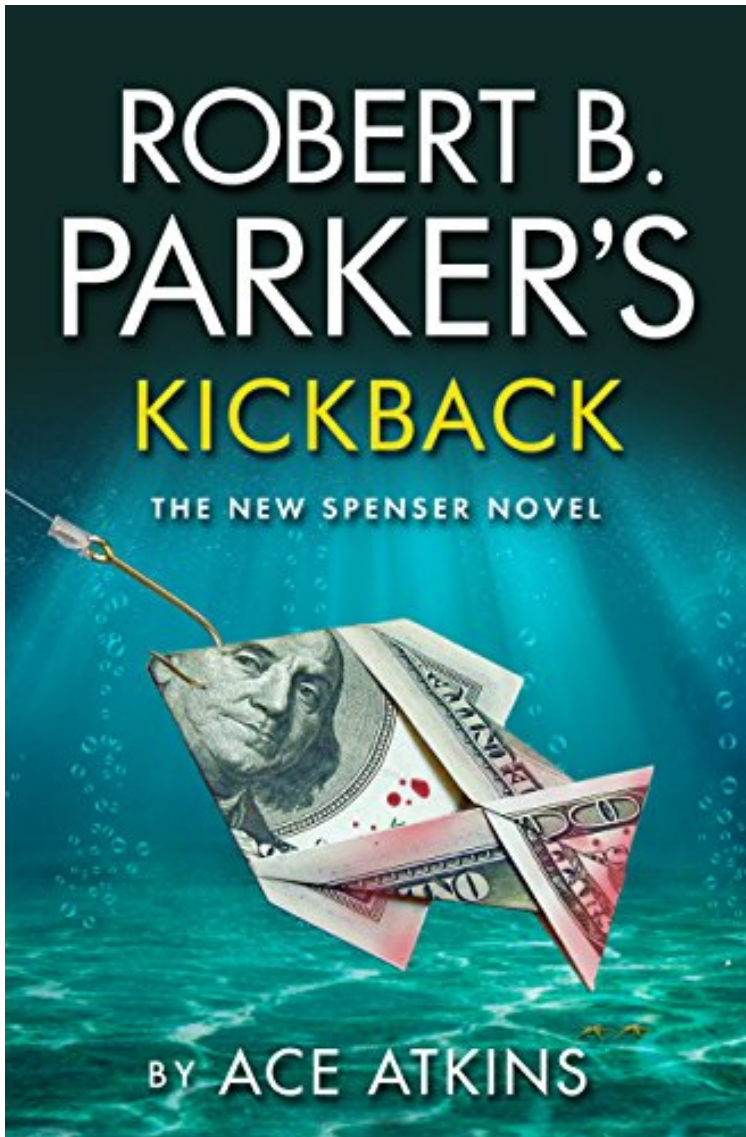


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Robert B Parker's Kickback (The Spenser Series 44)



Par Ace Atkins
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurSpenser is as tough and funny as ever, and Atkins has become a worthy successor' - Booklist The iconic, tough-but-tender Boston PI Spenser returns in an outstanding new addition to the New York Times-bestselling series from author Ace Atkins. What started out as a joke landed seventeen-year-old Dillon Yates in a lockdown juvenile facility in Boston Harbor. When he set up a prank twitter account for his vice principal, he never dreamed he could be brought up on criminal charges, but that's exactly what happened. This is Blackburn, Massachusetts, where zero tolerance for minors is a way of life. Leading the

movement is hard-as-nails Judge Joe Scali, who gives speeches about getting tough on today's wild youth. But Dillon's mother, who knows other Blackburn kids who are doing hard time for minor infractions, isn't buying Scali's line. She hires Spenser to find the truth behind the Draconian sentencing. From the Harbor Islands to a gated Florida community, Spenser and trusted ally Hawk follow a trail through the Boston underworld with links to a shadowy corporation that runs New England's private prisons. They eventually uncover a culture of corruption and cover-ups in the old mill town, where hundreds of kids are sent off to for-profit juvie jails.

