



Robert B. Parker's Slow Burn (Spenser)

By Ace Atkins

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Boston PI Spenser faces a hot case and a personal crisis in the latest adventure in the iconic *New York Times*–bestselling series from author Ace Atkins.

The fire at a boarded-up Catholic church raged hot and fast, lighting up Boston's South End and killing three firefighters who were trapped in the inferno. A year later, as the city prepares to honor their sacrifice, there are still no answers about how the deadly fire started. Most at the department believe it was just a simple accident: faulty wiring in a century-old building. But Boston firefighter Jack McGee, who lost his best friend in the blaze, suspects arson.

McGee is convinced department investigators aren't sufficiently connected to the city's lowlifes to get a handle on who's behind the blaze—so he takes the case to Spenser. Spenser quickly learns not only that McGee might be right, but that the fire might be linked to a rash of new arsons, spreading through the city, burning faster and hotter every night. Spenser follows the trail of fires to Boston's underworld, bringing him, his trusted ally Hawk, and his apprentice Sixkill toe-to-toe with a dangerous new enemy who wants Spenser dead, and doesn't play by the city's old rules. Spenser has to find the firebug before he kills again – and stay alive himself.

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Robert B. Parker's Slow Burn (Spenser) By Ace Atkins Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #190953 in Books
- Brand: Putnam Pub Group
- Published on: 2016-05-03
- Released on: 2016-05-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x 1.20" w x 6.20" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“Scene-by-scene, line-by-line pleasures are authentic.”—*Kirkus*

“Atkins tosses in a surprising change to his lead’s status quo, and series fans will be eager to see what he does with it in Spenser’s next outing.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A 5-alarm thriller...Atkins deftly recreates the Spenser character and his Boston milieu.”—Associated Press

“Sizzling...*Slow Burn* rises to a blazing finish and leaves Spenser with some major decisions to make. Can’t wait to find out how it goes.”—*Tampa Bay Times*

About the Author

Robert B. Parker was the author of seventy books, including the legendary Spenser detective series, the novels featuring police chief Jesse Stone, and the acclaimed Virgil Cole–Everett Hitch westerns, as well as the Sunny Randall novels. Winner of the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master Award and long considered the undisputed dean of American crime fiction, he died in January 2010.

Ace Atkins is the Edgar Award–nominated author of seventeen books, including the forthcoming Quinn Colson novel *The Redeemers*, and was selected by the Robert B. Parker estate to continue the Spenser novels, most recently the *New York Times* bestsellers *Robert B. Parker’s Kickback* and *Robert B. Parker’s Cheap Shot*.

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I

The Harbor Health Club had returned to its roots.

Not only was boxing allowed, it was now encouraged by Henry Cimoli. For a waterfront gym that had weathered both urban renewal and Zumba, the time had come. Henry and I took a break from the boxing ring and watched a dozen or so young professionals, men and women, listen to a Cree Indian from Montana teach them how to deliver a left jab.

Henry had a welded cage built in the expanse of what had been the workout room, heavy bags swinging from the platform. Half the gym was now boxing, the other half free weights and Crossfit gear. Hawk and I were quite pleased. Not to mention Z, whom Henry had employed for the last two years and had ushered in the new era.

“You didn’t have to do all of this for us.”

“I did it for Mr. Green,” he said, rubbing his thumb and two fingers together. “What makes the world go ‘round.’”

“What if aerobics come back in style?”

“I’ll bring in fucking monkeys on unicycles if it’ll keep this gym open,” he said. “If you hadn’t noticed, this building isn’t on Skid Row anymore.”

“I could tell by the yachts moored outside,” I said. “I pick up on subtle clues like that.”

We leaned against the ropes, like cowboys on a split rail fence, watching Z help a fit young woman in a pink sports bra throw a left hook.

“To be young,” Henry said.

“*The moments passed as at a play*,” I said.

“And I have the ex-wives to prove it,” Henry said, letting himself out of the ropes and down the short

steps. He walked over to help Z instruct the lithe young woman. I admired his commitment.

