

ROBERT B. PARKER'S STONE'S THROW

One

Sunny Randall, with whom Jesse Stone was currently in a relationship time-out, asked him once what he missed the most about baseball.

"Everything," he said.

"Even though it broke your heart?"

"Even though," he said.

They'd been walking on the beach in Paradise, a couple miles from where he lived.

"Do you ever miss drinking the way you miss baseball?" Sunny said.

"Let me answer you this way," Jesse said. "The worst days I ever had because of drinking were the worst days I ever had. The worst day I ever had in baseball, at least until the one when I got hurt, was great."

That day had been in Albuquerque, Triple-A ball, last stop before the majors, when he'd landed on his shoulder and had his dreams of making the show blow up along with his shoulder.

"What about sex?" Sunny asked.

Jesse had grinned.

"Right here?" Jesse said. "Damn it, I knew I should have brought a blanket."

"You know what I mean," she said. "Baseball or sex?"

"Sex with you, or sex in general?"

"In general."

"Baseball," he said.

"Seriously?"

"Both pleasurable activities, more with you than anyone I've ever known," he said. "But baseball wasn't just what I did. Was who I was."

"I thought being a cop was who you are."

"Now it is," he said.

It was one of the last times they'd been together before she went to Los Angeles on a case a few weeks later, unsure of when she would return. She'd been hired by an old boyfriend of hers named Tony Gault, a big-time talent agent Out There whom she still refused to classify as having

been her boyfriend, describing him more accurately, she said, as an itch she'd occasionally felt the urge to scratch. Jesse had met Gault, who wasn't much different from a lot of Hollywood phonies he'd met when he was still working Robbery Homicide for the LAPD. He'd told Sunny, and more than once, that the next time she had a similar itch she should consider ointment.

But they both knew they hadn't taken this time-out because of the case, or because she was there right now and he was here. They'd decided to take a break because they both knew they needed one. They loved each other, Jesse was certain of that. But she still loved her ex-husband, who had recently helped save her life from some very bad Russians on a case she'd been working. In the aftermath of that, she told Jesse that despite her best intentions, she was still feeling an old, almost gravitational pull in her ex's direction, no matter how hard she fought it.

"I don't pull," he told her.

"Or push."

"Nor that."

"Why I love you," Sunny said.

"Just not enough?"

"I didn't say that," she said.

"Didn't have to," Jesse said.

"Let me ask another question about baseball," Sunny had said that night.

"As a way of changing the subject?"

"As a way of circling back to the original."

"Do I need a lawyer before answering?"

"You hate lawyers," Sunny had said.

"Well," Jesse said. "There's that."

"Are you as happy with me as you were playing baseball?"

"Right now," he said, "or in general?"

"In general," she said. "And I don't need to remind the witness that he's still under oath."

When Jesse took too long to answer she'd said, "A full stop like that could hurt a girl's feelings."

"You didn't even let me answer."

"Didn't have to," Sunny had said.

He had been thinking a lot about baseball the past few days, even more than usual, because he had to decide whether or not to play in the Paradise Men's Softball League, about to start up in a few weeks. The men's league, the kind of bar league he used to play in when he was in L.A., wasn't like real baseball, Jesse knew that. Or even close. But close enough. And all the ball he had now. He couldn't make the kind of throw from shortstop that he used to be able to make when he still had the arm. Sometimes in the morning, when he was sitting on the side of the bed, he would rotate his right shoulder and hear what sounded like loose coins rattling around in a clothes dryer.

But he could still make that throw better than even young studs in the league just out of college. Jesse smiled now, to himself, as he walked the same beach he'd walked with Sunny, just walked it in the night, with her Out There and him here. Knowing that's the way all old guys thought, all the old ballplayers who were sure they would have made the show if things had broken differently for them.

But I would have made it.