Maybe he shouldn't have gone out and celebrated. Maybe he should have stuck around for the vanilla ice cream after the lasagna victory meal. But what-ifs and should-haves didn't cut it the next morning as the gray dawn crept up at five a.m. over a row of clapboard houses with peeling blue and green paint. You could smell the Merrimack River rolling by. The cops were there. They were talking to the old man with the gun. The boy stood in the open, his pal Tim already in a squad car. Tim's old man's Coupe de Ville getting hooked up to a tow truck with spinning lights. His parents were going to freak. Another cop was talking to the boy now, wanting to know how much they had to drink. I don't know, he said. A beer. Maybe two. That's illegal, the cop said. You're only seventeen. Yeah, he said, not caring for a lecture, knowing he was screwed. No shit. The cop just shook his head. He was young, maybe five years older than the boy. The cop stood ramrod straight, had hair clipped close like he'd been in the military. He wrote down some notes, wanting to know the boy's parents' phone number. It's just my dad, he said. I live with my dad. Is your mom alive? Yeah, he said. But I don't talk to her. Listen, this is a big mistake. We weren't doing nothing. We were just fooling around and that crazy old guy comes busting out the garage door waving his pistol and saying he was going to blow our brains out. Why were you in his garage? We were lost, the kid said. We ran out of gas. Is the car stolen? No, it's not stolen, the kid said. It belongs to my friend. It was his grandfather's and then his father's. He rebuilt the engine. Now it's his. Kind of. What do you mean kind of his? the cop said. It's his, the kid said. His old man lets him use it when he wants. He's gonna get the title on the Caddy when we graduate. What school? Blackburn, he said. I go to Blackburn High. Am I getting charged with something? Because I don't see what we did. I mean, we're not the one with the gun. The cop looked over to a squad car and an older cop with stripes on his sleeve. The old man nodded to the younger. Out came the handcuffs. Shit, the kid said. I knew it. I fucking knew it. The night was gone, slipping into a dull bluish-gray morning, roadwork light when he'd wake up and jog those five miles. Every day. Even Sunday. He wasn't an all-night-party kind of guy. But Tim had told his parents he was staying with him and he'd told his dad he'd be at Tim's. They didn't have anywhere to go after the party was over. There were girls and beer. Danielle had been there with that older guy and he wasn't about to leave first. Now the spinning blue lights. You're being charged with attempted burglary, the cop said. You got some beer in the car. And we found a controlled substance. Shit. The girl from the party, the one Tim had made out with, had given them a few pills. They didn't know what they were, didn't even ask. Tim had tried to be cool, stick them in his pocket. Now they were drug dealers. Yesterday morning, he'd stood on the podium with a gold medal around his neck for winning his weight class in Worcester. His dad had been proud. His coach. His grandmother had cooked a big Italian meal for them, even turning off the TV as they said grace. She'd made lasagna, a big salad to keep him healthy and in shape, ice cream since the next wrestling tournament was weeks away. It had been a perfect day. Damn near everything had clicked into place. Now he was being pushed into the back of a squad car with Tim. He'd like to be mad at his friend, but this wasn't his fault. No one forced him into that garage to see if they could find a can of gas. Controlled substance? Now he'd be labeled a drug addict, too. He tried to calm himself, think rationally. You let your head get filled with a bunch of junk and you can't think straight. What he did wasn't smart, but it wasn't the worst. He'd tell his dad the truth. He'd never lied to him. His dad knew some Blackburn cops and they'd straighten out the whole mess. This was a mistake. A really bad mistake, but just a screwup. Nothing like this ever screwed up a person's whole life. A person does the right thing every day of his life and that has to mean something. A kid pushes himself to run faster, lift more, not ever quit. You build up some kind of points for that. Right? Can I have my phone back? he said. The cop didn't answer. Don't I get to make a call? You can do that at juvie intake, the cop said. The young cop wasn't looking at him as he slammed the door shut. What do we do now? he said to Tim. Pray hard and fast, Tim said. We're freakin' screwed.

On the first day of February, the coldest day of the year so far, I took it as a very good omen that a woman I'd never met brought me a sandwich. I had my pair of steel-toed Red Wings kicked up on the corner of my desk, thawing out, when she arrived. My morning coffee and two corn muffins were a distant memory. She laid down the sandwich wrapped in wax paper and asked if my name was Spenser. Depends on the sandwich. A grinder from Coppa in the South End, she said. Extra provolone

and pickled cherry peppers. Then my name is Spenser, I said. With an S like the English poet. Rita said you were easy. If you mean Rita Fiore, she's not one to judge. She also said you're tough. True. And hardheaded. Also true, I said. And did she say if you scratched behind my left ear my leg would shake? No, the woman said, squeezing into a client chair. But when I told her my problems, she said to go see Spenser. And bring him a sandwich? She said that would help. I shrugged and walked over to the Mr. Coffee on top of my file cabinet, poured a cup, and offered her one. She declined. I mixed in a little sugar, set the spoon on the cabinet, and moved back to my desk. My peacoat and Brooklyn Dodgers cap hung neatly from my coat tree. You can go ahead and eat, she said. Don't let it get cold. I unwrapped the sandwich, which was still miraculously warm, and took a bite. I nodded with appreciation. The woman had indeed made a friend.

