

ROBERT B. PARKER'S

BAD

INFLUENCE



The Sunny Randall Novels

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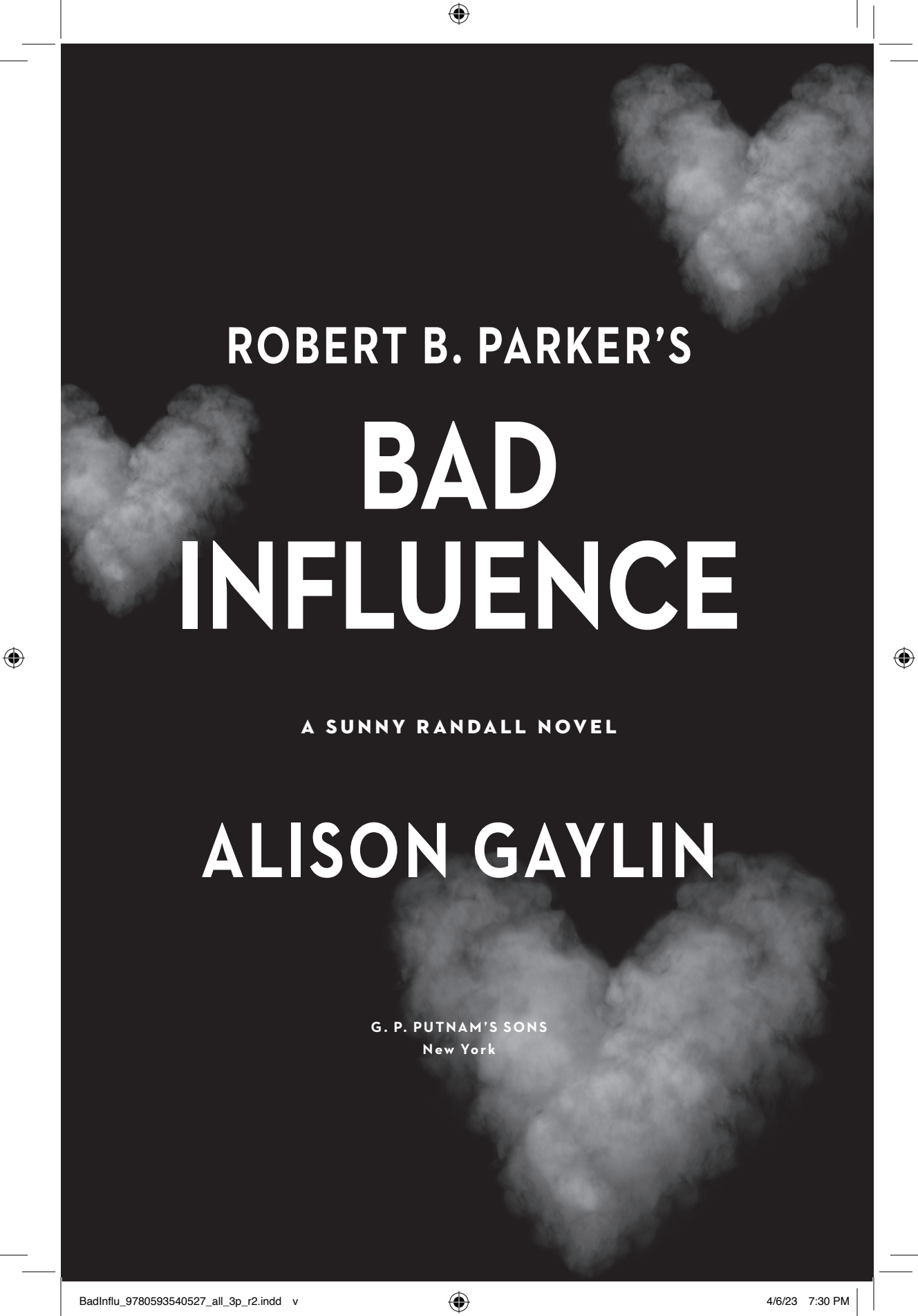
Shrink Rap

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ROBERT B. PARKER'S

BAD INFLUENCE

A SUNNY RANDALL NOVEL

ALISON GAYLIN

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
New York

PUTNAM
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ONE

Were we ever like that?" I said. "Please tell me we weren't."
"We weren't," Spike said. "Believe me."

I was with my best friend in the bar of the restaurant he owns, both of us transfixed by a couple twentysomething influencers sitting at a dimly lit table and taking selfie after selfie, a bottle of pricey cognac looming behind them like a chaperone. I'd been told their names were Blake James and Alena Jade—apparently, last names had gone the way of MySpace. I'd also been told that they were Instagram's "it" couple, and having them here, in Spike's, would be sure to transform it from "just some place" into a "destination."

