

Robert B. Parker's Buried Secrets

Chapter 1

Jesse Stone was on his way home when his deputy chief Molly Crane interrupted him on the radio for a welfare check.

“A guy is worried about his friend. Says he hasn’t seen him in a couple weeks and now he won’t answer the door,” Molly told him.

“Can’t someone else do it?” It had already been a long day. Three of his officers were out sick — Covid again — which was why Molly was covering dispatch. Jesse himself had been on multiple patrol calls and was looking forward to sitting down and watching whatever ESPN had to offer.

“Suit’s breaking up a fight at the Scupper. Everyone else is busy,” Molly said. “Serve and protect. It’s in the job description.”

“Yeah, but I’m the chief. I’m supposed to tell you what to do.”

“It’s adorable you think that,” Molly said. “Anyway, it’s not like you had plans. Your girlfriend left you for the *New York Times*.”

“You know I can fire you any time I want.” Jesse said.

“Good luck. You’d be lost without me.”

“Fine. Where is it?”

“See?” Molly read him the address.

The house was in a nice neighborhood on the good side of Paradise, but it had seen better days. The paint was peeling, and the wood was splintered and rotting in places. The lawn was mostly weeds and crabgrass. Deferred maintenance, Jesse had heard it called. When the people inside the house had to choose between upkeep and property taxes. Even in a place with a

median income as high as Paradise, it happened to some of the older residents as their lives extended past their savings accounts.

As Jesse drove up, he saw a younger man in the driveway, his worried face framed by a thin beard. He wore a leather jacket, black jeans, and boots, despite the early spring warmth. He looked like he was late for a club opening somewhere.

“Are you the police?” he asked as Jesse got out of his Explorer. Not from around here, Jesse figured.

“I’m Chief Stone,” Jesse said, showing the young man his badge

He looked at the badge, and then Jesse, as if trying to make up his mind.

True, Jesse didn’t really dress like a cop. Perks of being chief of a 12-person force. He wore jeans and a polo shirt and sneakers and a ball cap with PARADISE PD printed on it.

Usually a jacket to hide the Glock on his hip, too, but again, today was warm.

“This is the part where you tell me your name,” Jesse said helpfully.

“Oh, right,” the man said. “Sorry. I’m Matthew. Matthew Peebles.”

“Can I see some ID?” Jesse said. Peebles? Really?

Matthew Peebles appeared taken aback. “Why do you need to see my ID?”

“It’s a cop thing,” Jesse shrugged. “We like to make sure people are who they say they are.”

“Oh. Of course,” Peebles said. He handed over a driver’s license from a thick wallet attached to a chain. It was from New York.

Despite the odds against it, Peebles really *was* his name. Jesse handed the ID back. “You said you were worried about your friend inside the house?”

“Well. My parents’ friend more than mine, really,” Matthew said. “His name is Phil Burton. He’s old. I mean, he’s an elderly gentleman. I come out from the city and check on him

every now and then for my folks. We talk on the phone, too. But I haven't heard from him for a while, and I got worried."

It wasn't lost on Jesse the propensity of people who lived in New York to refer to it as the city, as if there were no others. Nobody ever did that in Los Angeles when he lived there. He wondered if it was them overcompensating.

"You drove four hours up here to check on him?"

"He wasn't answering. And like I said, I was worried."

"Would you mind calling him again?"

Peebles called again, with his phone on speaker so Jesse could hear. There was a generic voicemail greeting, and the mailbox was full.

"Are you going to check on him or what?" Peebles asked. He seemed to be growing increasingly agitated.

"Let's go knock on the door," Jesse said.

Jesse knocked on the door, which wasn't in any better shape than the rest of the house. Then he rang the bell. No answer to either.

"You're sure he's home?"

"Well, pretty sure," Matthew said. "He usually spends a couple weeks out of the country every winter. He doesn't like the cold much anymore. But I thought he was back now."

Jesse rang the bell again.

"Can you kick it in?" Matthew asked.

Jesse looked at him. "I'd rather not do that if he's just on vacation. I think your friend probably wants to come home to a door that works."

"Well, are you going to do *anything*?" Matthew asked, now clearly aggravated.

Jesse nodded. "I think I might try the back way, first."

Jesse went around the side of the house and found a gate. It was stuck, as if something was pressing against it. Jesse sighed. Protect and serve, Molly said. Let's see her come out here and do this, he thought.

