

ROBERT B. PARKER'S


BLIND
SPOT

A Jesse Stone Novel

Reed Farrel Coleman

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

NEW YORK



There was no taking it back now, no do-overs. Never. He had said yes, so he was going. There were storm clouds over Paradise as Jesse Stone looked out at the Atlantic and remembered his last night in L.A., staring out into that other ocean. What Jesse thought was that water color in sunlight was beside the point. At night, all oceans were black. He understood that a lot of people, maybe most, believed the ocean symbolized endless possibility, better days, bright futures. Jesse knew better. He took a sip of his Black Label and soda. He was alone, with only the ocean and his regrets for company. You can gaze at the road ahead of you all you want, but your future is in your rear-view mirror.

“Jesse . . . Chief Stone,” a busboy called to him.

Jesse was too busy time-traveling there on the dock behind the restaurant to hear.

“Excuse me, Chief Stone,” the kid tried again.

This time Jesse heard him and turned. He nodded at the kid.

“The boss, he wants you to stop by the office before you leave.”

“I’ll be right in.”

It was the usual kind of thing in a small town. Dan Castro, chef and owner of the Lobster Claw, was a squat man with sad brown eyes

REED FARREL COLEMAN

and the weight of the world pressing down on him. The place had been up and running for only two months and Dan had discovered why it was easier to want to own a restaurant than to actually own one. He wanted to know if Jesse could talk to the health inspector. Jesse was the police chief, so he must have a lot of pull with the selectmen, the Health Department, the dogcatcher. Jesse tried listening, without much success. Stared at the Dan's moving lips, watched his gestures, but Jesse wasn't exactly in the moment. He was thinking about tomorrow's drive down to New York City, about the reunion. He had been thinking about it on and off for the last six weeks, ever since he'd gotten the invitation from Vic Prado and sent back the little RSVP card with a check in the yes box. As the date got closer, it was all he could think about. He said something reassuring to Dan and left. It must have been good, because Castro's eyes weren't quite so sad, nor did he seem as much a victim of gravity.

As Jesse drove back home through the streets of Paradise, he tried to recall exactly what he had said to the restaurant owner. For the life of him, he couldn't remember. That's how distracted he was by what lay ahead of him over the next few days. The scotch hadn't helped with his memory and this reunion hadn't helped with the scotch. Jesse's tug of war with booze no longer held any romance for him, nor anyone else. He had a problem with drinking. It was like a given in a geometry equation. When he realized his words to Dan Castro were lost to him, Jesse shrugged and moved on. He remembered he was a cop, the top cop in a town fifteen miles outside of Boston. A million miles from L.A.

The rain came in a light spray not even heavy enough for Jesse to use the wipers. He studied the streets. He had settled into the rhythms of town life, but thought that only someone who didn't know him would describe Paradise as his adopted hometown. He'd grown up in Tucson, lived in L.A., and now Paradise. Were any of them really home? That was for someone else to ponder. For the moment Jesse Stone was running through his checklist for tomorrow, making sure

BLIND SPOT

everything was set before he went down to New York. As he turned for home, the skies opened up, the rain falling in sheets so thick that he could no longer make out the streets of Paradise. He was no longer paying much mind to the rain or the streets. Distracted again, Jesse Stone was caught in a rundown between his past and New York City.

2

The Salters' place was a redbrick Victorian nestled on an ocean bluff just north of the yacht club. As Victorian houses went, it was more reserved than most, smaller than the sprawling manses that dotted cities and towns throughout New England and points south. There was one spire, two chimneys, a widow's walk. No gazebo, no wraparound porch, no whimsical paint job, no whimsy at all. It stood solid and restrained as Harlan Salter, the dry-goods magnate who had commissioned it in 1888. The Salters still owned the place, but these days most of them split their time between Boston and the Vineyard.

Mostly it just sat up there on the bluff and reminded Paradise of a faded past.

There was one light on in a small bedroom on the second floor.

"This place is so freakin' creepy and so cool, Ben," said Martina Penworth.

Benjamin Salter made a face. "We only use this place in the summer, and then not always."

"Any ghosts?"

"No. Plenty of spiders, though."

She slapped his biceps. "I hate spiders."

"Don't worry. I'll protect you."

BLIND SPOT

"Mmm," she said and stepped closer to him. "I just bet you will."

She angled her head up to his and planted her lips on Ben's. He returned the favor and it didn't take long for them to advance beyond kissing. When they came up for air, Ben grabbed the bottle of Pappy Van Winkle and took a swallow.

"Hey," she said, grabbing at the bottle, "what about me?"