It made sense. Between them, Blake James and Alena Jade had close to a million followers, and getting them both here in Spike's, together, could ensure a house full of big-spending

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fans, each one of them desperate to stand in the spot where their inked-up, Fashion Nova-wearing, iron-pumping, duck-face-making idols had stood.

Blake James in particular. In addition to his wildly popular Instagram account, Blake was a YouTube sensation, with legions of viewers tuning in to his workout video channel, *The Shred Shed*.

As irritating as it may have been to Spike and me, I hoped the presence of these two sentient mannequins would give Spike's a much-needed prestige infusion. Despite a post-pandemic uptick in business, inflation and supply-chain issues had taken their toll on the place—just as they had on most restaurants. And my friend, for all his hard work, was back in the red.

I was worried Spike might do something stupid to keep his tavern afloat. Again. Which is why I listened to a woman named Bethany Rose who called herself a “media concierge” and assured me she could “marshal the power of the Gram” to ensure that Spike would never feel the need to swim with another loan shark. But more on that later.

All you need to know at this point is that Bethany Rose brought us Blake and Alena.

Blake rested his chiseled chin on Alena's bare shoulder, a selfie stick holding the phone high over their heads, the two of them pouting up at it contentedly.

Spike stared at them. “How can anybody spend that much time looking at themselves?”

“Maybe they're looking at each other.” I took a swallow of

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my pinot noir—a nice year, recommended by Spike, and probably one-twentieth the price of the influencers’ cognac. I did have to admire Alena. Looking the way she did took more effort than I could ever imagine mustering—and I’m not exactly low-maintenance.

I once had a drag queen client and I doubted he spent as much time with the contouring brush as Alena did. Her face was so sculpted she seemed almost unreal, and her shimmering hair was perfectly behaved, like a swath of black silk. She had to have spent tens of thousands on plastic surgery to get that body—which was really something you’d see only in comic books or the Kardashian family.

Blake, meanwhile . . . Okay. If I was going to be honest, I didn’t mind looking at him. “I’d love to paint that man,” I said. I hadn’t intended to say it out loud, but sue me. He had the most symmetrical face I’d ever seen.

“Meh,” Spike said.

I stared at him. “Are you serious?”

He shrugged. “He’s not my type. I’ve punched too many guys who look like him.”

Blake raised his glass for another selfie and smiled, his Caribbean-blue eyes an exact match with the sleeveless jacket he was wearing, his teeth gleaming nearly as much as his exposed, tatted biceps. And then Blake shouted, “Let’s do a cheers!” like a five-year-old.

A couple of Spike’s regular patrons shot him death glares. The bartender visibly cringed. Even Alena looked embarrassed.

I turned back to Spike. “I get what you’re saying.”

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He sighed. “Is this really necessary?” he said. “I mean . . . the last time this place was in trouble, I handled it.”

I raised an eyebrow at him.

“Okay, I guess I shouldn’t have—”

“Taken out a loan without reading the fine print?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Gotten involved with the Russian Mob?”

“Yep.”

“All of the above, plus breaking a loan shark’s nose and nearly getting both of us killed?”

“Yeah. Except for the nose-breaking part. I stand by that decision.”

I grinned, clinked my glass with his. “Let’s do a cheers to that,” I said.

“To Spike’s,” he said.

“To Spike’s.”

He swallowed his wine, then glanced at his watch. “So . . . the customers should be rushing in any minute now, huh?”

Spike was watching the door. I was, too, but not for the same reasons. Unlike my best friend, there was only one customer I needed to see walk into this place tonight. And that was media concierge Bethany Rose. She was late.

TWO

It wasn't long before new customers began streaming into Spike's—dozens of them, all under thirty, the girls in rompers and sky-high heels, the boys in skintight T-shirts and stinking of Axe spray, all of them spray-tanned within an inch of their lives. It wasn't the typical crowd you'd see in Spike's—or in Boston, for that matter. It was more like Hollywood meets *Jersey Shore*. But Spike didn't seem to mind. When the fourth or fifth group started a tab, I saw him smile for the first time in I couldn't remember how long.

“This media maven—what's her name?” Spike said.

“Bethany Rose. And it's media *concierge*.”

“Whatever,” he said. “Color me pleasantly surprised.”

I had to agree. Even if this wasn't my ideal bar clientele,

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money was money. I glanced at the door again. “She should be here.”

