

James Patterson Co-Authorship Contest
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Fingerprints
by John Horner

Chapter 1

The hot, smarmy Los Angeles day outside made for strange bedfellows with the tenuous situation inside the room as a sharply dressed man with crazy eyes held a Colt .45 pistol to a poor lady's temple. The man looked around the room, eyes darting to the left and right, He didn't want to show it and the untrained eye wouldn't be able to tell, but he was nervous along with being very, very afraid.

"Now you listen here," he spoke calmly with self-assurance, but something in the tone of his voice revealed that was all an act. "In my line of work, people have done awful things to me, and I've chosen to do awful things back to them. I don't want to hurt no one, but right now if I do or if I don't, that's your choice. You can choose to be a hero and rush me, try take this gun, call the cops so the good guys win another one. Or you can choose to give me what I came here to get. I shove my gun into the back of my pants without having to use it. I walk away and everybody wins. The good guys can go fuck themselves."

"So this where it ends, in some seedy motel room with you naked and with your flashy boss lying next to you? Do you remember our first date? Or the first time we made love to each other? Or that first our child slept in bed between us because he was afraid of the dark? I want you to think about that as I put a bullet in your head, because seeing you here now with that scumbag puts a bullet straight through my heart," the man spoke measurably, trying carefully to announce every word.

Spade knew he was supposed to be paying attention, but his mind was somewhere else. His back hurt from having to sleep on a couch, his knuckles hurt from having to break someone nose recently, his head hurt from drinking too much last night, and heart hurt from being broken. The man who was talking stopped and made eye contact. He'd been busted drifting off into space. The man was his twin brother, Jerry.

"Damn it, Spade. This is going to be one of the biggest shows on television! How am I supposed to get the part if I can't even get you to pay attention?" His brother looked at him with quiet disapproval as he poured more gin into his coffee.

"You want me to pay attention, eh? While I'm not Consider it sweet revenge for having to pay your rent last month," Spade smirked with satisfaction, never being one afraid to laugh at

his own jokes. This was why he made jokes frequently. It was a trait he and his brother had in common. “Start over, Brother. I want to see if I’m good at acting like I’m listening”.

His brother started reciting his lines yet again, and yet again his mind started to drift. He looked at different objects around the office: a neat stack of files on the secretary’s desk, a trash can that badly needed to be emptied, and, finally, an autographed baseball bat. The bat was a gift from his largely absent, celebrity-poker-player, hard-drinking father. He would never tell this to anyone, except maybe Jerry, but he already knew. He kept it in the office because it was a remnant of the only time his father took them to a baseball game. He couldn’t recall what team had won the game or even receiving the bat; he remembered only two details. The first detail was that he thought his father’s breathe smelled funny. Now he knew that was the smell of expensive vodka. The second detail was a piece of advice from his father. A player had just struck out, and buzzer had just rung; the player’s face had a look of being deeply ashamed.

“Look at that man’s face, kiddos. He has nothing to be disappointed about,” their father’s speech only slightly slurred, “because he swung. I want you to remember to always take a swing in life. Even if the bases are loaded, and you’re losing. Never be afraid to take a chance, never be afraid to swing.” After the game was over he got the only gift his father would ever give him: the bat. The only other gift after that was his drinking problem.

“So, what did you think?” Jerry eyes were filled with hope and expectation. Both of these faded as he realized Spade hadn’t been paying attention.

“I think I’m going to be paying your rent next month,” he said.

Before Jerry had a chance to retort, Lilly, Spade’s octogenarian secretary with the mind of a teenager, walked in the door with ice cream from Lucky Luciano’s. That shop was nothing more than a front for the most powerful crime family in Los Angeles. Spade enjoyed the ice cream thoroughly, but it always left a bad taste in his mouth. “Hello, James and Jerry! I thought I would pick up a little treat since your brother is job shadowing you today.”

That was Lilly, always being thoughtful. Spade met Lilly the same day he’d decided what he wanted to do with his life. After meeting on the city bus, she’d kindly offered to buy him a cup of coffee at the used bookstore she was headed too. As if by divine intervention, he saw his name printed on a stack of books in the mystery section. He knew at that very moment what his true purpose was. Now here he was a decade and one recently failed marriage later. He was Spade Patterson: Private Investigator.

Lilly dutifully dished out the sundaes to each of them, and they began to scarf them down. That was when Spade noticed there was something in his that wasn’t supposed to be there. He fished it out and plopped it on the desk. Intellectually, he knew what it was, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe it. It was a...

“A finger!” Lilly screamed in shock. Jerry jumped out of his chair, but Spade stayed seated. Deep in his own thoughts as he looked at the appendage on his desk, he knew right at that moment he had to make a choice that could very well change the course of his life. He could do

what anyone would easily have done and call the cops, or he could take a swing and go get more ice cream.