Ben smiled, yanking the bottle out of her reach. "Patience, baby, patience."

He took another swig but was careful not to swallow. He winked at Martina, pressed his mouth hard against hers. She parted her lips just enough so that the warm amber fluid drained slowly into her mouth from his. When she'd taken it all in and swallowed, she sighed, and her body shuddered involuntarily. Ben reached for the hem of her T-shirt and lifted it over her head. She did the same for him and she kissed his chest, brushing her hand across his nipples. As Ben fingered the clasp of her bra, Martina pushed him away. She strolled around to the opposite side of the big cherrywood bed and swayed while she unhinged the silvery silken bra. She swung it over her head and threw it at him.

He snatched it out of the air, took in her scent, and stared at her pert breasts. Her nipples were red, erect, perfect, and he said so. There wasn't much about Martina Penworth that wasn't perfect. She had that sun-streaked blond hair other girls spent hundreds to imitate but could never quite pull off. Her eyes were a shade of deep blue that he hadn't seen before. Her lips, her nose . . . they were all amazing. Nor did it hurt that Martina had the body of a cheerleader and the brain of a professor. He didn't much care about the latter at the moment. He knew he was lucky to have her. He wasn't bad-looking. He had been with plenty of girls before, but not girls like Martina. That was why he had brought her here. No dorm room beds or cheap Boston motels for her.

Just as Martina unbuttoned her jeans and began wriggling out of them, she thought she heard something coming from downstairs. Ben saw the look on her face.

REED FARREL COLEMAN

“It’s an old house and it’s storming like crazy. Don’t worry about it.” He half smiled. “Maybe it’s a ghost. Like I said, I’ll protect you.”

“That was from spiders.”

“Spiders and ghosts.”

He walked around to her. He had waited long enough. They fell into bed together.

When they were done, she lay with her head on his hairless chest. They were silent. First times, even at their best, come with a certain amount of awkwardness. Besides, wanting and having are two very different things. Then the silence was broken, but not by either Ben or Martina.

The bedroom door flew back so hard that the old hinges nearly pulled away from the oak frame. As it was, the brass doorknob had made an oval dent in the plaster and lath. A tall man dressed in matte black military-style garb strode into the room. He wore a black balaclava over his head and face. Only his shark eyes and crooked mouth were visible. In his right hand he held a black sidearm with a sound suppressor extending from the barrel. He turned to face the two nude college freshmen, pointing the tip of the suppressor at them. Martina wanted to scream, but her fear swallowed it up. Instead, she dug her nails into Ben’s biceps. He didn’t feel it, not even when he bled.

“Look, mister, my parents have a lot of money,” Ben said, his voice cracking. “They’ll pay you anything you want.”

The gunman shook his head.

Ben realized this guy might be here for Martina. She was so hot, so perfect. Here she was for him, undressed and vulnerable.

“Don’t even think about touching her,” Ben warned. This time his voice was strong and steady.

“She’s not as good as you’d think,” he said, because he couldn’t think of what else to say. “She—”

The gunman stifled a little laugh and put his left index finger across his lips to shush the boy. The boy shushed. The gunman waved the tip of the suppressor at Ben, gesturing him away from Martina.

BLIND SPOT

When the kid hesitated, the gunman put a round in the wall above the headboard. Ben got out of the bed, shaking. The gunman motioned for Ben to get on his knees at the side of the bed. Ben got on his knees.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Ben reassured Martina. “He wants me, not you. Isn’t that right, mister? You want me.”

The gunman nodded, stepped close to Ben. Now there was something in the gunman’s left hand. Before Ben could figure out what it was, he pressed it to Ben’s neck and stunned the kid. Ben Salter collapsed to the floor, his convulsing body thumping against the bare wood. Tears streamed down Martina’s face as the gunman turned the tip of the suppressor in her direction. The gun barked twice and Martina Penworth stopped crying forever.

3

Jesse Stone stared at himself in the full-length mirror as he adjusted his bow tie. He had always looked good in uniform—Albuquerque Dukes, USMC, L.A.P.D., or Paradise PD dress blues, it didn't matter. A tuxedo, he thought, was just another kind of uniform. He had been away from baseball for many years now, but he kept in good shape. He was no more than five pounds heavier than when he was a soft-handed shortstop prospect in the Dodgers' organization. While he hadn't been a five-tool phenom, he had the requisite skills to make it to the bigs: great glove, cannon arm, quick pivot, adequate speed, average bat, less-than-average power. What he lacked in natural physical skills he compensated for with what sports types called intangibles. He rarely made mental errors. Bonehead plays were what other guys made. He was like a manager on the field, mentally tough. That much hadn't changed. When some wiseass pitcher tried backing him away from the plate with a little chin music, Jesse dusted himself off, and stood a few inches closer to the plate for the next pitch. As one scout wrote, "Stone always seems to be in the right place at the right time." Not always.

