incidents, questioning his decisions? And today those questions rang in Jesse's ears as loudly as they ever had.

"Jesse," Alisha said, sticking her head through his office door. "I didn't expect you in today, with Suit's wedding and all."

He didn't turn around but stopped pounding the ball. "Just making sure things are in place, with most of us scheduled to be at the wedding."

The truth was that he hadn't slept more than a few hours last night, nor did he want to be alone in his house with his memories and doubts.

“We’ll be fine. Nice tux,” she said, noting Jesse’s outfit hanging from his coatrack.

“Thanks.” He turned slightly, smiled. “What did you come in here for, anyway?”

“Since you’re in, there are some people here to see you. Should I send them in?”

He cursed under his breath. He was desperate for a drink but was duty bound to stay straight for the rest of the day.

“Who?”

“Roger Bascom.”

“Send him in.”

“He’s not alone. He’s got two other people with him.”

“What two other people?” he asked, his voice edgy, impatient.

Alisha shrugged. “Bascom didn’t bother introducing them, but one of them is stunning. She’s dressed in a few thousand bucks’ worth of clothes and jewelry. Her Christian Louboutin shoes and her makeup alone cost more than I make every two weeks. Believe me, Jesse, she’d get your attention if she was dressed in a potato sack.”

“The third member of the party?”

“An older man. Well dressed, but he reminds me of a used-car salesman.”

“Send them in,” Jesse said, placing his ball and glove on his desk.

Roger Bascom was the head of private security for Stiles Island. Stiles, largely a playground for the wealthy, was under Jesse’s jurisdiction. Most of the time there was little reason for his cops to venture over there to do anything but routine patrols. Early in Jesse’s tenure, there had been a failed assault on the island by a gang of thieves, during which the bridge to the mainland was blown up and several cops, guards, and criminals had been killed. Since that day, the islanders had seen fit to get more serious about protecting themselves and their assets.

Over the years there had been a gradual upgrading of security, in terms of both personnel and equipment.

Jesse didn't have much use for Bascom, a lean man with a military brush cut and a chilly demeanor. He took himself a little too seriously for Jesse's taste. Dealing with him was like dealing with a household appliance, only less enjoyable, but Jesse wasn't paying much attention to Bascom when the trio walked into the office.

Alisha's assessment of the woman with Bascom was spot on. She wasn't yet thirty, drop-dead gorgeous, with hair that shone in the light like a blackbird's feathers in the sun. She had intense green eyes flecked with gold. Beautiful eyes, but intelligent and assessing. She had goddess cheekbones and a thin sculpted body that was only enhanced by the cut of her suit, the height of her heels, and her taste in jewelry. Alisha had gotten it right about the third member of the party as well. In his seventies, too tanned, with a head of wispy Einstein hair, he wore a light brown suede jacket over a white silk shirt, the open collar of which exposed a tangle of furry white chest hair. He also had on expensively ripped jeans and running shoes.

Jesse stood and got a third chair to add to the two that permanently faced his desk. He asked all three to sit and then went back behind his desk. He sat, too, keeping his shaky hands out of sight.

He nodded. "Roger, what's going on?"

"Chief Jesse Stone, meet Bella Lawton and Stan White. The chief prefers to be called Jesse." Bascom made a disapproving face.

Jesse ignored that and nodded to them. He saw that Bella Lawton's eyes focused on his baseball glove. Bascom noticed her notice.

"Chief Stone was a professional baseball player. In the Dodgers' system, I believe."

"Uh-huh. Now that we all know one another's names and you know I played ball, what can I do for you?"

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Jesse saw Bella's eyes shifting from his glove to his tuxedo.

"One of my officers is getting married later this morning, so if you don't mind, can we get to the point?"

The three visitors looked at one another as if silently arguing about who would answer the question. Finally, Stan White spoke up.

"Terry Jester," he said, as if those four syllables were self-explanatory. Jesse nodded, thinking that maybe they were.

2

STAN WHITE STARED AT HIM IMPATIENTLY, MISTAKING JESSE'S SILENCE FOR ignorance. That was usually a grave mistake. Jesse didn't mind. He knew that in most situations it was better to be underestimated, and cops were always being underestimated. Still, Jesse kept quiet. Silence could be a cop's best friend. He enjoyed watching White squirm. As he did, he took sideways glances at Bascom and Bella. Bascom was his usual unreactive Frigidaire self. Bella was trying unsuccessfully not to smile, and her smile did nothing to damage Jesse's opinion of her looks.

White had had enough of Jesse's silence and repeated himself, only louder. "Terry Jester! You've heard of Terry Jester, haven't you?"

"Who?"

White thought that if he kept repeating Jester's name over and over, it might get through to Jesse. He stood up, wagging his finger at Jesse. "Terry Jester. *The* Terry Jester."

Jesse shrugged and tilted his head like a confused puppy. "Sorry. I got nothing."

White turned to Bascom. "Is this guy for real?"

