

Silent Night: A Spenser Holiday Novel

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"Brann does a seamless job...Diehard Parker fans will be delighted." -Publishers Weekly

A special treat for the holiday season - a rumination on Christmas, family, and the meaning of home as conceived by Robert B. Parker.

It's December in Boston, and Spenser is busy planning the menu for Christmas dinner when he's confronted in his office by a young boy named Slide. Homeless and alone, Slide has found refuge with an organization named Street Business, which gives shelter and seeks job opportunities for the homeless and lost. Slide's mentor, Jackie Alvarez, is being threatened, and Street Business is in danger of losing its tenuous foothold in the community, turning Slide and many others like him back on the street. But it's not a simple case of intimidation - Spenser, aided by Hawk, finds a trail that leads to a dangerous drug kingpin, whose hold on the at-risk community Street Business serves threatens not just the boys' safety and security, but their lives as well.

Unfinished at the time of his death, *Silent Night* was completed by Parker's longtime agent, whose decades-long association with Parker's work gives her unique insight and perspective to his voice and storytelling style. Her contribution also speaks volumes about their enduring friendship.

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.

Helen Brann was Robert B. Parker's literary agent for thirty-two years, from 1978 to 2010, and is the Literary Executor for the Robert B. Parker Estate. She is the owner of The Helen Brann Agency, Inc., which she founded in 1973. SUSAN AND I WALKED from my place up to Newbury Street on a sunny Saturday morning. The snow from the night before had stopped falling. There wasn't much traffic, mostly cabs and an occasional noisy snowplow. It was two weeks before Christmas. A Salvation Army worker in full uniform was ringing a bell beside a tripod bucket at the corner of Boylston and Berkeley.

"I'm glad we don't exchange presents anymore," I said.

"Me too," Susan said. "Have you canceled your account at Victoria's Secret?"

"Reluctantly. But they still send me the catalog."

"You could probably have your name removed from the list," Susan said.

"Sure."

She smiled.

We went into a women's boutique, where the staff seemed to know Susan. I found a chair designed for a woman who weighed 108 pounds. I resumed my lifelong comparative study

of the female form. Susan had opened a nearly insurmountable lead. That was no reason not to see who might be runner-up. Or in the top ten. After about forty minutes we left. Susan had bought what she referred to as a "lovely little top." And several small packages in a shopping bag decorated with a large Santa Claus.

"I didn't think Jews did Christmas shopping," I said.

"More often we do Christmas selling. You do realize there's a group of us at Harvard who gather every year and drink wine and exchange one gift each."

"Any men in this group?"

"No."

"Sounds like a fun crowd. A gathering of Harvard women."

"It can get a little fustian at times," Susan said. "But I like these women, and there's something sort of nice about a girls' night out."

"Sort of like Hawk and me at the fights?"

"Sort of."

We turned the corner and into the bar door of the Taj Boston, formerly the Ritz, for a libation at the table we liked overlooking the Garden.

"I'll have a glass of Edna Valley chardonnay," Susan said to the waiter.

"Johnnie Walker Blue, soda, highball," I said.

Susan smiled at me. "I like your Christmas spirit."

"And I like yours."

Susan sipped her wine. "Why do you suppose a grown woman, a doctor, a therapist at that, feels at Christmastime the same sense of excitement and anticipation she did when she was just a girl?"

"Perhaps we'll need to discuss this later," I said, lifting my glass.

"I do hope so," Susan said, and raised her glass to me. "At length."

I STOOD AT MY OFFICE WINDOW and looked out at the snow falling quietly onto the Back Bay and muffling the gleam of the Christmas lighting in the store windows. The snow had

come often this year.

"Fa, la, la," I said.

Pearl raised her head. She was with me on a take-your-dog-to-work day, which she spent, as she often did, on the couch in my office. I looked at her.

"La, la," I said.

She didn't know what I was talking about, but she was used to that. She could also sense that whatever it was, it had no connection to food. So she put her head back down on her paws and watched me in silent resignation.

I liked the myth elements of Christmas. The way in which its origins reach back far beyond Jesus, to the rituals of people unknown to us. The celebration of the winter solstice. The coming of light in the darkest time. And with it the promise of spring to come and beginning again. I liked it better than Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

I went to my desk and sat down.

"Actually," I said to Pearl, "I've had bad colds I liked better than Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

I sensed movement in her look. Then she lost interest and snapped her head toward the door and made a low growl. Hospitality dog.

The door opened and a kid came in.

He looked at Pearl and said, "That dog going to bite me?"

"Not," I said, "unless you attack me."

"Attack you?"

"Uh-huh."

"For crissake, I'm a fucking kid."

"I guessed that. Have a seat."

Still watching Pearl, the kid sat down opposite my desk. His face was pointy and his eyes were close. He was wearing gray sweatpants that were too long for him. The bottoms of the pant legs were torn and ragged where the heel of his sneakers had repeatedly caught in them. His jacket was a threadbare navy peacoat, also too big, with the sleeves turned back. Under it was a gray hoodie. His baseball cap had a flat brim, and he wore it level and straight under the hood.