“Who?”

“Bethany.”

“Why?”

I sighed heavily. “We’re supposed to talk terms.”

I’d spoken to Bethany Rose the previous day at the suggestion of Lee Farrell. It felt weird to hear a no-nonsense cop like Lee use a term like *media concierge*, but as he said himself when I told him Spike might lose his bar again, “Bullshit times call for bullshit measures.”

Lee had known about Bethany from his niece Emily Barnes, a pretty college student with a habit of getting herself into un-pretty situations. These days, Emily was earning extra cash and free swag as an influencer—a noble pursuit, comparatively speaking. With Bethany’s help, she’d become what they call a micro-influencer, with close to fifty thousand followers. Lee had no idea what that meant, but he was still proud. And who could blame him? It was legal.

Anyway, Emily had done one of those email intros between Bethany Rose and me, and yesterday, Bethany had given me a free consultation via Zoom. She basically looked the way I’d expected her to. Kris Jenner haircut, a rope of expensive-looking pearls, cheekbones that angled out from her face dramatically, and plumped-up lips that were no stranger to the needle. Looking at her, Bethany Rose could have been anywhere from thirty-five to sixty-five. It was impossible to tell—especially since she went so heavy on Zoom’s

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“touch up your appearance” feature. She wore a tailored black jacket that probably cost more than my kitchen renovation, which made me wonder if I was wasting my time. The economy was tough for PIs, too, monthly expenses for my home and office had skyrocketed and, solvent as I may have been, it was hard to justify dropping a small fortune on something as ephemeral as potential word of mouth. I’d decided to keep the consultation short and sweet.

My first question for Bethany: “What the hell is a media concierge?”

“If you have to ask, Sunny, you can’t afford me.”

I hadn’t even cracked a smile.

“I can put your friend’s business on the map,” she had said.

“How?”

“I have a five-point plan.”

“What are the points?”

She’d gone on about reach, demographics, and algorithms for at least six solid minutes, sprinkling her pitch with info about her “stable of influencers” and a lot of social media lingo. “The Gram,” she’d said repeatedly, her blue eyes lighting up each time she said it, as though it were some kind of wonder drug.

“Look, Bethany,” I’d said, once I could get a word in. “You seem great. And your pitch is . . .” I struggled for the right descriptor. “Well, it’s the bomb.”

“Thanks.”

“But Spike and I don’t have much in the way of extra cash these days. I’m thinking you’re probably out of our league.”

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“Don’t be so sure,” she had said. “Emily told me about your private investigating business.”

“Meaning . . .”

“Meaning I have a problem that requires your services.”

“You want to barter?”

“Yes.”

I’d blinked at the screen, at her flawless image. “Details, please?”

Bethany told me she’d send her two most popular influencers to Spike’s the following night pro bono. (I didn’t bother to tell her she wasn’t using the term properly.) “A few minutes of these two, the business they bring in . . . You’ll see what I’m capable of doing for your friend.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’ll come by the place myself at ten p.m. That’ll give Blake and Alena enough time to get the word out. You like what you see, I’ll give you all the details you need.”

I looked around now at the hectic bar. A group of bearded wannabe hipsters was taking selfies with Alena, while Blake and two barely-of-age girls were doing another cheers. The bartender was taking orders faster than he could fill them, and Spike was across the bar talking to his manager, a huge grin on his face. Everyone was drinking and spending as though the world wasn’t about to end. There was no denying it. I was liking what I was seeing.

I felt a light tap on my shoulder. “Sunny Randall?”

I spun around on my corner barstool, and there she was. Bethany Rose. In the flesh.

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“Sorry I’m a little late. I had a hotel opening on Newbury and traffic was a nightmare.” Strangely enough, I still had no idea how old she was. She looked very much the same as she did on Zoom, though she was smaller than I expected. Doll-size. Standing next to my barstool, she was able to look straight into my eyes, and when I stood up to shake her manicured hand, I could fully see the top of her sleek black pixie cut.

She asked if we could talk somewhere quiet, and we found a table near the window. Spike spotted us and came over to introduce himself. Before I could explain who he was, Bethany told him she’d like to place her order and asked for a glass of Blake and Alena’s fancy cognac.

“This is the owner,” I said. “Bethany, Spike.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Bethany said. “You look so young, I thought you were a hot waiter.”

Spike grinned. “She can stay.” He pulled up a chair and joined us.

Bethany trained her eyes on Spike. They were hard to look away from—the same color as the sky in Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. They had to be colored contacts. “Your girlfriend’s lucky,” she said. “Big, strong drink of water like you . . .”

