

Robert B. Parker's Fool's Paradise

by Mike Lupica

One

Jesse Stone opened his eyes even before the alarm on his phone started to chirp, 5:58 a.m. Sunday, Fourth of July weekend, cold sober. Stone cold. Private joke. His drinking never was. Jesse had never been a happy drunk, or a funny one. Just a drunk.

Once he would still have been drunk at this time of the morning, trying to decide whether he was waking up or coming to, and likely scared shitless about what he might have done the night before.

Good times.

Now he set the alarm for six, seven days a week.

Last night had been another early one for him, after the relighting of the marquee above the entrance to the Paradise Cinema. The theater had burned to the ground the year before. But somehow that day the volunteers from the Paradise Fire Department had managed to save the marquee. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, a not-for-profit committee had been formed by Lily Cain, part of the town's royal and ruling class. It was called Friends of Paradise. No better friend than Lily, who, being Lily, had quickly raised enough money to invade New Hampshire. The Paradise Cinema had been rebuilt in less than a year and had officially reopened last night.

Jesse had looked around the crowd during the ceremony and seen all these happy faces lining Main Street. So many more faces of color than there had been in Paradise when he'd first arrived here. The town wasn't just more diverse than it had been twenty years ago. He knew it was better because of the diversity, livelier and more welcoming. Even though he knew people of color still scared the money in town, and there was still a boatload of that.

But for this one night, they all stood shoulder to shoulder on Main Street, cheering the reopening of a theater that always looked to Jesse as if it had been a fixture in Paradise almost as long as the ocean. It always amazed Jesse how little it took to make other people happy.

Molly Crane, his deputy and friend, had seen him staring into the crowd before Lily Cain threw the switch to light the marquee.

"Looking for potential perps?" she said.

"Nope," he said. "Just trying to figure out why something like this could make this many people feel this good."

"Maybe because these people don't think feeling good is against the law in Paradise, Massachusetts," she said.

"I'm the chief," Jesse said. "I should know shit like that."

"Not about being happy," Molly said.

"I think of myself as a work in progress," he said.

She'd sighed and said, "So much work."

Fireworks had lit the sky as soon as the ceremony ended. Most of Paradise had gone out to party after that, in bars, all the way to the beach. Jesse had gone home to bed. Alone. But sober.

Sober, he knew, was why he was still the chief of police. Alone was because he'd arrived at the decision, at least for the time being, that he was about as good at romantic relationships as he had been with scotch.

Molly Crane had always said he was the lonest man she'd ever known.

His phone started chirping again. Incoming call this time.

The display said Suit.

"Got a body at the lake," Suitcase Simpson said.

Jesse had made Suit a detective at the same time he'd officially made Molly his deputy, and had gotten both of them raises, despite the objections of the

cheapskates on the Board of Selectmen. When Jesse had first met Luther Simpson, nicknamed Suitcase after an old-time ballplayer, he'd been a former high school football player, a local who'd just drifted into police work, after he'd taken the test, passed it. Molly had been working the desk and acting as a dispatcher. Now Suit had grown into being a terrific cop, even if Jesse still looked at him and saw the big, open-faced kid he'd met originally. Molly had grown into being a first-rate cop herself, in addition to being completely indispensable.

"Man or woman?"

Jesse sat up.

"Man."

"How?" Jesse said.

"Looks like a bullet to the back of the head," Suit said. "Or two. Lot of blood."

"ID?"

"Not yet. But we just got here. I wanted to call you first thing."

"You're a detective," Jesse said. "It means you're authorized to start detecting without me."

"Just going by the book," Suit said. "Yours."

"Floater?"

"No, praise Jesus and all of His apostles."

Suit now knew more about floaters than he'd ever wanted to, things that Jesse had learned a long time ago in Los Angeles, about how bodies in the water first sank and then eventually came back to the surface as the air in them was replaced with gas that inflated them like toy dolls. The longer they had been in the water, especially seawater, the better the chance that fish and crabs and sea lice had been feeding on them, turning them into something you never forgot.