He hopped up, caught the top of the gate with both hands and felt the familiar twinge in his bad shoulder, a relic of the injury that had ended his days playing baseball. He ignored it and scrambled up without looking too ridiculous, he thought. Swinging his body over the gate, he came down in the yard.

Which looked like it was auditioning for a landfill, Jesse thought. There was a pile of garbage under his feet piled up against the gate. The random junk was holding it shut. Old tires, layers of cardboard boxes, plastic jugs, both empty and full, of restaurant-sized condiments and sauces. A child's wagon. A stack of broken lawn furniture. Heavy black garbage sacks.

Jesse shifted his balance, trying to stay upright, and picked his way toward the back.

He found a sliding glass door, half-open, and put on the blue nitrile gloves he always kept in his pocket, before walking inside.

Opening into what must have been the kitchen, the inside of the house was even more crowded with junk than the yard. The counters were hidden under boxes: cases of motor oil, unopened. Stacks of mail that must have gone back decades. Old phone books. Where do you even get phone books anymore? Jesse wondered. Fast food wrappers and delivery bags in piles, most of them with rotting food and grease stains.

There was also a familiar smell. Jesse knew that odor. It was not a pleasant one.

He tried to breathe through his mouth.

There was a narrow path in between all the debris. Jesse followed it through a maze of old cardboard file boxes, stacked in towers as high as his head.

The path led to the living room, where Jesse found dozens of moldering cardboard file boxes, some stacked as high as his head, arranged in a semicircle around an old couch.

And the couch was where Jesse found the body.

Chapter 2

Phil Burton — Jesse assumed that's who this was — had been there a while.

It was like he'd built a nest in the living room, the one open space in the house that Jesse could observe.

The decomposition wasn't too bad. The house was dry, and it had been cold until recently. The skin had drawn back from the face, but there was still something recognizably human there. He'd been an old man, his hair straw-like and fried from multiple dye jobs. His eyes were sunken behind tinted aviator glasses, and he wore a button-down shirt with epaulets. He looked deflated; half-melted.

Around him on the floor were paper plates and more fast-food containers. This was apparently his dining room as well as his bedroom.

In truth, this wasn't the first time he'd found a body like this in Paradise. Older men, living alone, with no close friends or family nearby, occasionally ended up like this. Waiting for someone to discover them.

But Jesse had never seen a house this far gone before. He'd heard of hoarders, obviously, but he'd never seen one here. He wondered how it started — how you went from hanging on to an old phone book to living like this. What was the tipping point? When did you stop seeing the mess, start seeing it as your life?

Burton clearly wasn't going to tell him. Jesse took another look at the body. No obvious sign of foul play.

Apparently, he went to sleep here and never woke up.

There were worse ways to go.

Jesse carefully picked his way out of the house again, easing between the piles and stacks of junk. It had been years since Jesse was a prospect with a major league career ahead of him, but he still moved with an athlete's grace.

In his mind, he was already making a list of everything that would need to be done. Notifying the coroner, a search for the next of kin, finding someone to come and excavate all the layers of garbage.

As he climbed back over the gate, he wondered how Matthew Peebles was going to take the death of his family friend. He seemed high-strung

As it turned out Jesse didn't have to worry about that.

When he got back out of the house, Peebles was gone.

Jesse called Molly to report what he'd found, then Dev Chada, the medical examiner. Then he waited, leaning against a low stone wall that separated the property from the road. The air was better out here, and the day was cooling down nicely as the sun set.

Suit showed up before anyone else.

Luther "Suitcase" Simpson did not appear at all damaged, or even wrinkled, by his recent call to break up an argument between a couple of drunks. He was a big guy, one of the most solid cops — and friends — Jesse had ever known. Still, he'd always be a kid to Jesse. In Suit's plainclothes blazer, Jesse couldn't help thinking of a boy wearing his dad's clothes.

"You look pretty fresh for someone who just got out of a bar fight," Jesse said.

"Ah, it barely qualified as a fight," Suit said. "Two guys who could hardly stand up, getting angry over a woman. She didn't want either of them. Once they realized that, they began crying on each other's shoulders. I got them each a ride home."

"The path of true love never did run smooth," Jesse said.

“Especially when booze is involved.”

“Don’t have to tell me,” Jesse said. He’d spent a few too many nights looking for answers at the bottom of a glass, and far too many years searching for love with the wrong woman.