Outside, traffic bustled and zoomed along Berkeley and Boylston. It was still early, but dark and insular, with snow predicted all week. I had crossed winter days off the calendar until opening day for the Sox. My name is Sheila Yates, she said. Three weeks ago, my son Dillon was taken from me by the state of Massachusetts. He was sentenced to nine months in a juvie facility out in the harbor. She motioned with her chin as if you could see the harbor from the Back Bay. I was still able to leap medium-size buildings in a single bound, but my X-ray vision was a bit iffy. Sheila was big and blond, with thick, overly styled hair, a lot of makeup, and gold jewelry. She wore a blue sweater and blue jeans under a heavy camel-colored coat.

She also wore a lot of perfume, which in small quantities might have been pleasant. What did he do? I said. Jack shit. Okay, I said. What was he charged with? Terrorism, stalking, and making physical threats against a school administrator. I started to whistle, but my mouth was full. I chewed and swallowed and then took a sip of coffee. You want to know what he really did? I nodded. He set up a fake Twitter account for his vice principal, she said. He's a funny kid. Although some might say he's a smart-ass. I like him already. Does any of this make sense to you? What did your lawyer say? Then? Sheila said. We didn't have a lawyer. I couldn't make the hearing. I had to work or I'd get fired, so Dillon's grandfather took him. It's my mistake. I would have never signed that stupid piece of paper. It waived his right to an attorney. Not good. You bet your ass, she said. Rita's now got a young attorney at her firm to help. Did he make threatening remarks on Twitter? I said. No way, she said. It was all a big joke. He may have wrote something about the guy getting his privates stuck in an appliance. He did say the guy liked to garden in the nude. In all fairness, I said, pruning shears could be dangerous. You get it, Sheila said. It's a gag. I've been doing this for a long time, I said. And in those years it never ceases to amaze me the great wealth of people born without a sense of humor. Sheila took in a large breath, threw her hands up in the air, jewelry clanging, and said, Oh, thank God, she said. So you'll help me? What can I do? I said. Sounds like Rita's firm is on it. They are, she said. But while they're filing papers and stuff, I want to know how this crap happened. Rita says it's one of the craziest things she's ever heard. Where was he charged? Blackburn. Ah, I said. The Riviera of the North. Wasn't my choice to live there, she said. I grew up in Newton. I took a job there after I split with Dillon's dad. You do what you can. I nodded. I reached over the sandwich for a yellow legal pad and wrote her name at the top left corner. I asked her for a phone number and an address. I asked her son's full legal name and his date of birth.

She told me more about the charges and then a lot about the judge. Judge Scali, she said. He's a class-A prick. Now, that's a campaign slogan. He's the Zero Tolerance for Minors guy, she said. You know who I'm talking about now? He's all over the news and on the radio. He says what he does is tough love. Says parents that complain can deal with him now or go see their kids at Walpole later. Never heard of him. Well, he's a big freakin' deal in Blackburn, she said. Everyone up there is afraid of him. They think his word is God. The DA, the public defender, the cops. No one will listen to me. That's when I called Rita. I used to work in the business office at Cone, Oakes. I don't have a law degree, but I know when I'm being jerked around. How's Dillon? They won't let me see him, she said, reaching into her purse for a tissue. They won't let me talk to him but once every couple weeks. They say it's part of his rehabilitation out on Fortune Island. Rehabbing what? Being a wise guy? These people up there are nuts. She started to cry but then just as quickly wiped her eyes and sat up. I leaned back into my chair. I crossed my arms over my chest. I can't make any promises, I said.

But I can check into things. Maybe find out something to help your attorney for appeals. Thank God, she said. When can you start? I looked down at the day planner on my desk. I flipped through several empty pages. How about tomorrow? Jesus, you mean it? she said, standing, coming around the desk. As I stood, she reached to hug me. I didn't return the embrace, only patted her back a couple times. You know I probably can't afford your day rate, whatever it is. I saw how much some snoops charged the firm. Outrageous. But you'll help anyway? I nodded. She walked back to the client chair and grabbed her big purse. She did not sit. I looked down at my desk and saw my sandwich waiting, only one bite mark in place. The coffee had

probably grown cold. Thank you, she said. I haven't been able to sleep or eat since this happened. I blame my dad. I blame myself. The only person I don't blame is Dillon. Doesn't sound like it's his fault. He's a good kid, she said. He doesn't deserve to be treated like this. Nobody does. Everyone in Blackburn says I'm an outsider, she said. They tell me to let this all play out. Keep my mouth shut. Don't piss people off. Let me piss 'em off, I said. I heard you're good at that. Yeah, I said. I've had years of practice.