I spent a half hour on a treadmill, showered, and changed into my street clothes: Levi's, black pocket T-shirt, and a pair of tan suede desert boots. As I was headed to the street, a rotund man in a gray sweatshirt whistled for me. He'd been running the dumbbell rack with biceps curls, his fat face flushed and sweaty. Jack McGee wiped a towel over his neck and said, "Christ, Spenser. I been waiting for you all freakin' morning."

"Nice to be needed."

I shook his wet hand. Jack sweated a lot. He was a short, thick guy with Irish written all over his face. I'd known him for many years, and in the many I'd known him he'd been a Boston firefighter. Being a firefighter was more than a job for Jack, it was a calling.

"I got a problem," he said. Whispering, although most of Henry's clients were in the boxing room.

"Superset your bis and tris," I said. "Work the dumbbells with press downs."

"Are you busy with anything right now?"

I shrugged. "I just finished an insurance fraud case," I said. "But I'm always on standby for the big S projected into the clouds over Boston."

"Well, I got a big fucking S for you," he said. "As in the shit has hit the fan."

"I'm familiar with that S."

"There's this thing."

"There's always a thing," I said.

"Can we talk outside?"

McGee followed me out to my newish blue Explorer. I tossed my gym bag into the back and leaned against door with my arms folded over my chest. I had worked out hard and my biceps bulged from my T-shirt. I feared if I stood there any longer, I might be accosted by passing women.

"You know about the fire last year?" McGee said.

Everyone knew about the fire last year. Three firefighters had died at an old church in the South End. The funeral Mass had been televised on local TV. There had been an inquiry. I'd never spoken to Jack about it other than offer my condolences.

"For the last year, I've been saying it was arson," he said. "But no one's been arrested and I hear things have stalled out. It's always tomorrow with those guys. And now we're getting shit burning nearly every night. This city's got an arsonist loose and no one wants to admit it."

"You think it's connected to the church?"

"Damn right," he said. "But no one is saying shit in the department. I lost my best friend Pat Dougherty in that church. We went through the academy together. Then at Engine 33, Ladder 15 for the first three years. Godfather to his kids. Same neighborhood. Jesus, you know."

I nodded again. I told him I was very sorry.

"Mike Mulligan hadn't been on the job but six months," McGee said. "A rake. An open-up man. His dad was a fireman. He was a Marine like me. Saw some shit over in Afghanistan only to come home and get killed."

I opened up the driver's door and let the windows down. It was June and the morning had grown warm. No one was complaining. We'd just survived the longest, snowiest winter since Grant was president. "Why do you think the church is connected to the new fires?"

"Call it firemen's intuition."

"Got anything more than that?" I said.

"That church wasn't an accident," he said. "Everybody knows it. Arson sifted through that shit pile for months. No signs of electrical or accidental. It's a fucking fire of unknown origin. How's that sit with Pat's wife and kids?"

"Arson investigation is a pretty specialized field," I said. "Most of the clues burn up."

"I don't need more samples and microscopes," he said. "I'll pay you 'cause you know the worst people in the city. Some scum who'd do something like this. Burn a fucking Catholic church and then keep

burning through Southie and the South End until they're caught."

"Over the years, I've met a few people of questionable breeding."

"Freakin' criminals," Jack said. "I want you to shake the bushes for criminals and find out who set this and why."

"Follow the money?"

"What else could it be?"

I leaned my forearms against my open door. My case load had waned over the months while my checking account had fattened. Corporations paid more than people. I had few reasons to spurn the offer. Not to mention, Jack McGee was an honorable man who'd asked for help.

"OK," I said. "Will you introduce me around?"

"Nope."

I waited.

"You start making noise at headquarters and the commissioner will have my ass," he said. "All I need is for the commissioner and the chief to get pissed while I'm doing my last few years. I made captain. Got a pension. I got a great firehouse in the North End. I don't want to make waves. I just want some answers."

"No official inquiries?" I said.

"Nope."

"No pressure on arson investigators?"

"Nope," Jack said. "You're going to have to go around your ass to get to your elbow on this one."

"Yikes," I said. "That sounds painful."