Suit, at the heart of him, only wanted to do good. He was driven to help people, which is why he became a cop.

Jesse, on the other hand, was driven to make things right, which was not exactly the same thing.

Suit looked around. “Where’s the good citizen who reported this?”

“Not so good would be my guess,” Jesse said. “He scampered.”

“Scampered?”

“That’s a technical term. Look it up in your detective handbook.”

“You call the crime scene people?” Suit asked.

“We might need an archaeologist,” Jesse said. “Maybe a whole team of them. Come on. I’ll show you.”

Jesse got over the fence first.

“Pretty spry for a guy your age,” Suit said.

Jesse waited until Suit came down on the piles of trash and slipped, nearly falling on his ass. “Careful there, Junior,” Jesse said. “Wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

Suit regained his balance, put on his own pair of nitrile gloves, and they went in through the open sliding door.

Suit went red, then pale, as the scent hit him.

“Jesus,” he said, taking in the view. “How does somebody live like this?”

“Well, in this case, he doesn’t. Not anymore.”

They made their way through the narrow path to the living room, Suit turning sideways in places to avoid touching anything. For someone his size, it was like navigating a maze of spring-loaded traps, like something out of an Indiana Jones movie.

Burton was right where Jesse had left him.

“Ugh,” Suit said.

“Ugh? Is that your professional opinion, Detective?”

“Well, what would you say? Can you imagine? Just being left like this until someone remembers you exist?”

“Not everyone has someone who cares about them,” Jesse said.

Suit took a KN95 out of his pocket and put it on. As his arm came up, he accidentally nudged one of the towers of file boxes stacked around the room. The tower shifted, and the old cardboard suddenly split open, sending a cascade of papers and folders to the floor.

“Ah shoot,” Suit said. “Sorry.”

He tried to find a safe place to stand and took a step forward, and again nearly fell on his ass as a stack of magazines slid out from under his foot.

“It’s like watching Baryshnikov dance,” Jesse said.

“You watch a lot of ballet?”

“Sorry, I meant one of those dancing bears.”

Then something caught Jesse’s eye in the pile of papers released from the box. He kneeled down to take a closer look.

Suit was still staring at Burton’s corpse on the couch.

“Well,” Suit said, “at least he didn’t suffer.”

Jesse carefully picked up a Polaroid photo. He looked at the image, then and showed it to Suit.

Suit went pale again.

“Maybe he should have,” Jesse said.

Chapter 3

The Polaroid was aged and a little faded, but preserved from its time in the box. It showed a man in what appeared to be an alley. It was hard to see the background, it was a tight shot, focusing mainly on the bullet wound in the man's forehead.

"What the hell?" Suit said.

Jesse stood.

"We should let the crime scene techs handle this. I don't want to disturb anything else."

But Jesse kept looking down at the floor, the Polaroid still in his hand.

There were dozens more among the papers folders scattered on the floor. Suit was staring at them too, breathing a little heavier in his mask.

From what Jesse could see, the pictures were all of dead men. Gunshot wounds. Blood. Some staring dead-eyed, some with their eyes closed as if they were blinking or sleeping. All starkly lit in the camera's flash.

The house suddenly felt much smaller, as if all the junk was pressing in on the both of them. Before, it was just sad. Now it seemed haunted.

"Let's go," he told Suit.

Jesse got to the fence before he realized he still had the first picture.

He slipped it into his pocket and climbed over, back into the everyday world.

Jesse made some more calls. First to Molly, to let her know that he and Suit would be out here a while, and then to Dev Chada, the medical examiner. Then he called the state's crime scene technicians. They were going to need a lot of people for this one. The house was packed to the walls with junk, and all of it would have to be hauled out and catalogued.

He and Suit stood outside and waited. Dev showed up first. Jesse walked him, carefully, into the scene, leaving Suit outside.

“I don’t want to trigger an avalanche,” he told Suit.

“I’ll just enjoy the fresh air out here,” Suit said.

Even Dev, who spent most of his days up to his elbows in death, looked a little green when he saw the corpse.

“Damn, I hate these,” he said.

“Can’t blame you,” Jesse said. “Look, I need you to be careful.”

Dev made a face. “When am I not?”

“Sorry. Not what I meant. This isn’t just a dead body.”

He took the picture from his back pocket and showed it to Dev, then pointed to the others on the floor.

“My God,” Dev said. “What do you think this means?”