Blackburn, Massachusetts, didn't appear on many tourist maps of New England. The old mill town, about thirty miles north of Boston on I-93, had lost any of its Norman Rockwell charm long ago. The huge brick mills stood like forgotten fortresses along the slow-moving black water of the Merrimack. The skies were gray. A light snow was falling. As I crossed over a rusting metal bridge, I saw ice chunks in the river. I made a mental note: only sixty-nine days until opening day. I drove around a bit, cruising the downtown and Central Avenue toward the Victorian-era city hall. Most of the storefronts sat empty. I passed the police station, an all-night diner called The Owl, a Vietnamese grocery, and several corner bars. There was the high end of town with an upstart coffee shop and a ladies boutique. There was a low end of town with Farmans Salvage and a scratch-and-dent furniture warehouse. I soon ended up in front of Blackburn High School and parked in a space reserved for the school resource officer. Might as well start making friends now. Blackburn High looked to have been built in the twenties, constructed of blondish brick and dull glass blocks. According to a sign, it was home to the Fighting Eagles. I checked in at the office, as thuggish middle-aged men were often frowned upon for wandering school corridors. And these days, schools were locked down after the first bell. A dour-looking woman in an oversized T-shirt reading ACHIEVE! issued me a badge, unlocked the entrance, and gave me directions to where I was headed. The school had that familiar scent of old books and disinfectants. Being in school always tightened my stomach. My best day in high school had been graduation. I found Officer Lorenzo sitting at his desk, hunched over a computer and not looking up even after I knocked on his open door. He was a fat guy with a couple chins in need of a shave. He wore a baseball hat, too small for his big head, with an embroidered law enforcement star reading BLACKBURN POLICE DEPARTMENT. I waited in the doorway until he could summon the energy to look up at me. To call his appearance slothlike was a true insult to the animal kingdom. Fill out the form, he said. You can drop it at the front desk. He had yet to look up. I didn't speak. Finally he lifted his eyes, refocusing. Yeah? I'm not here for the form. Arent you a sub? Do I look like a sub? You look like me, he said. A guy who loads trucks. Well, I'm not here to award you officer of the year. Ha, ha, he said. Then what the hell do you want? I took a seat without being asked. His minuscule office was very sloppy, filled with stacks of newspapers, old copies of Guns Ammo, and a shelf full of playbook binders. He'd fitted cardboard in the windows to keep out any light. He assessed me through smudged metal-frame glasses and shifted on his sizable rump. I handed him a card across the desk. He took a very long time to read my name, occupation, and phone number. Cops in schools were still strange to me. But these days, it was the norm. Yeah? he said. I work for Sheila Yates, I said. Earlier this year, you arrested her son Dillon for setting up a Twitter profile for Vice Principal Waters. You charged him with stalking, making physical threats, and terrorism. Goddamn right I did, he said, crossing his meaty arms across his chest. That's all done with. Not for Dillon, I said. He's cooling his heels out on Fortune Island, which I gather isn't Boys Town. Not my business, he said. The kid was nuts. He's got mental problems. How so? Officer Lorenzo leaned forward, took a sip from a plastic Coke bottle, and leaned back into his seat. His chair was under considerable duress and creaked loudly during the process. You clear this? Because you can't just walk in here and start asking me a lot of questions. I checked in at the office, I said. They told me all law enforcement matters were your turf. He smiled, eyeing me with new enthusiasm. The man in charge. The top dog. Still, I wanted to reach over and clean his glasses. You ever been a cop, Spenser? Sure. Then you know what kind of crap these kids are capable of, he said. I back down an inch, show I'm weak, and they'll take advantage of it. I see them looking at me like I'm just some fat doofus. They think protecting this school is a joke. I start laughing with them and the next thing I know some kid like Dillon Yates is running down the halls with an AR-15. Quite a step up from cracking jokes. You can't give an inch, Lorenzo said. Not a fucking inch. No one wants to see a fat doofus in charge. Damn right. I couldn't tell if he was doing Eastwood or Wayne. He seemed more along the lines of Roscoe Arbuckle. Okay, I said. So tell me what concerned you about what he did. Have you met Luke Waters? he said. I shook my head. He's a class guy, he said. You know? Grew up in Blackburn and loves this town. He coaches the ninth-grade football team. Lives his life for these kids. This guy went from being respected to kids snickering behind his back because of that Yates kid. Last time he held an assembly he couldn't even get kids to sit still and listen. It broke his heart. Wow. What did Dillon's mom tell you? That these were just some smart-aleck remarks? Pretty much. The kid wrote some

