



ROBERT B. PARKER'S

SLOW DOWN

ACE ATKINS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS  
NEW YORK

**SLOW BURN**

**K**evin always loved fire. His earliest memories were of his mother taking him to blazes, watching men in helmets and heavy coats pull hoses into burning buildings. He loved the way she looked at those men with honor and respect, and maybe something more. Just the crackle of the scanner, a far-off bell ringing, smoke trailing up into the sky made his heart jackhammer. When he drove through the night in his old Crown Vic, he felt like he owned the freakin' city.

He kept the scanner under the dashboard, a big antenna set on the trunk as he roamed the streets of Hyde Park, Roxbury, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, Brookline, and up into Cambridge and Charlestown. All that spring and summer, Kevin liked to drive slow, windows down, listening, waiting, and sniffing the air. He'd work his

*deadbeat job during the day, sleeping through most of it, and then take on the city at night. He, Johnny, and Big Ray would meet up at Scandinavian Pastry in Southie, taking breaks off patrol to talk call boxes, famous fires, new equipment, and all the ways the current administration was fucking up a long, proud tradition.*

*“Cocoanut Grove,” Johnny said, powdered sugar on his mustache. “It could happen again. Payoffs, bribes, and all these damn foreigners in this town. You just wait. Some asshole’s gonna be changing a lightbulb and poof.”*

*“Nobody gives a crap,” Ray said. “I’ve been warning the fire guys for ten years. Their equipment has turned to shit. They just don’t get it. Mayor won’t approve the new budget. Not with a gun to his nuts.”*

*And he’d look up at them, in that little corner Formica-topped table and ask, why don’t they do something? Why don’t they take action and save this city?*

*Kevin thought about this long and hard. He and Johnny had talked about it a thousand times. And he’d finally agreed to Johnny’s master plan. Save the tradition. Keep Boston safe. Knock people in the side of the head and make ’em listen. The city needed firefighters—and a lot more of them. Guys ready to serve who were shut out. He met Johnny’s eyes across the table. Johnny nodded and said, “Burn it.”*

*“Burn what?” Ray said. “Hey, you gonna eat that maple glazed? I’ve only had two.”*

*Kevin didn’t say anything, just leaned back farther in the booth, arm stretched out wide behind Johnny. Short,*

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*squat Johnny cutting his eyes over at him and lifting an eyebrow. The scanner clucking off and on. Some bullshit Dumpster fire over by the T on Dot Ave. Probably a couple bums roasting a hot dog.*

*"We understand what's wrong with the department," Johnny said, wiping the sugar off his face. "It's the only way. We got the know-how and the skills to make it work."*

*Big Ray looked to each of them with wide, nutty eyes, waiting for someone to tell him what the hell was going on. The scanner caught again, sending the ladder truck and EMS back to the station. False alarm. Silence. Nothing. Fluorescent lights burning over the donut displays, cash register empty, unmanned. No one minding the store at 2 a.m.*

*"Burn it," he said. "Johnny is right."*

*"Burn what?" Big Ray said. "What the hell?"*

*"Boston, you fucking moron," Johnny said. "We burn fucking Boston."*





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 who 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.”

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“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.

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“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 the 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 to 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.”

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“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.”

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“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 caseload 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.

“Okay,” 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.”



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 your nature."

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“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 in to 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,” Quirk said. “We just might.”

“You do.”

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

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 push-up?”

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

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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. “Okay. Okay. You got that look in your eye.”

“Sanguine?”

“Like you’re going to pain my ass until I say okay,” 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 to rely on anyone."

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

Eastern Standard was at the bottom of the Hotel Commonwealth, 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.

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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 Saint 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. "Okay."

"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 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?"

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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.

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“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.



**B**right and early the next morning, I drove into the South End to meet with Captain Troy Collins of Engine Company 22. The firehouse was a squat building of little character situated between several churches and office buildings on Tremont. Collins invited me upstairs to the firefighters' quarters and kitchen, where he made some coffee. "McGee warned me you'd be stopping by," he said. "He didn't want to get me in trouble. Told me to keep it on the down low."

"What'd you say?"

"This was Pat D's fire house," he said. "I'll tell you my deepest, darkest secrets if you think it might help. Him and Mike were like brothers."

Collins was a trim black man in his early fifties with closely cropped gray hair and a short gray mustache. He had a thick chest and muscular arms and walked with the ramrod posture

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of former military. Two firefighters were in a break room, lying on an old couch and watching CNN; three others were in a back room, lifting weights. I passed a locker with a bumper sticker that read DIAL 911 CUZ SHIT HAPPENS.

“Accurate,” I said.

“Saw one the other day that read GOD CREATED FIREMEN SO POLICE COULD HAVE HEROES, TOO.”

“I bet cops love that.”

“Cops think that Jack, Queen, King is as high as we can count,” he said. “Screw ’em. Would you like some cream or sugar?”

I took a teaspoon of sugar. “You guys were the first to arrive?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was off. Dougherty was in charge.”