“No idea,” Jesse said. “There could be a lot of evidence buried around here. Any hope I have of getting answers is in all these boxes. That’s why I need you to do your best to get the body out without disturbing — ”

At that moment, another cardboard box sagged, then slid over on the other side of the pile, vanishing into the gloom.

“So that’s what you meant by avalanche,” Dev said. “I get it now.”

“I know you’ve got to do your job,” Jesse said. “But I don’t want to lose anything in here, either.”

“I don’t think losing anything is the problem. I imagine it’s going to take months to go through all of this.”

“Probably,” Jesse sighed. He felt the need for something simple, like a traffic violation. And a drink, which bothered him. He shoved the thought down.

“Don’t worry,” Dev said. “I’ll be gentle. I don’t want to be buried in here either.”

Dev picked his way over the photos, the piles, and the papers, stepping with the balance of an acrobat. He barely disturbed the dust on any of the surfaces. Jesse was legitimately impressed.

“Graceful,” he said.

“Ten years of gymnastics as a kid, plus twelve years of stepping over corpses,” Dev said.

Dev made a preliminary examination of the body, just looking, not touching. Then, clamping his jaw shut and putting his mask and gloves on, he gingerly reached out to the corpse.

“I think we’re in luck,” he said. “The body has mostly dried out. I think he’s been dead for at least two months.”

“You have a funny definition of luck.”

Dev carefully rolled the body to one side. The cloth of the shirt stuck to a blanket covering the couch, then peeled away, along a layer of other stuff that Jesse didn’t really want to look at very closely. Dev made a frustrated noise.

“This is going to be ugly,” he said.

Jesse’s phone buzzed. A text from Suit, letting him know the state police’s crime scene team had arrived. Jesse didn’t text back. He wasn’t a teenage girl. He didn’t text if he could possibly avoid it.

“What if we lift the blanket from the couch?” Jesse asked. “Move him to the floor?”

The blanket under the body extended from one end of the couch to the other. The body was on top of it. It seemed like it was all still in one piece.

“Worth a shot,” Dev said.

They each took a position, Dev at the body's head, Jesse at its feet.

"Really wish I'd sent one of my assistants for this," Dev said.

"Come on. Isn't this why you went to med school?" Jesse grabbed his end of the blanket.

Dev did the same. "On three."

Jesse counted. They lifted. The body was surprisingly light. The blanket didn't rip.

Nothing else came loose.

They put it down on the floor.

Jesse spotted something under the couch cushions, which were flattened and thin from years of wear, as well as sodden with dried fluids.

But there was definitely something underneath.

"Hey Dev," he said. "Take a picture of this, will you? I want to move these."

Dev snapped a photo with his phone, then Jesse lifted one of the cushions carefully and set it aside.

Jesse and Dev both stared.

They didn't speak. They didn't have to.

Dev snapped another picture, preserving the scene. Jesse then moved the other cushions, exposing the bottom of the couch completely.

The photos, apparently, weren't the only secrets hidden in this house.

In the couch, filling the hollow space of the frame, were stacks and stacks of cash.

Thousands of dollars, easily. Hundreds of thousands, even.

"Well, shit," Dev said.

"That's what I was thinking," Jesse said.

Chapter 4

An hour later, Jesse was on the phone with Brian Lundquist, the head of the state homicide division. Lundquist and his team usually handled the big investigations for small towns like Paradise, but he'd known and worked with Jesse for years now, and if they didn't have the same relationship that Jesse had with his predecessor, Healy, they still respected one another.

"How much money?" Lundquist asked.

"They haven't got an exact count yet," Jesse said. "But they did a rough estimate. If they're all hundreds, about two million dollars in cash. Some of it was ruined, of course."

"Jesus," Lundquist said.

The crime-scene techs had gone into the house, and, under Dev's careful direction, managed to slide the body into a bag, which they hauled out and into a waiting ambulance. Then they'd gone back inside and begun the process of bagging the money and excavating the layers and layers of debris.

Dev had promised to call as soon as he'd done the autopsy, but he didn't think he'd have much to tell Jesse. "Advanced decomposition," he'd said, just before he left. "Unless I find a bullet inside the skull, I'm probably going to have to go with natural causes."

"You ever have any dealings with this guy before?" Lundquist asked.

"Nobody did," Jesse said. "He was a recluse. Neighbors barely saw him."

Jesse had sent Suit around to canvass the neighborhood. He'd come up with nothing.