He was on another one of his late-night long walks. He had been taking a lot of them lately, more since Sunny had left. He was still running a few miles a day, a few days a week. But it was getting harder for him to do that, because his knees had begun to bark at him the way his shoulder did. More old-man shit that he knew wasn't going to get any better, or easier, the older he got. Whoever had said it in Hollywood had been right. Getting old wasn't for sissies.

Especially when they were old ballplayers.

These were the things you thought about out here, the things you couldn't stop yourself from remembering, sometimes coming at you like the waves.

But it was better for him to be in motion than sitting at home, the time of night in his drinking days when he'd fall asleep in front of the television, in his chair or on the floor, passed out after trying to watch a Red Sox game. Ballgames on television still made him think about drinking. But, then, what the hell didn't? Even thinking about softball made him think about drinking, that first cold one when the game was over that Suitcase Simpson always described as "the best beer of the week."

So he walked, sometimes through the streets of Paradise, sometimes along the water. Tonight he had decided on the water, Jesse making it all the way down to the piece of land, high up above him to his right, that had been pulling the town apart, the one nicknamed The Throw.

It was the last and biggest and absolutely most valuable piece of oceanfront property in Paradise, Mass, having been put up for sale by the rich asshole Thomas Lawton III, who owned it, now being fought over by two even richer men who wanted to buy it from him and develop the shit out of it. And because it was their stated plan to develop it, the sale had to be approved by the Board of Selectmen.

One bidder was Billy Singer, Vegas guy. The other was Ed Barrone, a Boston developer who'd recently built two of the first non-tribal casinos in Massachusetts. Both had made no secret of the fact that they wanted to build a hotel and casino at The Throw. Both had been hard-lobbying the Board of Selectmen to approve the sale of the land, before each submitted his final bid. Both had spent an insane amount of money advertising in local media, promising jobs that both men swore would finally bring the town's economy back from the damage COVID-19 had done. Doing what guys like them always did, no matter the prize:

Showing they'd be willing to fight to the death over dirt.

Jesse made his way up there now, first through the dunes, then the long path that led up to the eastern end of the property, which had one of the great views of the ocean in Massachusetts, or anywhere else.

It was where they'd found the first shallow grave about a month ago, with this miniature headstone, made of lightweight concrete, next to it:

R.I.P. Paradise

The headstone had the date the town had officially been incorporated in the nineteenth century, and this year's date. The responsibility for the graves-or credit-had been accepted freely by the local group, mostly kids, known as the "SOB." Completely without irony. Or maybe just a little bit. Save Our Beach. They really saw themselves as saving Paradise and its ecosystem from these two grubby developers, no matter how many jobs Singer and Barrone were promising. The owner of The Throw, Lawton, the last living member of the Lawton family, had another name for them. He had taken to derisively calling them "the tree huggers," and constantly hectoring Jesse to find every one of them vandalizing his property and throw their asses in jail.

"For digging holes?" Jesse'd said to him the last time he'd come barging into Jesse's office. "You mean before the bulldozers come rolling through your property like the First Army?"

All in all, Jesse thought, he needed an old-fashioned land grab like this the way he needed to fall off the goddamn wagon. Jesse knew that Singer had hated Barrone from the time Ed Barrone had tried to invade his turf in Vegas. The feud between the two men only got worse when Barrone got the casinos in Taunton and Springfield that Singer wanted. Barrone hated Singer for being a mobbed-up Vegas guy thinking he could come east and throw his weight and money around as a way of getting even with him. They were both the real SOBs in the story, to Jesse's way of thinking. The only thing on which Singer and Barrone agreed was that each man hated the tree huggers as much as Thomas Lawton did, because the kids weren't just digging graves, they were attacking all of them on social media on a daily basis, vowing to continue their fight even if the Board of Selectmen had voted to approve the sale, which everybody in Paradise assumed it would in the end; there was simply too much money at stake, too many jobs. By now

the whole thing had turned the whole town meaner than the place Jesse called Tweeterville. Choosing sides on the sale of the land. Choosing sides on the men bidding to buy it.