I’d spent my waking hours reading up on Lieutenant Pat Dougherty, Jimmy Bonelli, and Mike Mulligan from *The Globe’s* online archives. Mulligan was only twenty-four, just back from a second tour of Afghanistan. Bonelli had nine years on the job, two ex-wives, and three kids. Dougherty was the old-timer, a lifelong friend to Jack McGee. Father to four, a practical joker, a fine cook, and a dedicated Pats fan. He spent most of his years with Engine 33/Ladder 15, the old Back Bay firehouse built in the 1880s.

“It had been a busy night and the boys were eating late,” Collins said. “We had some extra in the dinner fund and Dougherty sprung for some nice filets. Wrapped in bacon. He knew a guy who knew a guy in the meat business.”

“And right before they sat down—”

“They were in the middle of saying Grace and the alarm goes nuts.”

ACE ATKINS

“Always that way?”

“Always,” Collins said. “Good food tempts fate.”

“How long do you think the fire had been burning?”

“It’s not a half-mile from the station,” Collins said. He sat down and placed two coffees between us. “Didn’t take them a minute to get there. Mike was a great driver. But I heard that church was lit up. Fire eating through plywood and shattering the big stained glass window. Dougherty struck a second alarm right away.”

“I read they went immediately toward the basement?”

“Pat would’ve seen the fire and smoke down there,” he said. “We later found out that’s where the church kept their old files, which burned quick and hot. He knew he’d lost the building but wanted to make sure it didn’t spread. There’s a big new condo a block away, hundreds of people. When they got there some homeless guy was screaming he’d seen someone inside.”

“How many went in?”

“All four,” he said. “Dougherty and Mulligan led with the hose. Bonnelli and John Grady followed after hooking up to the hydrant.”

“You know what happened to the homeless guy?” I said.

“Nope,” he said. “There’s a methadone clinic around the corner. Neighborhood is in a transition, homeless guy could be one of hundreds. I can’t tell you much else.”

“What about John Grady?”

“He got lucky,” Collins said. “Another few feet and he’d been dead, too.”

“I know you weren’t there,” I said. “But how do you think they get trapped?”

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“No secret,” he said. He rubbed his short, gray mustache and had a vacant, faraway look in his eyes. “The fucking fire flashed back and blocked the exit. I know the smoke was thick down there. They have had to try and braille their way out. You know? On their hands and knees, feeling walls when they died. Like I said, this thing happened quick. It burned hot. All in all, five minutes? I think about those men when I go to sleep and first thing when I wake.”

“Do you think it might’ve been set?”

“No evidence of it,” he said. “To be honest, there wasn’t a hell of a lot left in that pit.”

“But it’s possible?”

“Of course.” Collins watched me and took a long deep breath. “Anything’s possible. I found it strange how fast the fire burned. And how the fire met in the middle.”

“Multiple points of origin?”

“Say, you’re pretty smart for a former cop.”

I shrugged. “Some of my best friends are firefighters.”

Collins grinned and drank some coffee. He made a bitter face and reached for some artificial sweetener.

“The investigation is still open?” I said.

“Unknown origin,” he said. “I guess technically it’ll always be open.”

“Why do you think the fire was set in two locations?”

“Hold on,” Collins said. He lifted up his right hand. “Hold on. I never said ‘set.’ I said it could have *originated* in two places. And I only say that because Mulligan radioed in that two fires were burning at opposite ends of the church before the flashback.”

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“That didn’t register with investigators?”

“Evidence didn’t show two sites,” Collins said. “And Mike’s dead. We can’t ask him what he saw.”

He gave a weak smile and sipped his coffee.

“I’m very sorry.”

“One minute you’re laughing and telling jokes and the next thing you know you’re riding that red truck into the depths of hell,” Collins said. “I miss those fellas every damn day. Like I said, they were brothers. If you hadn’t noticed, not many folks who look like me in the ranks.”

“Irish?”

“My great-great-grandfather must have been Irish,” he said, laughing. “A slave owner down in Georgia.”

“I knew it,” I said. “You have that twinkle in your eye.”

“I wish I knew more,” he said. “And I wish I’d been there with them. We got the dedication coming up. They’re going to unveil a plaque here at the house. It’s pretty much all I can think about. Media and all that stopping by. Folks bringing us more food than we can ever eat.”

“I’d like to speak to John Grady.”

“That might be tricky,” he said.

“He’s no longer with your company?”

“Nope.” Collins shook his head. “He’s on disability. Cracked a couple vertebrae that night. Off the record, I hear he’s been drinking a lot. He just never came back from it, physically or mentally.”

I asked where I might find him, and he gave me the name of a well-known bar in Dorchester. I nodded and offered my hand. Collins shook it and looked me in the eye.

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“What do you think about this church being connected to these latest arsons?”

“Hard to say,” Collins said. “We haven’t had much rest since spring. Someone or several folks are burning up lots of old buildings. Dumpsters, trash piles. It’s keeping us on high alert.”

“Jack believes it’s all the same.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Collins said. “Seems to be a different kind of animal at work. Besides, you do know Jack McGee is crazy?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why do you think we’re friends?”



**T**he Eire Pub was known as Boston's Original Gentlemen's Prestige Bar. Just to underscore the point, it was announced from a rooftop billboard on Adams, across from the Greenhills Irish Bakery and down the street from a run-down funeral home. Staying true to my heritage, I ordered a Guinness. The head was poured so thick and professionally, I could have used it to shave.