highly disturbing things on that tweeter thing, he said. You know what Im talking about? All the kids mess with that crap. My fans run my account. Well, I saw what he wrote. He kept on running down Vice President Waters. He wrote about crazy sexual shit and mutilations. We took it as a genuine threat. Lorenzo widened his eyes as if the vagueness was enough. I nodded a few times in mock understanding. For instance? I dont have to discuss all this with you, he said. Go talk with the chief. Im a Blackburn police officer, and I did my duty to charge the kid. It was up to the judge to decide what to do. Nine months is a bit excessive, I said. For something written online. Kids sentencing isnt my department, he said. You think Im tough? You hadnt met Judge Scali. Hes the true ballbuster in this town. I cant wait. He doesnt care what you think, or the parents think, or any of the bleeding hearts, he said. The judge was elected on Zero Tolerance and he means it. Since hes taken the bench, hes cut juvenile crime in half. He doesnt let shit slide like you people in Boston. He knows if he doesnt reach kids now, theyre gonna be sticking a gun in someones face tomorrow. Its tough love, but it works. I seen it happen. Even if theres no crime committed? Lorenzo shook his head. You got sold a bill of goods, Boston, he said. You got a couple parents around here who wont get with the program and they say life is unfair. I dont feel sorry for them in the least. Can I see the report? No, he said. Thats fine, I said. Ive got a release from his mother. Good luck, then, he said. Whyd you want to see me? I wanted to meet the man who started all this. The fat man stood, showing he was much shorter than expected, which was perhaps the source of his irritability. He put his hands on his hips as if to show our conversation was over. He adjusted his BPD cap and tried in vain to suck in his gut. Dont expect a lot of cooperation in Blackburn, he said. All your liberal crap doesnt fly here. Its a tough town to grow up in, and tough love is the only way we keep things safe. Understand now? I saluted him. He scowled back. How about you tell me this. Just what exactly did Dillon Yates write that got the vice principal so upset? No way. Doesnt matter, I said. I can look it up. I just thought youd stand behind your charge. Goddamn right I do, Lorenzo said, and reached up with his hand to rub both chins. What the hell. Ill tell you. I waited. Lorenzo ran a finger under his nose and sniffed. He took a couple breaths. I tried to ease my quickening heart. He said Luke Waters got his dick stuck in a VCR. I stifled a laugh. Lorenzo didnt like it. You think thats fucking funny? he said. I do, I said. Man versus technology is always comedy gold. He glowered. It made me want to laugh even more. On the way out, I winked at him and walked out into the hall, nearly knocking down a gawky girl fiddling with a locker. She looked embarrassed and smiled at me, pulling back a blackened streak from her otherwise white-blond hair. I peered back into the open door, just in time to see Lorenzo tossing my business card in the trash.³ The criminal courthouse was on Blackburns highest hill, across from the city cemetery and a public housing complex. The building was old and stately, as it should be, with a lot of brass, marble, and dark oak inside. Cavernous, with the air quality of a museum or a summerhouse shut up for the winter. On the first floor, an art nouveau bronze statue of blind Lady Justice stood proud but tarnished, with courtrooms on both sides of an open staircase leading to the clerks office. I bypassed a curving staircase for an elevator. Id recently had surgery on my right knee. A lifes work of busting heads and kicking butts could be hard on the joints. Upstairs, I found a frizzy-haired blondish woman not so hard at work at a computer. The building wasnt well heated or insulated. The frizzy-haired woman wore a blue overcoat and fingerless gloves at her desk. When I leaned in, I saw she was checking her Facebook account. I gave her a high-wattage, dynamite smile and slid across a faxed release from Sheila Yates. She glanced up at me, somehow immune to my charms, and then down at the paper. I considered arching an eyebrow but I didnt want her falling out of her chair. Whats that? she said. A parental release. For what? For all police and court files related to one Dillon Yates. Is he a minor? Indeed he is. Well, all juvenile records are sealed, she said, with little remorse. Clicking away. Not to parents, I said. Are you the parent? I dont think so. Law enforcement? Not for a long while, I said. I dont like to wake up early. Sorry, she said, with even less remorse. I really cant help you. I reached into my wallet and showed her that Id been licensed by the Commonwealth as a private investigator. She glanced down at the license, unimpressed. I wondered what shed have thought of my Napoleon Solo all-access badge. As she looked back at me, I arched the eyebrow. Oh, what the hell. Doesnt matter, she said. The parent may view the file. But may not take the file with them or make copies. The parent has signed the release, I said. The release is now on your desk. You cant just go and transfer parental rights. I am not seeking to be the kids parent, I said. I am seeking access to the files to help with his court case. She looked at her screen, not switching over to a database, keeping it on her personal Facebook page. Has the case been adjudicated? Yep. Then how are you going to help? Ever heard of an appeal? I said. She didnt answer, returning to her Facebook page, clicking away. I glanced down and saw her smile at a photo of a couple kittens in a basket of flowers. Always cute seeing tax dollars at work, I said and left. I ungracefully took the