"How old are you?"

"Eleven, I think."

"You think?"

"Yeah. I was there, but I don't remember it, you know."

"What about your parents? You know them?"

"My old lady was a drunk. I don't think she knew who my old man was."

"She the one who raised you?"

"Awhile," the kid said. "Then she didn't."

"Run off?"

"Wherever she went, she went."

"So who raised you?"

"The orphanage."

"How was that?"

"Sucked," the kid said. "You wanna hear why I come to see you?"

"I do."

"I live in a place."

"Where," I said.

He made a looping gesture with his right hand.

"Around," he said.

"Nice neighborhood."

The kid frowned at me. He was so street-worn and tough-talking and life-weary that I forgot he was only eleven. Irony is not the long suit of eleven-year-olds.

"You don't know where I live," he said.

"No." I said. "I was just making a little joke."

"Ain't funny."

"No." I said. "Probably not. What's your name?"

"Slide."

"Last name?"

"Slide," he said.

I nodded.

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"I want you to talk with Jackie," Slide said.

"Who's Jackie?" I said.

"Jackie asked me to come here and deliver his message. He needs to see you."

"What does he want to talk to me about?"

"He'll tell you."

"Why me?"

"He seen you on the TV."

"Why didn't Jackie come?" I said.

"He sent me. He wanted to know if you would see him," Slide said.

"How long have you known Jackie?"

"A few weeks," he said.

I nodded. "And before that?"

He shuffled uncomfortably in the chair. "Did odd jobs. Slept where I could. The Y. You know."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Will you see Jackie?"

I took a card out of the middle drawer of my desk and gave it to him.

"You or Jackie call me when you're ready," I said.

"Okay," he said.

The kid took the card and put it in the side pocket of his pants without looking at it. Then he stood up and looked at me and didn't say anything and turned and went out.

I went to my window and watched him walk through the snow, his shoulders hunched, hands in his pockets, staying close to the walls of buildings, until he turned the corner onto Boylston Street and disappeared in the direction of the Public Garden.

WE WERE AT MY PLACE. I was making supper. Susan was at my kitchen counter. Pearl had stretched out the length of the sofa, longer than one would think possible for a seventy-five-pound dog.

"Tell me more about this boy who came to see you," Susan said.

"His name is Slide, he's eleven, and he lives with someone named Jackie in a place whose location is unknown."

"That's all?" she said.

I mixed bread crumbs and pignolis with a little olive oil and began to toast them in a fry pan on low.

"Except he's terrified of his own shadow." I stirred the contents of the pan, which were beginning to brown.

"And who is Jackie?" she said.

"Not much to go on," I said.

I took the fry pan off the fire and emptied the toasted crumbs and pignolis into a bowl. I took an Amstel Light out of the refrigerator and opened it. I poured it into a tall glass. After a swallow, I said, "If you didn't know, how old would you think you were?"

"Twenty-eight," Susan said.

"Plausible," I said. "But you're far too smart to be only twenty-eight."

"I try to conceal that."

"You fail."

"I wonder why Jackie sent a boy instead of coming himself," Susan said. I watched her sip her wine. After an hour, the glass was still half full. "You'll talk with Jackie?"

"If he gets in touch," I said.

"What if it's something illegal," Susan said.

"There's illegal and illegal," I said. "I make part of my living from that fact."

Susan nodded.

I turned up the heat under the pot of water on the stove and put some whole-wheat linguine in it and set my timer. I sat on a bar stool opposite Susan, who took another sip and said, "Let me see if I have this right. Slide is sent by this guy named Jackie, who may or may not ever appear. And although you don't fully grasp the situation, something about Slide has got you interested in helping him, whether Jackie's activities are legal or not."

"Slide's eleven going on thirty. So far life hasn't been full of good times for him. He's afraid. Somewhere along the line he got scared, real bad. Of who, or what?"

"And maybe Jackie is the key to figuring out what's happening," Susan said.

The timer went off and I went over and drained the linguine. "Whatever Jackie turns out to be, or whether or not he shows up, Slide is definitely in some kind of trouble."

"Slide is a convenient cover for Jackie to hide whatever he's up to," Susan said. "And since he didn't come himself, it would appear that at the very least Slide is being used."

"A Boston version of Oliver Twist," I said. I plated the pasta and brought the plates over to the counter.

"There wasn't much Charles Dickens in our house," Susan said.

"That's because you spent your time reading the diaries of Sigmund Freud," I picked up my fork. "A match made in heaven."

"So deep down, we're really just a couple of Victorians?" she said.

"Maybe not. Just that we were educated early in the analysis of motivation," I said. "Dickens, Freud, they're all alike in the dark."

Susan laughed. "Mrs. Freud might disagree with you on that."