"We've got a couple complaints about him with city code enforcement for not mowing his lawn," Jesse said. "Other than that, he's a blank."

While they talked, Jesse watched the crime scene techs walking in and out of the house, laden with junk.

They laid it out, piece by piece, onto tarps they'd placed on the front lawn.

All of which they had to photograph and tag because of the photos of the dead bodies.

"Any chance the guy was just into true crime? Private investigator? Or maybe he just had a really sick fetish?" Lundquist asked. "Maybe that's why he had those pictures."

"That would make things easier, but I doubt it," Jesse said. "If I had to guess, I'd say he had something to do with every one of them."

"I really hate it when you get a hunch, Jesse."

"So do I."

"But you're probably right."

"I usually am."

"Well, let's not get crazy here. They find anything that links these pictures to any names? Or open cases?"

Jesse laughed. "Sure. They found a list, right next to a card with the killer's signed confession and his current address."

"Too much to hope for."

"I can't even tell you what else they've found yet. They're just doing their best to find the floor right now."

A few of the neighbors watched from their front doors, or on their lawns. They weren't yet moving to the sidewalk or crowding the crime scene tape to get a better look, but it was only a matter of time. Jesse was surprised the media wasn't here yet, but the local stations were understaffed — budget cuts, he'd heard — and it was a Friday night.

Not that Jesse had a problem with it. He wanted to keep people as far away as possible until he could get a better handle on it.

"You thinking serial killer?"

Jesse considered the question. Serial killers were rare, but he'd run into a couple. They kept trophies. And contrary to all the movies, they were usually sloppy, disorganized, and isolated — just the kind of guy who'd die alone in his house, surrounded by trash.

But Jesse didn't think that he'd found one. He had a file, taken at random from one of the boxes inside the house, spread out on his dashboard in front of him. It had more Polaroids. These were different people from the first photos he'd discovered, and an entirely different era judging by the clothes and hairstyles. Maybe the late 80s or early 90s. They were just as dead, though. There was a woman who'd been shot in the chest, lying prone on a kitchen floor, her eyes looking away from the camera, staring blankly at the ceiling. There was a man who'd been strangled — Jesse recognized the bruising around his neck as well as the distinctive bursting of blood vessels in his open eyes. Another guy with the tidy little gunshot wound in his forehead. And four more, all killed by varying methods, including one unidentifiable corpse that had been burned to a crisp on a concrete floor, scorch marks radiating from it in a circle.

The papers inside were old as well; brittle sheets of lined yellow from a legal tablet, and covered in faded numbers and barely legible words. He couldn't make out much, and what he could seemed to be in some kind of code. Dates and locations, if he had to bet. It seemed like some kind of record-keeping system. Something far too impersonal for a serial killer.

And there was the money.

"I don't know," Jesse finally said. "If I were going to bet, probably not."

"Then why the photos of dead bodies?"

"Well, that's what they pay me to find out."

"Maybe you could hand this one off, Jesse," Lundquist said. "It already sounds like a mess, and it's not going to get any better."

"No," Jesse said simply. His town, his responsibility.

“I should have known better than to ask.”

“You really should have.”

There was a sigh over the line. Then Lundquist said, “All right. I’ll send more people.”

“Thanks,” Jesse said.

“You’re lucky it’s getting close to the end of the fiscal year and I need to spend some of my budget or I’ll lose it. We can hire one of those clean-up crews to help out.”

Jesse knew about those crews. Relatives who discovered bodies in a house full of accumulated trash would hire them to sort through the mess, dump everything out, so they could salvage the house.

“Still hard to believe that’s an actual business,” Jesse said. “I mean, how many people are found like this every year?”

“Lot of it going around, I guess,” Lundquist said. “Too many sad and sick and lonely people in this world.”

An evidence tech passed by Jesse with a child’s tricycle over one shoulder. He felt a pang of something he couldn’t name.

And that same need for a drink.

“Well,” he said. “one less of them now.”

Chapter 5

“Good morning,” Molly said.

“That is a matter of opinion,” Jesse said.

“Aw, is hims gwumpy?”

Jesse just stared back at her. He was, in fact, more irritable than usual this morning. He chalked it up to not enough coffee and too little sleep. He’d been out late at the Burton house. Suit was there again this morning, with Gabe Weathers. The media had finally showed up, and the pile of junk on the front lawn was growing. They were going to need to haul some of it away soon.