marble steps down to the lobby, past Lady Justice, my work boots echoing through the giant courthouse with each methodical step. The courthouse seemed empty, oddly quiet, and with all the personality of a mausoleum. I would have to return with some legal saberrattling from Cone, Oakes. Sometimes a threatening letter was better than a 357. Back out into the spitting snow, I found a Blackburn PD patrol car had parked behind my Ford Explorer. A cop was examining my license tag and writing down the numbers. This town was just getting better and better. The cemetery stretched out far and wide behind where we both stood. Last weeks snow sat piled up high and dirty on the curbs. I crossed the street, leaned against my SUV, and waited. The cop was a young, thin guy with the high-and-tight haircut of ex-military. If he hadnt been in the Army, he needed a refund from the barber. He wore wraparound sunglasses and one of those satiny blue cop jackets with a Sherpa collar. His prowl car idled, throwing out a lot of exhaust in the cold. When he finished writing down what he needed, he turned to spit. I didnt offer to shake hands. Sir, were you at Blackburn High School this morning? he said. Yep. Why was that? Signing up for Glee Club, I said. A little old for that, he said. Arent you? He stared at me with the black bug lenses of his sunglasses. I smiled back and said, I do a mean Lady Gaga. Vice Principal Waters said you were found roaming the halls, he said. We take school security very seriously in Blackburn. Now, you want to tell me what you were doing? I met with Officer Lorenzo about a legal matter. Why dont you call him? Thats not what we heard from Mr. Waters. Maybe Luke Waters is still sore after his encounter with the VCR. The young cop changed up his stance a little, called into dispatch from a mic he wore on his heavy jacket. The dispatcher came back with a rundown of my vehicle registration. I hoped my parking ticket collection didnt show up. I hadnt paid a ticket since the Flynn administration. The cop stared at me as he listened to dispatch. We could get you for trespassing, he said. But I let you off with a warning. Terrific, I said. Thanks so much. You think Im kidding, sir? he said, giving me his best hard look. No, I said. But someones giving you some bum information. He turned his head and spit again. He held the notebook in his hand and just stared at me. The patrol car continued to idle. I smiled at him. Id stay clear of Blackburn, sir, he said. Just please go on back to Boston. Im just a rambling boy who wont settle down, I said. This just aint my kind of town. The young cop didnt react, only turned and walked back to his prowlie, flipped it into drive, and drove off. I watched his taillights disappear over the hill. Blackburn was going to be more fun than I thought. 4 When I got back to Boston, Susan met me at my apartment, standing in the doorway and holding an empty dog leash. Well, that looks interesting, I said. Please be gentle. Get your running shoes on, Fido, she said. Weve been waiting. Ten minutes later, wed crossed Storrow Drive and were walking at a brisk pace along the Charles River. The river was frozen and covered in snowdrifts, looking barren. Few were so foolish as to be out exercising. But I was protected in my cold-weather gear, thermal underwear under navy sweatpants and a sweatshirt cut to the elbows with a watch cap. Susan wore black yoga pants and a gray Harvard sweatshirt under a ski jacket. Pearl pulled Susan along, and we both strained to keep up. When it came to knee rehab, Susan made Henry Cimoli look like Florence Nightingale. But the knee had improved, the limp all but gone. We followed the river, went over the Harvard Bridge, and took the path by the MIT boathouse and then went back to the river. The Longfellow Bridge was still under renovation, tall wooden panels and chain-link fencing closing off the work. We cut through Beacon Hill and made our way down Charles and into the Public Garden, most of the green space hidden in mounds of snow. I miss the tulips, she said. And anything green. I miss the swan boats, I said, baseball, and short skirts. Not necessarily in that order. Pearls tongue lolled from her mouth. I tried to keep my tongue in place. I found it more dignified. The night was full on, streetlamps blooming yellow light over snowbanks and skeletal trees. We made our way across Arlington, down Marlborough, and finally back up to my apartment. Once upstairs and inside, I opened the refrigerator and found a six-pack of Abita Turbodog. Susan and Pearl drank water. Howd it go in Blackburn, kiddo? she said, leaning her fanny against my kitchen counter. She removed her hooded sweatshirt to reveal a snug-fitting black exercise top. As always, I felt a familiar surge zap through my chest. She noticed the staring and smiled, her teeth very even and white, her delicate face flushed from the cold wind. I was greeted with open arms, I said. Everyone couldnt be more helpful. I pointed out the error of their ways and all charges against the kid were dismissed. Uh-huh, Susan said. They ran you out of town on a rail. Not yet, I said. But I heard theyre prepping the rail. Administrators seldom see the error of their ways, she said. Why do you think I ditched the guidance-counselor gig? Because you longed to be a shrink with a fancy Ph.D.? I liked the kids, she said. The administrators mostly sucked. I sat on a bar stool and stretched out my leg, pulling up the sweatpants to examine the new scar. I wont get much help, I said. This judge who sentenced the kid is pretty popular among the yokels. They think hes keeping down the juvie crime. Is he? I dont know. Maybe hes just an