“Relax, Stan,” Bascom said, shaping his mouth into something that passed for a smile.

Bella said, “I think Chief Stone—Jesse is . . . I believe the technical term would be *busting your balls*. Is that right?”

If she was trying to make a good impression, she was doing a hell of a job.

Jesse laughed his first meaningful laugh in months. “I’m sorry, Mr. White. I know who Terry Jester is. I played ball. I didn’t live in a cave. Folks around here call him the Boston Bob Dylan.”

But instead of calming down, White was apoplectic.

“Bob Dylan isn’t fit to kiss Terry’s tuchus. Until Terry went into semiretirement, their record sales were about the same. And as a poet, Dylan couldn’t hold a candle to Terry. Dylan the genius . . . get outta here. You wanna see where ‘Mr. Tambourine Man’ comes from and all those swirling, rapid-fire words from Zimmerman, go get yourself a copy of *Mexico City Blues*, for crissakes! Terry Jester never had to rip off Jack Kerouac.”

“Take it easy, Stan,” Bella said, grabbing his forearm and urging him back into his seat. She turned to Jesse. “You’ll have to forgive Stan. He’s been Terry’s manager for—how long has it been?”

“Fifty-three years.” White puffed out his chest, a wistful look in his eyes. “We were just two kids, Terry and me, bumming around Greenwich Village then, not even eighteen. We didn’t have two nickels to rub together, but we did gigs, had fun. I could sing a little, write a little, but Terry, Terry . . . He had the magic. He had the gift, the looks. Me . . . I had business sense and some family connections. One thing led to another and . . .”

Jesse said, “All very fascinating, Mr. White, but—”

“Stan, please.” His agitation was suddenly replaced by a winning smile and polite charm. “Please forgive my outburst. Old men get impatient.”

“No need to apologize, Stan, but what has all this to do with the Paradise Police Department?”

White said, “It’ll be all over the local media soon about Terry and the album, so we thought we should give you a heads-up is all.” White had leaned forward and whispered the words “the album” like he was giving Jesse top secret information.

That got Jesse’s attention. “The album?”

White raised his palms, winked at Jesse, and said, “You’ll see. Terry might even sing a few songs from the album. That would be a once-in-a-lifetime thing.”

Before Jesse could ask anything else, Bascom spoke up, “A month from tomorrow, Mr. White will be throwing a gala seventy-fifth birthday party for Mr. Jester at the Wickham estate on Stiles Island. There will be several celebrity guests in attendance. Some will be arriving by chartered yacht from New York City, but most will be coming by car through town. You will no doubt want to have your entire department on duty that weekend and alert your auxiliary as well. Mayor Walker has given Mr. White and Ms. Lawton her assurance that you will give us your full cooperation.”

Jesse bristled at that. Not only was Bascom condescending to dictate how Jesse should deploy his department, but they’d gone over his head, directly to the mayor. Beyond that, the last thing Jesse wanted to deal with in high summer in a seaside town like Paradise was a celebrity invasion. As an L.A. cop, he’d seen what nightmares star-studded events created even in a town that lived for them and was equipped to handle them. Jesse kept his cool, ignoring Bascom and talking directly to Bella Lawton.

“That makes you PR,” he said, nodding at Bella.

She smiled her electric-white smile. “Very good, Jesse. Yes, I’ll be handling all the traditional, digital, and social media for the gala. And

with all due respect to Roger's understated assessment of the attendees, we anticipate several megastars from across the artistic spectrum to be there. We're still waiting on Jay-Z and Beyoncé, Clooney, and Jagger's people to give us a firm yes. But those are only some of the A-listers we're looking at."

Had he not been so desperately craving a drink at that moment, Jesse might have chided Bella for giving herself away. He had always been good at seeing the truth beneath the bullshit. It was one of the qualities that made him a great cop. What Bella had really said was that the response to the invitations wasn't what they had hoped for and they were going to put on a full-court press. *Press* being the operative word.

"Okay, thank you for notifying me," Jesse said. "I'll be in touch. If you don't mind, I've got to get ready for this wedding."

Bascom just stood and left. White, confused by Jesse's terse dismissal, hesitated for a beat or two, then followed Bascom toward the office door. Only Bella lingered.

White called to her, "Bella, are you coming?"

"Go on, Stan. I'll be out in a second." She waited for White to leave before turning back to Jesse. "I guess I overplayed my hand there with the A-list-megastar routine. How did you know?"

"I worked LAPD for a long time and my ex-wife was an actress. Not many PR ploys I haven't seen."

"Sorry, Jesse, I meant no disrespect."

"I can take it."

She leaned across his desk. "I just bet you can."

A loud few seconds of silence followed as they both let Bella's comment hang there between them. She placed a business card on the desk, took a pen out of her bag, and wrote something on the back of the card.

"Listen, Jesse, I might have oversold it, but we really are expecting a crowd and there will be some marquee names among them. So please

don't totally discount what we've said. That's my cell number on the back of the card. Call me . . . anytime."