Suit told Jesse exactly where he was at the lake, a part of the closest thing Paradise had to a Central Park, close to town, full of wooded areas, but somehow feeling remote at the same time. It was on the west side of Paradise, next to the

field where Jesse still played in the Paradise Men's Softball League. What he called the Men of Summer. It's where they'd once found a teenage girl named Elinor Bishop. Jesse had seen more than his share of floaters when he'd worked Robbery Homicide. Suit had never seen one before Elinor Bishop. He still said he'd rather be caught wearing women's clothing than catch another floater.

He'd admitted later to Jesse that the first chance he got that night, and hoping that nobody else noticed, he went into the woods and nearly puked up a lung.

Jesse told Suit he was on his way, and ended the call. Then he was out of bed, having already decided not to shower, getting into the jeans he'd left hanging over the chair next to his bed, grateful there was no hangover for him to manage. Before the lighting of the marquee, he had been at an AA meeting in Marshport, the next town over from Paradise. At one point the speaker had said having a hangover was like having a second job.

Jesse was still making it. Day at a goddamn time. Still on the job as chief. Maybe that was all the proof he needed that the Higher Power they talked about in AA really was looking out for him. Serving and protecting him.

Jesse felt a different kind of buzz now. One that had never had anything to do with booze. Just cop adrenaline and a dead body making him feel more alive than he had in a while.

He went into the kitchen, poured some coffee into a travel mug, mixed in cream and sugar, and headed out the door. Before he did, he stopped, having caught his reflection in the mirror in his living room.

Toasted himself with the mug as he did.

First of the day, Jesse Stone thought.

Two

Jesse drove his new black Ford Explorer through the empty streets of Paradise, the theater marquee looking like some kind of ghost light sitting on top of morning fog. Suit had told him it was time to upgrade, that this year's Explorer got a better "pursuit rating" than Jesse's model, that they had beefed-up suspensions and

performed better, and that you could get them even more easily prewired than before for police radios and what Suit called "all the other fun cop shit."

Jesse had told him to stop, he was sold, had gone to the Board, and had been issued the Explorer he was driving now. He got them to issue Suit one, too. Molly said she was sticking with her old Cherokee.

She'd just shook her head at the time and said, "Boys with their souped-up toys."

As Jesse got to the lake he saw the flashing blue lights, like a different kind of light show now in the first hour after sunrise. He parked the car, got out, and ducked underneath the yellow crime tape, noticing Suit's Explorer parked next to the medical examiner's van and two other patrol cars. No onlookers here yet, no cell phone pictures being taken. Soon, though. Word would get out. It always did. In the old days, before the advent of digital portable radios, there had briefly been an app people in Paradise could download onto their phones that live-streamed the PPD's police scanners. All in the name of transparency. Jesse had shut it down first chance he got.

Yeah, Jesse always thought, what the world needs.

More fucking transparency.

He walked toward the water. The new state medical examiner, Dev Chadha, and Suit were standing over the body. Peter Perkins was there, too. He'd been with Jesse on the PPD as long as Molly and Suit had, and hadn't even changed after his morning run. He was in a faded Patriots Super Bowl T-shirt and gray sweatpants and New Balance sneakers the color of tangerines, already walking the immediate area. Gabe Weathers was doing the same. Jesse just assumed both Peter and Gabe had heard on the new portable radios that had been issued to everybody in the department. Now they were both taking photographs and video with their phones, trying to get as complete a picture of the scene as possible.

There were twelve men and women in the Paradise Police Department. A third of them were here now, before seven on a Sunday morning. They all understood why. It never mattered whether it was a big city or a small town. Murder was still the main event.

The body was still facedown about twenty yards from the water's edge, the back of his head matted with blood that did not yet appear completely dry. Jesse didn't know how many bodies there had been for him in his cop life, in L.A. and here. Had never tried to process his personal body count. Just knew there had been too many. The first one had been a shooting victim on a side street near Dodger Stadium. Slumped over the wheel of a car, two bullets to the back of the head. Hector Rodriguez. The shit you remembered. He'd wanted to throw up, too, but knew if he did he would never hear the end of it. Death before dishonor.