asshole? That would be my guess. You can't overturn a decision based on the guy being a jerk, Susan said. I've worked with a lot of kids in that system. The judges have a free hand. You just hope they're fair. My client believes there's something hinkier than just the judge being an a-hole, I said. She thinks there's a conspiracy up there. About what? She doesn't know, I said. She just knows a lot of kids are being railroaded through this system. Are you being paid on this? I took a deep breath. My fee hasn't been discussed. You did recently get a nice paycheck from Kinjo Heywood, she said. You can afford to do one off the books. I stood and filled a pot with water to boil. I had red beans with andouille sausage simmering in a Crock-Pot all day. I added rice to the water when it boiled, then I started to chop green peppers and onions. My chopping was quick but masterly. I placed a baguette from the Flour Bakery in the oven. I opened a second bottle of Abita, interspersing sips of beer with a glass of water. I pulled out some plates and opened a bottle of sauvignon blanc for Susan. I put an old Louis Jordan album on the turntable. While you slave over the stove, I'll freshen up, she said. A truly modern relationship. Would you rather me cook? We each have our talents. Pearl trotted into the kitchen. And the baby's? she said. I tossed a hunk of baguette into the air. Pearl caught it. Kitchen detail, I said. And mine? Susan said. Besides helping the depressed, the neurotic, and the true wackos of Boston and Cambridge? Yes. How graphic would you like me to get? I set down the knife, walked up close, and wrapped my arms around her small waist. Susan whispered things into my ear that would have made a fleet of sailors blush. I held her tighter. We kissed as the rice simmered, and until I felt a buzzing in my pants. Susan laughed. It buzzed again. Susan stepped back as I reached for my cell. She disappeared into my bedroom. I read through a text message and set the phone down. First day of school and I'm a big hit, I said, yelling to the bedroom. Young girls already texting me. Should I be jealous? Susan said. Only if I take my letterman's jacket out of mothballs. Do you even own a letterman's jacket? Of course, I said. She wants to meet tomorrow. What's her name? I'm not sure, I said. She refers to Dillon as her BFF. Maybe someone is trying to set you up. I heard the shower start to run. Of course. I sipped the beer and listened to Louis sing. But there's only one way to find out. He stayed fifteen days in Lawrence before two cops in a black van drove him to the Blackburn courthouse. They forced him to change into an orange jumpsuit, shackled his wrists, and led him up a back stairway and into a small courtroom with a tall ceiling. Every word and every move seemed to echo off the wooden walls. He was told to sit down in the front row and shut up. He turned to see his dad standing in the back row. His dad wore a suit. He didn't even know his dad had a suit. Up on the bench was the judge, a short, Italian-looking guy with black hair and wearing a black robe. He didn't seem big or tough. The judge had on a Patriots Super Bowl cap and laughed it up with two bailiffs who wore guns. The judge spoke low, but something he said really set off the two men. They laughed hard. He looked back to his dad. His dad caught his eye and nodded back. Maybe he'd fixed the thing. Maybe his dad had called one of his cop pals and all this would go away. What he wanted more than anything was a shower and McDonald's. He'd had dreams last night about a double cheese and fries. He looked down the row at the other kids brought in. He didn't see Tim, which was strange. Tim had been with him at Lawrence and then gone. He figured that they wanted to keep them separate, make sure they couldn't connect their stories like cops talked about on Law Order. The shackles and orange jumpsuit made the boy depressed and humiliated. He wanted his street clothes back. The judge took off his Pats cap, showing a long strand of black hair plastered to his pale scalp. He nodded to a bailiff, who told everyone to rise. The room was very quiet and hot, smelling of a stale furnace. The judge flipped through some folders, his eyes never looking at all the faces crammed into the courtroom. Not nervous. Just seeming not to care. He wore the kind of glasses that had a purplish tint and would turn full dark in the sun. The boy hunched his shoulders and looked down at his hands. He waited for his name to be called. He was a big kid, big for his age, but today he felt small. It was Wednesday, and he'd already missed two weeks of school. He wondered what his friends would say. What his wrestling coach would say. This was senior year, and he couldn't have something like this in his file. Everything had to be perfect for a scholarship. He never expected the room to be so crowded and so hot. He grew hungrier. More kids were led inside wearing orange jumpsuits, boys and girls. All of them with bound wrists. Some of the new kids' names were read before his. He figured it took nearly three hours before his name was called. He stood, looked back to his dad. But his dad had disappeared. He looked to the bench and the doorway he'd entered. His dad was gone. The bailiff pushed him along until he stood before the judge. Judge Scali looked down from on high at the boy. He rubbed his face as he considered the papers in front of him. You go to Blackburn? he said. Yes, sir, the boy said. Did you come and hear me speak in the fall? he said. Or were you skipping school? I heard it, the boy said. You came to our auditorium. And what did I say? Stay off drugs? the boy said. Some kids snickered behind him and Scali shot them a mean glance. What else? Stay out of trouble,