"But can you do it?"

"Sure," I said. "I've taken that route many times before."

2

"To what do I owe this honor?" Quirk said. "Did you just shoot some poor bastard while cleaning your revolver?"

"I just stopped by to admire your new office," I said. "Check out your breathtaking view. Congratulate you on your promotion."

"Bullshit."

"Deputy Superintendent Quirk has a nice ring to it."

"It's ceremonial," Quirk said. "I meet with neighborhood groups. Do press briefings and photo ops."

I saluted him. "Does this mean I can finally meet McGruff the Crime Dog?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'll tell him to hump your leg. After this long on the job, a little boost is appreciated. Might finally be able to retire. Move down to Florida. Get a boat."

"Not in in your nature."

"Neither was this," he said. "But it's what I got."

"And Belson?"

"Training the new captain in investigative techniques."

"God help her."

"Amen," Quirk said, leaning into his desk. His hands were as thick and strong as a bricklayer's. His salt-and-pepper hair looked to have been trimmed that morning. White dress shirt double starched. Red tie affixed with a gold clip. I knew his wingtips were polished so bright they'd blind me. "So what the hell do you want?"

"There was a fire last year," I said. "A nine-alarm in the South End at the Holy Innocents Catholic Church."

"Yeah, I know."

"You worked the deaths?"

"Of course I did," Quirk said. "You might recall I once ran homicide. We investigate all fatal fires."

You know that.”

“And what did you learn?”

“Jack and shit,” he said, picking up the square plastic picture frame on his desk. He turned it around in his big hands to study his wife, kids, and numerous grandchildren. He waited a few beats and then leveled his gaze at me. If it was at all possible, his face had hardened in the years I’d known him. Not flesh and bone. More like carved granite. “Whattya know?”

“I’d like to see the interviews.”

“It was a fire,” he said. “Go talk to fucking Fire.”

“I would,” I said. “But it’s an open investigation. I hoped Boston police might have many of the same files.”

“Yeah, well,” Quick said. “We just might.”

“You do.”

“As you said, it’s an open investigation, hot shot.”

I smiled and shrugged. Quirk frowned.

“You working with a jake?” he said.

“Perhaps.”

“A jake who doesn’t want people to know he’s working with the nosiest snoop in the Back Bay.”

“I prefer the most winning profile.”

“If I had a nose like that, I wouldn’t be one to brag.”

“Character,” I said. “Built of character.”

“And plenty of cotton shoved up your schnoz,” Quirk said. He put down the plastic square and pushed back from his desk. He folded his big hands over his chest. “Arson isn’t too keen on a guy like you butting into their business.”

“I will tread lightly.”

“You?” he said. “Yeah, sure. How’s Susan?”

“Charming and gorgeous and ever.”

“Pearl?”

“Getting old,” I said. “Graying around the muzzle. But wiser like us all.”

“I like Susan,” he said. “She gives you class.”

“I do not disagree.”

“Never understood what she sees in you.”

“Would you like me to demonstrate a one-armed pushup?”

Quirk held his gaze for a while. He then nodded. “I can’t promise anything. But I can make some calls. Ask around.”

I nodded back. But I did not move from the chair. It was new and very comfortable.

“Or do you expect for me to leave the heights of my office and go down and fetch the reports in records like a Labrador retriever?”

“I can wait,” I said. “You now have a secretary. Perhaps she might share a little coffee?”

“My *she* is a *he*,” Quirk said. “And he makes terrible coffee.”

“Coming from you, that’s a compliment,” I said.

“So, your client thinks it was arson.”

“Yep.”

“Officially, I’ll tell you I never heard that,” Quirk said. “Unofficially, I’ll tell you we took pictures, asked questions, and stepped away. Looked to be accidental. Did I tell you it was my freakin’ church when I was a kid?”

“No, you did not.”

“Jesus Christ,” Quirk said. “OK. OK. You got that look in your eye.”

“Sanguine?”

“Like you’re going to pain my ass until I say OK,” he said. “Give me a call in the morning, Spenser.”

For Christ's sake."