"You call I-and-I yet?" Jesse said to Suit.

The Identification and Information unit from the State Police, with an office in Marshport now, was attached to the new police lab there.

Suit grinned.

"I might have waited until I saw the chief's vehicle arriving at the crime scene," Suit said.

"But they're on their way?" Jesse said.

Suit was still grinning. "Well, yeah, now they are."

Jesse turned to Dev.

"How'd you get here so fast?"

"Don't sleep," he said. "Got no life other than this job right now." Now he grinned.

"And this is the first homicide I've caught since I got this job."

"No ID?" Jesse said to Suit.

Suit shook his head. He was wearing jeans but had put on a blue PPD windbreaker over a polo shirt. Jesse had never met a cop happier to no longer be in uniform than Luther "Suitcase" Simpson.

"Nothing in the back pockets of his jeans, or in the general vicinity," Suit said. "Dev and I were waiting for you to roll him over."

"You didn't have to wait."

"You suddenly stop being a control freak overnight?" he said. "I need to tell Gabe and Peter."

It was part of the ongoing dynamic between the two of them. Even before the son Jesse didn't know he had, Cole, had shown up from Los Angeles, he'd treated Suit like a son. But Suit constantly reminded him that he was about to turn forty and didn't need Jesse to still hold his hand on the job.

Suit had still waited for Jesse to show up and take full control of the scene. Usually the Staties would take charge of the investigation as soon as they showed up. But both Jesse and Suit knew the rules of engagement were different in Paradise. Jesse had the same standing with Brian Lundquist, the chief homicide investigator with the Massachusetts State Police, that he'd had with Healy, Lundquist's predecessor, now retired. Neither one of them had ever treated Jesse Stone like just another small-town cop. Mostly because they knew better.

"The control thing is just one more habit I'm trying to quit," Jesse said.

"I'm gonna have to see some evidence of that before I believe it," Suit said.

"And don't do it all at once," Dev said. "You risk decompression syndrome."

"Decompression syndrome?" Jesse said.

"The bends," Dev said.

Jesse knew the drill by now. They all did. They weren't showing disrespect to the dead by standing over the body and talking some cop smack with one another. Somehow it just made standing over the body easier for them all to handle. Just more rituals of the job. Ones you'd never find in any book.

"Who found him?" Jesse asked Suit.

"Woman who lives between the lake and the park," Suit said. "Christina Sample. I played football with her brother Tommy in high school."

Sometimes Jesse thought Suit had played football with every male in Paradise who was around his age.

"Christina was out early walking her dog," Suit continued. "She's pretty upset. She thought it was somebody who might have been sleeping it off after partying too hard last night."

Jesse turned to Dev.

"Lot of blood," Jesse said.

"Whoa," Dev said. "You don't miss anything."

"Fuck off," Jesse said.

Dev grinned and saluted. "Yes, sir," he said.

Molly said one time that Dev was a dead ringer for the actor who starred in Slumdog Millionaire. Jesse had asked her which Clint Eastwood Western that was. But when he'd looked up the actor on the Internet, he'd seen Molly was right. Molly just knew a lot of things, about a lot of topics that didn't interest Jesse in the slightest.

"When there's this much it can take hours to dry completely," Dev said. "The guys say they can't see any sign that the body has been moved. So it must have happened here."

"How do you shoot somebody here and nobody hears the shot?" Jesse said.

"My guess?" Dev said. "Happened during the fireworks."

Jesse said. "Shell casings?"

Suit shook his head.

"The bullet's still in there, or not," Dev said. "Or bullets. I'll find out when I get him on the table."

"You said nothing in the back pockets?" Jesse said to Suit.

"No phone," Suit said. "No wallet. Weird, unless it was a robbery."

"Okay," Jesse said. "Let's turn him over."

"You don't think we'll catch some shit from the CPACs?" Suit said.