the boy said. Or what? You didn't give second chances. The judge smiled. His glass lenses a deep purple. That's right, he said. And so you rode around in a stolen car and then tried to rob an old man? No, sir. Scali shook his head. He breathed deeply. He looked to a bailiff and shook his head like the boy made him sick. Are you telling me the police are lying? No, sir. I know the police in this town, Scali said. I never even met you.

You've been charged with car theft and attempted robbery. Do you understand your charges? *Revue de presse* In short, *Kickback* is classic Spenser - the Spenser of wry wit, tasty food and drinks, hard workouts and lethal confrontations. It's a reader's guide to greater Boston and a nostalgic trip into the noir world of guys who privately investigate all manner of wrongdoing. Once again, Atkins has delivered a thriller that evokes the best of Parker's Spenser series, not least the punchy back-and-forth of the dialogue. *Associated Press* *Kickback* is the best one yet, with Spenser in fine wisecracking fettle. Fans of the series will be gratified that both Hawk and Susan Silverman, Spenser's brilliant and beloved squeeze, get plenty of presence, along with Pearl the Wonder Dog. There are just enough bursts of violent action as Spenser untangles the whole sordid mess and at least some justice is done. Good to have you in town, Spenser. *Tampa Bay Times* Atkins does a wonderful job with the characters created by Parker. To loyalists it may be heresy, but a case can be made for the Atkins novels being better than some of the last Spenser mysteries penned by Parker. A top-notch thriller. *Booklist* (starred) It's great to see Spenser tackle a social evil with its roots in real life. *Kirkus* A topical plot line propels bestseller Atkins's engrossing fourth Spenser novel. Once again, Atkins has done a splendid job of capturing the voice of the late Robert B. Parker. *Publishers Weekly* Another gritty and riveting Spenser novel in the best tradition of Robert B. Parker. Mark Rubinstein, *The Huffington Post* You can always tell if you're reading a great Spenser novel because you start to read with a Boston accent. So it is with Robert B. Parker's *Kickback* written in impeccable style by Ace Atkins. Atkins and Parker take us on an incredible trip down the road of greed and corruption beginning in the blue-collar town of Blackburn, Ma, extending into Mob-infested Boston and all the way down to the wealthy Gulf Coast of Florida. Robert B. Parker is smiling down on this brilliant Spenser adventure. It's full of everything we've come to expect from the Boston Private Investigator: action, smart-mouthed sarcasm, the assistance of Hawk and most of all, justice. *Suspense Magazine*