I stood and walked to Quirk's closed door. It was nice door, but I missed the old one with the frosted glass over on Berkeley. I opened it wide and waited.

"And Spenser?"

I turned.

"Your favor meter ran out a long while back," he said.

I mimed turning a meter backward and winked at him. Quirk did not smile.

3

I took Susan and Mattie Sullivan to Fenway that night. Mattie and I ate at the ballpark while Susan held out for postgame at Eastern Standard. Once seated, she promptly ordered a cocktail called The Thaw made with gin, St. Germain, lime, Peychaud's bitters, and parsley. I simply nodded toward the Harpoon IPA on tap.

"We should've given Mattie a ride home," Susan said.

"I offered," I said. "She still prefers the T."

"Because she doesn't want rely on anyone."

"Not a bad trait," I said. "She's known no other way."

Eastern Standard was at the bottom of the Commonwealth Hotel, outfitted with brass, swirling ceiling fans, and red leather booths. The place made me feel as if I were eating inside a Paris train station with a menu to match. Steaks, frites, oysters.

Since I'd eaten at the game, I kept it to two dozen oysters. Susan had the bluefish with hominy, cherry tomatoes, and romesco sauce. She told me I could pick from her plate.

"Do you remember my pal Jack McGee?" I said.

She shook her head, sipping her cocktail.

"The firefighter?" I said. "He's captain over the house in the North End. We stopped by the house during St. Anthony's last year."

"I had to pee."

"The firefighters were most gracious."

"Big guy?" she said.

"Some might call Jack somewhat husky," I said. "But he can shimmy up a ladder like nobody's business."

"Sure," Susan said. "OK."

"Jack's a long-timer at Henry's," I said. "He lost three guys in that church fire in the South End."

Susan nodded. She tilted her head to listen with more intent and complete focus. All the noise around us went silent when she looked at me in that way.

"Jack thinks it's arson," I said. "Although as of yet, there is no official cause."

"And Jack wants you to snoop?"

"I would prefer the term 'professionally detect.'"

Susan shrugged and took a sip of her cocktail. "And what do you know about arson investigation?"

"About as much as I do about women," I said. "But Jack says most of the evidence burned up in the fire anyway. He wants me to use my contacts with the flotsam and jetsam of Boston."

"He believes the fire to be the work of criminals?"

I nodded.

"But who would burn a church for money?"

"You really want to ask that?" I said.

"I withdraw the question."

"I just hope I can help."

"So you agreed to take the case?"

"He caught me at a good time," I said. "Summertime and the living is easy. If I can't get anywhere, I

won't charge him."

"Just how much did you charge Mattie Sullivan to find out who killed her mother?"

I grinned and looked down at my knuckles. "Box of donuts."

Susan smiled back. She'd worn a green safari shirt dress, gold hoop earrings, and a thin gold chain with brown gladiator sandals to the game. The outfit really snapped with the Sox cap I'd bought for her at Yawkey Way.

"You know Mattie graduates next year," she said.

I nodded.

"And I understand Z is moving back to Los Angeles?"

I nodded again.

"Does that make us empty nesters?" she said.

"Have you forgotten Pearl?"

"How could I ever forget the baby," Susan said. "But we both must admit she's getting a bit long in the tooth."

"You know my answer to that."

"We'll just find a new Pearl?"

I sipped some beer. I didn't like to think about it. Outside the window, the stadium continued to empty with people walking along Comm Ave. or down into Kenmore Station. The Sox had lost, but the lights burned bright across the city.

"And what if something happens to you?" Susan said. She grinned with her white perfect teeth in a devilish way. She tilted back her drink.

"You can have me mounted and stuffed," I said. "Just like Roy did for Dale."

"Roy stuffed Trigger," she said. "Not Dale."

"Similar sentiment."

"Maybe I'll just find a younger man," Susan said. "Someone with less miles on him."

"But could he sing 'Moody's Mood for Love' in Spanish?"

"Can you?"

I took a sip of beer and took a deep breath, just as the oysters and Susan's bluefish arrived.

"Timing is everything," she said.

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