“Can you get Peter Perkins to head over to the Burton place?” he asked her as he made himself a fresh cup. Peter had been set on retirement, but with the department’s recruiting and staffing issues, Jesse had convinced him to stay on part-time. “Maybe he can help out.”

“I’ll call him,” Molly said. “Don’t forget, you’re onboarding our new hire today. He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Onboarding?” Jesse asked. “Where the hell did you hear that?”

“That’s what it’s called when you bring someone new into a team, Jesse,” she said.

“Welcome to 21st Century management techniques.”

“You’re learning how to manage now?”

“Someone in this place has to.”

Jesse went into his office and looked at the file of paperwork he still needed to sign for his latest addition, Derek Tate, sitting on his desk.

But first he wanted to think about Phil Burton and his haunted house.

He took his glove and a baseball from his desk. For as long as he could remember, smacking the ball into the glove helped him think. He stood and looked out the window, snapping the ball into the glove with an easy, smooth motion of his wrist. It sounded like someone working the heavy bag in a gym.

What they had was called an orgy of evidence. Too many clues and no way to piece them together into a rational narrative. They were all basically blind men trying to describe an elephant from behind.

Every crime was an explosion in someone's life, tearing things up and leaving debris everywhere. Most people panicked, even if the crime was small, at the violation of it, the way it disrupted everything that was supposed to be normal.

Jesse didn't. There was always some way to uncover the truth buried underneath the rubble. The size of the mess didn't matter. Though the pile of junk from the Burton house was enormous. Still, there was always a starting point.

He broke it down in his head. It was how he approached every problem, almost instinctively. It's why the LAPD tapped him for its elite Robbery-Homicide division when he was starting out there. He had a talent for it.

The photos of the bodies and the papers were already piling up in a cleared space inside the house. The crime-scene techs wanted to get to those first, naturally. So they'd moved out a bunch of old furniture and garbage in what might have been Burton's dining room years before. Then they began going through the boxes, looking for anything that might help ID the dead people in the pictures.

And there were a lot of them. Lundquist, over the phone, had told Jesse they'd uncovered a hundred more photos of dead people so far. Some were duplicates or multiple angles of the same killing, and some didn't show the victims' faces. There had to be photographic evidence of

at least 60 different murders, and there was still more, not counting the ones Jesse still had in the folder in his car.

But not one of them had a name attached. Without more information, there was nothing to connect them to any known killings.

Jesse hadn't expected it to be that easy, to be honest. He'd thanked Lundquist and asked him to keep him informed, and then focused on the part of the puzzle that belonged solely to him: Phil Burton.

Burton had lived in his town for years, but nobody seemed to know him. Even Jesse didn't know him, and Jesse knew a lot of people. Molly knew *everyone*, and she'd never seen Burton either.

A recluse. A hoarder. A man who died alone in the wreckage of a wasted life, surrounded by memories of death. On a stack of cash bigger than most people ever saw. Like some kind of demented version of an ancient king in a burial mound, his corpse piled under all his wealth.

Jesse smacked the ball into his glove.

He began to make a mental list. He had to call Dev and Lundquist again. He should reach out to the feds, see if the serial numbers on the cash matched anything on their lists. He thought of a dozen other small chores that needed doing.

But most of all, Jesse needed to know who Phil Burton was before something in him went wrong and he retreated from the world.

To do that, he needed to find Matthew Peebles. Burton's only friend, who'd scampered away at the first sign of trouble, but who was concerned enough to alert the police.

Jesse thought about it. Why would a guy in his twenties from New York be friends with an aging hoarder in Paradise? He'd said Burton was a friend of the family, but Jesse didn't buy

that, not after what he'd found in the piles of Burton's trash. Peebles had to know more than he'd said.

Jesse realized his hand stung, even with the glove. He was putting a lot of power into his wrist. He was angry. He knew himself well enough to know that. It wasn't just the lack of sleep. Something about this case was bothering him.

What he couldn't figure out was why.

He shoved it aside. Put the ball and glove back into their spot on the desk. The glove was a custom replica of the one he'd used in the minors, a gift from his son, Cole, who was out in California again. They hadn't talked for a while. Jesse knew he should call. He put that on the list with everything else.

Jesse looked at his notebook and the driver's license information he'd taken down about Peebles. No criminal record in Massachusetts, but maybe NYPD had a line on him. He sat down and reached for the phone to get started.