It was precisely because he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time that he was forced to trade in his baseball uniform for all the others. Now the closest he was ever going to get to the infield dirt

BLIND SPOT

at Dodger Stadium was the softball fields of Paradise, Mass. He was the terror of the team, playing for the police department slo-pitch squad. His less-than-average power in pro baseball made him the Hank Aaron of the softball diamond, but that wasn't much compensation for a man who was once a phone call away from the Dodgers. He made one last adjustment to his tie before heading downstairs. Time to face the music.

Jesse Stone wasn't big on irony, but even he couldn't ignore the fact that there was almost nothing standard about The Standard, High Line. The angular glass, steel, and concrete beast straddled the elevated High Line park that ran along the west side of Manhattan from the Meatpacking District to West 30th Street. He couldn't decide whether he liked the exterior of the building or not. It was like both something out of the 1960s and a sci-fi movie. Not that he had seen many sci-fi movies. He didn't much care for movies, except Westerns and they didn't make many Westerns anymore. The interior was just weird, provocative for provocative's sake. Until he arrived and read up on the place, Jesse hadn't been aware of the least standard thing about The Standard: its reputation. The Standard was infamous for couples renting rooms, pulling back their curtains, and having sex in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows for people strolling the High Line to see. The Standard had always seemed like an odd choice for a reunion of a minor-league baseball team from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Now that Jesse had seen it, knew its rep, the place seemed an even less likely choice. He shook his head.

At the elevator, he fidgeted with his tie some more. When the elevator door opened, Jesse got his first gut punch of the evening. He had anticipated taking some blows, but not this one, not so soon. Inside the elevator was a dazzling woman with yellow-green eyes and jet-black hair cut in a perfect wedge. The hair that fell over the light mocha skin of her left cheek made a crisp angular line from her delicate cleft chin to her bare collarbone. Her plush red mouth neither smiled nor frowned at the man getting into the elevator with her, though her nose

REED FARREL COLEMAN

twitched ever so slightly. She wore a tight, satiny champagne-colored gown that made her look like she was moving in the wind even as she stood motionless. There was a rope of diamonds around her long, tanned neck. Sprinkled in among the diamonds were blood rubies, emeralds, and sapphires.

“Kayla,” Jesse said, as the door closed behind him. “You look lovely.” He bent and gave her an awkward kiss on the cheek.

“Jess.” She touched his cheek once and then quickly put her hand down by her side. “You keep a portrait in your attic? You haven’t aged a day.”

“Thanks. No portrait. Vic?”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “He’s down at the bar already with the boys.”

They rode the remainder of the way to the bar level in uncomfortable silence. Their story was an old one. Jesse had been dating Kayla for a few weeks after getting the bump up to the Dodgers’ triple-A team. She was a beautiful girl even then, if not the finely polished trophy she was now. They weren’t too serious, but the sex had been ferocious and Jesse thought there might be a future for them together. That lasted only until a slow ground ball was hit in the right-side hole and was smothered by Jesse Stone’s roommate, Vic Prado. Instead of getting the sure out at first, Prado got to his knees at the edge of the outfield grass and threw across his body to Jesse, who was just coming across second base. The runner went hard into Jesse, trying to take him out and prevent an accurate throw to first. Mission accomplished. He took Jesse out, all right: right out of a career. Jesse’s throw was legless and awkward. He had no balance and crash-landed on the hard infield with the point of his right shoulder. Jesse’s initial thought: *Did I get the runner at first?* His second: *I’m screwed.* By the time he came back from the hospital in L.A., post-surgery, Kayla had switched roommates from the one whose future had recently passed to the one scheduled for a September call up to the big club.

When the elevator car came to a halt, Jesse gestured for Kayla to

BLIND SPOT

exit first. As she did, she said, “I still think about you, Jess,” and left. He stood in place. Almost from the moment he had checked the yes box on the RSVP card and mailed it back, Jesse Stone had wanted to undo it, but he also knew he had demons in him that needed to be exorcised. Now he had a better idea of just how many there were to deal with and how difficult a deal it might be. When the elevator door began to close again, Jesse stuck out his right arm to stop it. He stepped out of the car, finally, and headed for the bar and into his past.