The Sox played on flat screens spaced about every two feet. After I sampled the beer, I ordered a corned-beef sandwich and watched another inning. Four potential barflies surrounded me at the largish bar. The walls were decorated with a lot of historic Boston photos. Several had been shot by my friend Bill Brett from *The Globe*. The middle of the bar was divided by an island of whiskey. Through the colorful bottles, I spotted a guy in his early to mid-forties with a lot of brown hair sip on a draft.

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Two of the other men were too old. A guy seated three stools down wore a collared shirt and had soft hands.

I moved to the other side of the bar and found a stool next to the big guy.

"These fucking bums are killing me," the man said.

"That's what the beer is for."

"It's like last season was some kind of dream."

"You wouldn't happen to be John Grady?"

"Depends on who's asking," he said. "You work for my ex-wife or the fucking insurance company?"

"I work for myself," I said. "I'm a friend of Jack McGee's."

"*Pfffft*. Jack McGee," he said. "You know he's a genuine nutso?"

"That seems to be the consensus."

"No, really," he said. "I'm not kidding. He's always been crazy. But lately. Holy Christ. He's got these theories. He won't let this fire go. Can't quit running his mouth. Somehow his brains have gotten all scrambled. Can't believe he made fucking captain."

"He lost a close friend."

"What about me?" Grady said. "I lost three great friends and broke my freaking back. You don't see me blaming bogeymen. Shit happens, you know? You think there's order in this universe, but no one is driving the fucking bus."

"Baseball, beer, and existentialism," I said.

"You trying to get smart?"

"Too early in the day." I sipped the second half of my Guinness. Ortiz hit a ball far and a little too high.

Grady slapped the bar and said, "*Come on. Come on. Come on*. How much is that fucking guy making?"

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An outfielder for the Blue Jays snagged it and threw it hard and fast whence it came. Grady shook his head and took a sip of beer. He signaled the bartender for another. He did not seem the least bit drunk or tipsy. It might take a keg or two, as he appeared to be pushing about two-fifty.

“You never did say,” he said.

“Say what?”

“Why McGee sent you.”

“Jack didn’t send me,” I said. “I just heard you’d been in that church before the flashback. Before your friends were trapped.”

He nodded. But the look on his face was not pleasant. It turned a bright shade of red as he swallowed hard. He shook his head several times to show his disappointment in me.

“I hoped you’d tell me what you saw down there,” I said. “I know Mike Mulligan radioed that the fire seemed to have started in two directions. What do you think about that?”

The bartender took away his pint glass and wiped down the moisture left behind. He lay down a fresh pint as John Grady studied my face. He wore his hair shaggy and long over his eyebrows and covering his ears. “Why? Why does it matter? Arson looked into it. I mean, Jesus Christ. Who the fuck are you?”

I introduced myself.

“That name supposed to mean something?”

“Ever read the Faerie Queen?”

“Do I look queer to you?”

“I would never speculate on one’s sexual orientation,” I said. “But your hair is a little long.”

“You wanna get popped in the mouth?” he said.

“Not really,” I said. “I need it to drink beer.”

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“Me, too,” he said. “But how about you change the freakin’ channel and quit busting my nuts. Unknown origin means freakin’ unknown. It means you can’t wrap up causes in a neat little package for the insurance companies and the paper-pushers. That church was a hundred years old. Christ. Shit happens.”

“*Shit happens* isn’t working for Jack McGee.”

“Like I said, his head is fucked up,” Grady said. He downed half his glass. “Like I said, no one is at the wheel. It’s the anniversary, you know? Next week. They’re having some kind of memorial. There’s talk of putting up a freakin’ statue or something.”

“And you’ll be there?”

He looked at me as if I might be nuts, too. He shook his head. “I’m a Boston firefighter, what the fuck do you think? I don’t know who you are or what you’re trying to do. But you start pissing on the memory of these men and you’ll get your ass stomped.”

“Sometimes, after a while, small details add up.”

“Leave it alone,” Grady said. “My back doesn’t work on a divine plan, like the sisters used to tell us.”

“But did you hear Mulligan say the fire had spread independently from two sources?”

“He said a lot of things before he died,” he said. “That’s ain’t one of them. I heard his last words. They were about his brothers with him. Not the fucking fire.”

“But it’s possible?” I said.

“Pfft,” Grady said. “Crap.”

“You’re one of the first on the scene,” I said. “Did you hear of anyone running from the building before the fire?”

## ACE ATKINS

“It was late,” he said. “Nobody was there. What are you getting at? Nobody but Jacky McGee thinks this was arson and the guy is still running crazy and loose. If that makes him feel better, let him think it. But how about you just let me sit here and watch my team lose. Do you mind? Is that too much to fucking ask?”

“Not a bit.”

I placed my business card next to his beer. Grady studied it for a moment, and without looking away from the game, ripped it into several pieces and tossed it down it to the floor. He sipped the beer some more. A nameless vet for the Sox was up to bat.

It didn't take too long before he struck out, too.