But before he could lift the phone, Ellis Munroe, the District Attorney, walked into his office, pausing only to rap his knuckles lightly on the door.

"Got a minute?"

Jesse stared at him. Ellis labored under the belief that he was Jesse's boss, which he thought gave him the right to enter Jesse's office uninvited.

Jesse looked past Ellis and called to Molly, in the outer office. "Molly, did I have a meeting with Ellis Munroe this morning?"

"Jesse, come on — " Ellis began.

"I told him not to go in there," Molly called back. "He went right past me."

"Sorry, Molly," Ellis said.

"You apologize to her?" Jesse said.

“Yes, I apologize to Molly. I’ve known her longer than I’ve known you. Our kids went to school together. My son took one of her daughters to a dance once. You, on the other hand, are the Chief of Police, and I can come into your office whenever I damn well please.”

He leaned in closer and spoke in a lower voice. “Also, do I look stupid enough to pick a fight with Molly Crane? Give me some credit, Stone.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Ellis,” Molly said.

“Thank you, Molly. I’ve got it,” Jesse said. He sat back in his chair. “Well? What do you want?”

“I see you’re in your usual mood this morning,” Ellis said. “Okay. Let’s get to it. I want to know where you put the \$2 million in cash you found at a crime scene last night.”

The money. Of course. That much money was going to attract attention. It already had.

“How’d you hear about that?”

“Jesse. Come on. A dead man on top of a couple million dollars? Everyone in town knows about it. And I shouldn’t have had to hear about it from anyone else. Now where did you put it?”

“It’s still with Dev. He’ll send it over to the state evidence facility when he’s done with it.”

“That money belongs to Paradise,” Ellis said. “We should have it.”

Jesse kept himself from laughing out loud at Ellis. “Really?”

“Money and other valuables gathered in the commission of a crime can be confiscated under both civil and criminal penalties by the responsible jurisdiction,” Ellis said, almost making it sound like he was quoting some court decision. “The City of Paradise should hold onto that money until we determine the proper ownership, and its proper disposal.”

“We don’t have the facilities to keep it safely,” Jesse said. “You want me to lock it in a jail cell? Besides, it’s a little sticky.”

“It wasn’t your call, Jesse. That should have been up to me. I should have been informed.”

“I just got in, Ellis,” Jesse said. “I would have called you.”

“Yeah,” Ellis said. “Sure you would have. Eventually.”

Jesse shrugged. “Well, you’re here now. You want to know what we know?”

“If you could spare the time in your busy schedule,” Ellis said.

“Don’t be shitty, Ellis,” Molly said from her desk.

“Sorry, Molly,” Ellis said again.

Jesse wondered how he could scare Ellis as much as Molly did. He wasn’t sure it was possible without drawing his gun. Something to consider in the future.

“I don’t have a lot to tell you yet, Ellis,” Jesse said. “It’s why I didn’t call. We’ve got a dead body on top of a lot of money. We’ve got photos of other dead bodies packed among a couple metric tons of garbage. We’re unpacking it as fast as we can.”

“Do you think this dead guy — ”

“Phil Burton.”

“ — whatever. You think he was a serial killer?”

Jesse inhaled deeply through his nose. He was trying to keep his temper with Ellis. He really was.

“No,” he said.

Ellis waited. Jesse didn’t say anything else.

“That’s it?”

Jesse nodded. That was all he had to say.

“Then what the hell are the pictures of the bodies doing there? Why did he have all that money?”

“Well, those are very good questions, Ellis. We certainly intend to look into that.”

“Don’t patronize me, Jesse. I want answers.”

Jesse had had enough. “Ellis. You want answers? So do I. Will you please get out of here so I can find them?”

Ellis sat for a second longer, scowling. “I want to be kept informed, Stone,” he said.

He tried to glare. Jesse tried to look terrified. Neither of them were very successful.

He got up and left the office.

“Next time, call first,” Molly said as Ellis exited, doing his best not to slam the door.

“You couldn’t keep him out of my office?” Jesse said to Molly.

“Deputy chief, not your secretary,” Molly said.

Jesse tried to get his thoughts back in order. He had calls to make. A crime to solve. A new hire to onboard, as Molly said.

“Is there anything in that book of management techniques about doing what your boss tells you?” he asked her.

“No, but there is a whole chapter on setting proper boundaries,” she said. “You should read it.”