I could have sworn he blushed. “Boyfriend,” he said.

She turned to me. “Always the best ones.”

Spike blushed even more. No doubt about it. This woman knew how to make friends.

Spike called a waiter over and we all ordered. Pricey cognac for Bethany, more of that good pinot for Spike and me.

After he left, Bethany smiled brightly at both of us, then

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gestured around the room like a boat-show model. “You guys like what you see?” she said.

“Absolutely,” said Spike. Not even attempting to give her the hard sell.

“How do we know this isn’t just a coincidence?” I said. “I think the night game just let out at Fenway.”

A reach. And Bethany knew it. “You let me work my magic,” she said, “and in a few weeks, you’ll consider something like this a slow night.”

“Wow,” Spike said.

I sighed. “Tell me about your problem.”

Bethany removed a file folder from her Birkin bag. “You and I are women, Sunny. We have to work that much harder to prove ourselves every single day, and I think it helps us develop thicker skin than the guys.” She glanced at Spike. “Present company excluded, of course.”

“Understood.”

“I have a lot of young, gorgeous women who are clients. A lot of them have gotten . . . unwanted attention from followers. Alena included.”

“I’d imagine,” I said.

“Anyway, these girls, like I said, are tough. Assholes slide into their DMs, they do like I would do. Tell ’em to fuck off. Nine times out of ten, it works. That’s the end of it.” She pushed the folder across the table and gave me a long, meaningful look.

I opened the folder. Inside was a series of printouts— isolated screenshots of direct messages and comments on

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Instagram posts, nearly a dozen from different accounts, all saying the same thing.

YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW.

“Creepy,” Spike said.

“I assume you checked out the accounts that posted these comments,” I said.

Bethany nodded. “Fakes,” she said. “You click on them, they no longer exist.” She thumbed through the stack, selected one of the printouts, and tapped on the profile picture. “Recognize this girl?”

I did. Most everybody in Boston did. The profile pic was of Carlotta Espinoza. Influencer. Problematic side piece of a powerful political consultant. Missing person and, ultimately, murder victim. “Nice reference,” I said. “Clever.”

“I thought so.”

The other profile pic choices on the fake profiles weren’t as inspired: cats, plant life, household-name celebs like George Clooney and Oprah. It was understandable. Besides Espinoza, I was unaware of any other dead Boston influencers the stalker could have sourced.

“So, you have no idea who might have created these profiles?”

“Nope.”

“And your client doesn’t, either?” I said. “No enemies? No angry exes?”

“Hell hath no fury like an angry ex,” Spike said.

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“Don’t I know it,” Bethany said.

Spike fist-bumped her.

She looked at me. “No troublemakers that I know of.”

“Is it possible,” I said, “that your client could be keeping something from you?”

She shrugged. “Possible, yes. But highly improbable.”

The waiter came by with our drinks and I closed the folder. I’d gotten anonymous threats before. More than once. In my line of work, it was a given.

Not too long ago, I came home to find a picture of my dad, the red light of a rifle scope superimposed onto his face. I knew what that was about: some lowlife, trying to scare me off an investigation. But that didn’t make the feeling any easier to handle—all that hate coming at you from an unknown source. It’s like being the target of that rifle scope. Someone else has all the power.

Bethany thanked the waiter and drank her cognac, swishing it around in her mouth for a while before swallowing it. I sipped my wine.

“Have you tried going to the police?” I said to her.

“They don’t care. They’re overworked. They think it’s nothing. You know this, Sunny. Kids get bullied online into killing themselves and the cops don’t get involved until it’s too late. They’re not going to waste time looking into some influencer’s hate mail.”

“Good point,” I said.

“Look, this client of mine is sensitive,” she said. “And scared.”

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“So, in exchange for marshaling the Gram or whatever it is you said you can do to put Spike’s back on the map,” I said, “you’d like me to track down the stalker.”

“Well, yes. But also—”

“Also?”

“You can shoot a gun, right? Emily told me—”

“I’m not going to kill for you, Bethany.”

“I will,” Spike said.

“He’s kidding.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“I don’t want you to execute this person,” Bethany said. “But I’d like you to spend some time with my client.”

I blinked at her. “Like a bodyguard?”

She let out a heavy sigh. “In his case, it would be more like a babysitter.”

“*His case?*” Spike and I said it at the same time.

Bethany nodded slowly, and I followed her gaze to Blake, who was standing up on his tiptoes, raising his glass and yelling, “*I’m the king of the world!*” so loudly, the girls next to him were plugging their ears.

“*His case,*” she said.