When she left, Jesse picked up the card, but he was too preoccupied to care. Instead, he pulled out his side drawer and looked for the bottle he knew wasn't there. It was only another few hours, he told himself, and then went back to pounding the ball into his glove.

3

HE'D ALREADY PULLED THE DRESSER DRAWERS OUT ONE AT A TIME, RUNNING his latex-gloved hands through the old lady's clothes. He'd turned the drawers over, searching for a hidden key, a note with instructions, or an envelope. Something. Anything. Now he moved on to her bedroom closet, gagging at the lavender, lilac, orange peel, and clove stench of the big potpourri sachet on the shelf. It wasn't just the potpourri getting to him. It was the way the mildew and camphor mixed and clashed with each other. Maybe it wasn't that at all. Since coming into her bedroom, he hadn't been able to escape the memories of his own grandma. Memories of how she used to powder herself up and pile on the clownish face paint over her sagging chicken skin, how she sprayed on sickly-sweet old-lady perfume to cover up the telltale scent of her own decay. He couldn't escape the feeling that she was watching him, judging him, especially when he touched the old lady's underthings. That really gave him the creeps.

After patting down her dresses, her coats, and inspecting each of her shoes, he grabbed a chair. He stood on it and began to remove things from the shelf: hatboxes, cardboard boxes, photo albums, letters bound together with faded red ribbon. This was more like it. He tossed each

item onto the bed, gladly leaving the white satin sachet bag behind. As he stepped off the chair, there was a knock at the bedroom door. Heart thumping, he froze, one foot still on the chair seat, the other on the floor. He laughed at himself for reacting. The cops wouldn't have knocked and, unless the old biddy had Houdini skills, she was still tied up in the basement.

"What is it, Hump?"

A linebacker-sized man in his forties with a face pitted like a bad country road stepped into the bedroom. Six-foot-three and two-forty, going soft around the middle, he looked like he'd forgotten to take his shoulder pads off after practice.

"King," he said. "Why are you dumping out the old girl's panties and stuff on the bed?"

King shook his head at his ex-cellmate. There was a reason everyone who knew him called him Hump. Hump was a good guy and somebody you wanted on your side in a prison fight, but he wasn't the brightest gem in the jewelry box.

"Yeah, Hump. The thing we're looking for can be hidden anywhere. Don't pass nothing up. Look under lamps, ashtrays, under the phone. Come on, we went over all this already, right? It's worth ten grand to us."

"But why are you dumping—"

"Because I'm looking for a key, a safe combination, a note with numbers on it . . . like that. The man didn't say we would definitely find it here, only that it might be here."

"Okay, King. I got it."

"Hump, I'm glad I cleared that up for you, but why'd you come up here in the first place?"

"The old gal."

"What about her?"

"I don't think she's doing too good."

King raced right past Hump, taking the steps two at a time, and barreled into the spindly-legged table at the base of the stairs. The collision knocked a white-and-blue speckled ewer and basin off the table. The antique porcelain smashed onto the wide plank flooring and cracked into a hundred nasty-looking shards. He didn't stop to check out the mess he'd made, hoping the job wouldn't end up the same way. He turned down the hallway and headed for the rickety basement stairs. They creaked and moaned under his weight.

"Hey, lady! Lady, you all right?" he called out to her even before he reached the basement slab.

She didn't answer. They'd been pretty gentle with her, up to a point. Sure, they'd made a show of their handguns, threatening to use them on her if she didn't behave. Maybe Hump had tugged her white hair a little too hard and King had had to slap her when she started squawking. The blow split her lip and she bled a lot more than he expected a dried-up old prune like her to bleed. Her skin was so brittle, so papery and white, she didn't even look like she had any blood in her. But they'd been gentler with her after that, careful not to break her birdlike bones when they tied her to a lally column. They'd used duct tape to bind her hands behind her and to wrap her ankles to the base of the pole, making sure not to cut off her circulation. When she started squawking again, Hump had shoved a balled-up sock in her yap and covered it with a strip of tape.

King called to her again. "Lady!"

But when his eyes adjusted to the dim light and he saw her head slumped, body sagging, he knew it was a waste of breath. The only voice she would hear now was St. Peter's. King felt her neck for a pulse even though he knew he wouldn't find one. When he pulled the tape away from her mouth, King was sickened by the stink of vomit. The old lady had puked into her gag and choked to death, or maybe it had been a

combination of things. Maybe it had just been her time. What the hell did he know about it?

There was a loud pounding as Hump came down the stairs.

"She okay?" he asked.

"Dead."

He crossed himself. "Oh, jeez, King. We killed the old lady. You said this wasn't that kinda job."

"Well, pal, she's dead, and unless you know how to unscramble eggs or raise the dead, we better find what we came to find."

"What should we do with the old lady?"

"We'll figure that out later. For now, leave her. She's not going anywhere."

Hump shrugged, turned, and went back upstairs.

When Hump was gone, King prayed. Not for the old lady, but for himself.