It was quiet for a moment. Then Susan said, "Have you given any thought to how we should spend Christmas?"

"Only that we should be together." I glanced over at the softly snoring Pearl. "With Pearl, of course. Hawk, too. Maybe ask Paul if he can join us."

"We'll do it at my place. You know how I love to set a nice table for Christmas."

"A beautiful paradox," I said. "But anywhere you are, it's Christmas to me."

THE NEXT MORNING I met Hawk at the Harbor Health Club. Hawk was doing combinations on the heavy bag and I was hitting the double-end jeeter bag with my left hand. Hawk didn't break a sweat. After ten minutes I was sodden and winded.

"You do any more damage to that bag, we'll have to get Henry a new one for Christmas," I said.

"Fuck Christmas," he said.

"Wow," I said. "And people say you're not sentimental. You still bitter that Santa Claus is a white man?"

Hawk began to hit the bag alternately with both hands.

"Whole holiday be a white man's scam. All those rich honkies running in and out of stores like they might miss buying the last Rolls on the floor. Bentley's beneath them." He shifted his feet a little and started hitting the heavy bag with his left hand.

"This from a guy who drives a Jaguar," I said. "I would think you'd appreciate a nice Rolls."

"Jag be subtle elegance, babe. Rolls just someone tryin' too hard to impress people who don't know better. That's Christmas."

"Well, Ebenezer, you had better work on your holiday spirit, or Susan's going to rescind her invitation to Christmas dinner."

Hawk stopped, lightly tapped the bag with his left hand, and looked at me.

"Christmas dinner? At Susan's?"

I nodded. "We could call it a Kwanzaa dinner, if that would improve your mood."

Hawk ignored me. "Just the three of us?"

"And Pearl," I said.

"How about Paul?"

Paul Giacomini had spent several Christmases with Susan and me in the years since I had helped liberate him from his parents.

"Susan called—Paul will be at his in-laws' this Christmas. We may visit him in New York after the New Year."

"So just us? And Pearl?"

I nodded. "Unless there's someone special you'd like to invite."

"No one special at the moment." Hawk grinned. "Course, it ain't Christmas yet."

"So can I let Susan know you'll be cruising by in the Jag to join us?"

"Tell Susan I'm looking forward to it."

"I can feel her blushing already," I said.

Hawk went back to pummeling the heavy bag.

"Dinner better be at Susan's house, though. Wouldn't park my car in your neighborhood, even if it is just a Jag."

After we wound down, we walked to the South Street Diner at Kneeland Street. Hawk ordered a coffee with skim milk and two Equals. No donut. I ordered a coffee and two corn muffins. Between the first and second muffin, I told him about Slide. "He's the most terrified kid trying not to show it I've ever seen."

"I knew a boy like that once," Hawk said.

"You." I said it without thinking, knowing I was right.

Hawk looked at me. To the world, Hawk appeared impassive and impenetrable. And mostly, he was. I had been around him long enough, though, that I could recognize subtle changes. Things most people didn't see, or didn't notice. But I knew Hawk—to the extent anyone could know him—better than most people did. And now it was Christmas, a time for revelations. Maybe Susan could explain it to me. Perhaps it was a vestige of our need to huddle by the cave fire together and tell stories, to ward off the darkness outside.

Hawk stirred his coffee. I watched the people come and go by the cash register, bundled up against the eighteen-degree weather.

"When I was about Slide's age, I hit the streets. The winter was always the worst. I got money to eat any way I could." Hawk looked at me. "Any way."

"This kid is scared. I don't see you being scared."

Hawk took a sip of his coffee. He placed the cup back down on the saucer and leveled his gaze at me.

"All kids scared one time or other. You on your own, you learn how to take care of yourself."

I nodded. "You survive long enough, you learn not to be afraid."

"Or you don't survive, and it don't matter."

Hawk drained the rest of his coffee, then counted out his tip.

"You have help?"

Hawk stood up and slid into his parka.

"Lotta help, 'long the way," he said. He paused. "One day I meet a cocktail waitress and she help me grow up real fast. I was sixteen and she was twenty." He grinned. "Haven't been scared since."

WHILE I WASN'T FEELING particularly holly jolly about Christmas, I was quite interested in Christmas dinner. Sometimes we went out, and sometimes we stayed home, where I cooked and Susan stayed out of the way. I had been pondering wild boar. While I toyed with the idea of hunting it myself, I opted for a more refined approach. I explored the exotic game at Savenor's on Charles Street. Then I drove out to Newton to inspect the offerings at John Dewar. Just in case I encountered a wild boar on the way to the suburbs, I took my gun.

Maybe turducken . . .

WHEN I GOT BACK to my office, waiting outside the door was a smooth, strapping guy with a lot of dark curly hair and the open professional smile of a television star. He was wearing an ill-fitting blue bla...

Other Books

The Florida Agriculturist,

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