The Throw felt serene to Jesse in the night, almost like sacred ground, with the sound of the ocean behind Jesse now and the cloudless sky full of stars. In this moment it was impossible for him to believe that a piece of earth as beautiful and previously undeveloped had turned, at least symbolically, into a war zone.

Jesse had his flashlight out, and now spotted what looked to be a new grave up ahead, just without a headstone next to it this time.

Shit, he thought.

Not because the tree huggers had come back. Just because a new grave meant more work for him, because their latest effort would mean another visit from young Thomas Lawton in the morning, and a continuation of his bitch-a-thon.

Only this grave, Jesse saw when he stared down into it, was different.

This one had a body inside it.

His boss's.

Two

"The mayor shot himself in the middle of The Throw?" Suitcase Simpson said when he got there.

"To be determined," Jesse said.

Neil O'Hara. Not just Jesse's boss. His friend. One who'd ended up in the middle of the war between Singer and Barrone and the middle of the campaign about the sale. One who'd been fighting the deal in vain, trying to convince his constituents that there were more important things than money.

"And I'd finally started thinking of him as the mayor," Suit said.

For as long as anybody could remember, the true mayor of Paradise had been the president of the Board of Selectmen. They had finally decided the year before to make it an elective office. Neil had then won the town's first-ever mayoral race, Gary Armistead running as his deputy. They had won by a lot. People liked Neil O'Hara.

Just not everybody.

Jesse said, "Doesn't do him much good now."

By now, Jesse had done everything by the numbers. Called 911. Called Ellis Munroe, Paradise's new district attorney and no friend to the Paradise Police Department, who'd called Brian

Lundquist at the state police, who'd sent two of his guys over. For once, Jesse and Munroe had managed to get through a conversation without arguing. He had made no secret, from the time he'd gotten the job, that he was the most powerful law enforcement figure in the town, and in the county. Not Jesse. And had made it clear to Jesse that it was a new day in law enforcement in America, maybe he'd noticed, it had been in all the papers, and that the days when prosecutors let cops make up the rules as they went along were long gone.

"I know you don't need my guys," Lundquist had said on the phone. "But my boss got the ass last time we didn't have our people there first thing."

It had been when Lily Cain had shot herself, on the other side of town. A member of one of Paradise's royal families, the way Thomas Lawton was.

"We've all got bosses," Jesse said.

"You don't," Lundquist said.

Jesse had called Dev Chadha, the medical examiner. Called Molly Crane, knowing there would be holy hell to pay later in the morning if he didn't, and Suit, and Gabe Weathers. They all knew how crucial the first two hours were, that missed evidence-whether it was a suicide or a homicide-could be devastating to an investigation later on. Suit liked to tell Jesse that he didn't just do things by the book, he acted sometimes like he'd written the book.

It was past two in the morning now, a couple hours after Jesse had discovered the body and the SIG P365, the expensive XL model, next to Neil's right hand in the dirt.

R.I.P., Jesse thought.

The body of Neil O'Hara had finally been bagged and loaded into the van and taken to Dev's lab. Jesse had once again reminded Suit and Molly that only amateurs wanted a body transported away from the scene as quickly as possible.

"Can I do the rest of it?" Molly Crane said, grinning at him. "By now, pretty sure I know it by heart."

"Knock yourself out," Jesse said.

"You want your ME's eyes on the scene as long as possible," Molly said.

Suit picked it up from there.

"Can't have too many sets of eyes," Suit said.

"Am I really that entertaining to the two of you?" Jesse said.

"Endlessly," Molly said.

They had been through this enough times by now, Jesse and Molly and Suit, to know that they weren't disrespecting the victim, or his memory, with humor or snark. They weren't trying to normalize what had happened, whatever had happened, and how Neil O'Hara, a good guy, had ended up here. But Neil wasn't Jesse's friend now, or mayor. Or husband of Kate. He was their vic. He was whatever case number Molly would give him when they were at the station later, and what was going to be a shitshow began almost immediately.

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