



STAMPED * * *

FOR MURDER

A WADE PARIS MYSTERY

BY BEN BENSON * *



M. S. MILL CO. and
William Morrow & Co.
New York, 1952 *

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By the same author

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1 *

HE HAD COME THROUGH THE HILLS IN THE DARKNESS OF the night, the cool September wind rushing by the opened car window and the motor humming under him. He was not driving fast. The curves were sharp and narrow, and he did not wish to accelerate the State Police car over fifty miles an hour in this fir-scented mountain wilderness. Other cars were on the road too, sometimes coming up on him at the turns with startling swiftness, with brief flashes of blinding headlights and the roar of their airslips as they hurtled by. Also, Paris was not even sure that a murder had been committed. It was true that a dead man had been found. But the method of his death had not yet been determined. And no amount of hurrying could bring the man back to life, either.

Now the road dipped and turned sharply. Paris applied his brakes. A sign in beaded glass caught his headlights. It said *Doeville—Speed 25*, then faded quickly beyond. He came down into a valley, passing darkened, scattered houses on the side of the hill. He went by a railroad siding and a small depot. He entered the town through the tree-lined, narrow main street. It was almost midnight on his dashboard clock. The street was empty and lifeless, showing only the winking of small street lights through the leaves and branches.

He drove through the town and picked up speed again. A half-mile and the road forked. He bore to the right. The surface was patched and uneven and began to climb steeply. The motor coughed and labored and he shifted into second gear.

At the top of the hill, between the tall firs on the side of the road, there was a blaze of light. He came up and saw the group of cars. The cars were in a semicircle with their spotlights focused on the flattened, charred ruins of a house. Paris drove by a few yards and stopped his car. He stepped out. There was an acrid, scorched smell in the air and, as he came back, he saw the plumes of smoke and steam. An old red fire truck, with an ancient pump attached to the front, stood nearby. The deflated hose lines twisted away from it, extending out sinuously and disappearing in the darkness. Paris stepped over them and went by a propped-up motorcycle with the State Police shield on it.

A trooper loomed out of the shadows, the light glinting off his belt buckle and showing his strong, fleshy face. He saluted and said, "They're around the other side of the house, Inspector."

"Thanks," Paris said, returning the salute. He walked across the wet, sodden pine needles and circled around the broken remains of burned furniture. Then he saw the form on the ground covered with a gray police blanket.

This was the way he found them, he thought. Never in peaceful death, but always in sordidness and horror. And he thought of the many different forms of violent

death he had seen and suddenly there was a deep bitterness in him. The air seemed to become sharp and cold and he put up his coat collar. His hands fumbled into his pockets, searching for his cigarettes and the small warmth and solace of tobacco.

A man came forward to meet him. The man was short and chunky, with a straight high-bridged nose and a small narrow slash of mouth. He wore a gray felt hat and a gray suit; Paris recognized him as Detective-Inspector Edward Carew of the State Fire Marshal's office.

Carew said, "Hello, Wade," and shook hands.

"Hello, Ed," Paris said, now turning because another man had crossed the beam of light and was crunching up through the pine needles. The man was tall. His face had heavy, wide-boned Slavic characteristics and a blunt nose. He wore a suède jacket and a brown hat with a stained band. He was smudged with ashes and soot.

Carew said, "This is Bob Wishniak, the town constable. Mr. Wishniak, Detective-Inspector Wade Paris of the State Police."

Paris shook hands with Wishniak. He stepped aside and went over to the blanket-covered form. "Is this the body?" he asked.

"Yes," Carew said. "What's left of it."

"Is there enough for an identification?" Paris asked.

Wishniak moved closer. "The body is badly burned," he said heavily. "But it's sure to be Mr. Gregg. He owned this place and he was here this week end. His car is still in the shed."

"You saw Mr. Gregg around?" Paris asked.

Wishniak bobbed his head. "Yes," he said. "In town, earlier this evening. He usually stays over till Monday morning."

"And who is Mr. Gregg?" Paris asked.

"Arnold Gregg," Wishniak said. "A widower. He comes from Eastern City. This lodge is right on Indian Lake and Mr. Gregg usually comes down week ends all through September. Most other cottages close up Labor Day. But Mr. Gregg likes his fishing. There's some black bass and perch in the lake."

"What time was it when you saw him this evening?"

"About five in the afternoon. Down on Main Street. He had just come out of the drugstore. Not many folks around on Sunday afternoon, especially in the middle of September. That's why nobody saw the fight."

"There was a fight?" Paris asked. "What fight?"

"Mr. Gregg came out of the drugstore," Wishniak said, "and a young fellow come up to him and they started arguing. Then this fellow knocked Mr. Gregg down. I was standing at the corner and I ran over and grabbed the guy. I told Mr. Gregg I'd run the boy in for assault and battery. Mr. Gregg told me to let him go."

"Why?"

"Mr. Gregg said it was all a mistake. He knew the guy. He said he was a friend and the guy had enough trouble already. He told me to forget it. So I did."

"Did he say what kind of trouble it was?"

"No."

"You never saw this fellow before?"

"No. He wasn't town people or summer people. But I could pick him out in a minute if I saw him again."

"What did he look like?"

"A young man. He had black hair, blue eyes, a square face with a strong jaw, and kind of a long nose. About twenty-eight years old, I figure. I didn't notice any marks or scars. After I broke it up, he went around the corner and that's the last I saw of him."

"And where did Gregg go?"

"He got into his car and headed up here to the lodge."

"And that's the last you saw of Gregg?"

"That's the last I saw of him alive."

Carew shifted his feet and turned his head toward the darkness. "The car shed is down back a way," he said. "The fire didn't touch that. It's set a good piece away from the house."

"All right," Paris said. "We'll rope off the area. I'll call for the technical sergeant from Troop D. He'll go over the whole place. Mr. Wishniak, how old was Mr. Gregg?"

Wishniak studied the ground for a moment. "I should say around sixty. Medium height, gray hair. Spry for his age. He took good care of himself."

Paris turned to Carew. "Did you examine the body, Ed?"

"Yes," Carew said. "The head isn't too bad at all. But the rest of the body is pretty badly burned. It's the body of a male about five-eight. We'll know for sure when the medical examiner comes. I think there's enough there for a positive identification."

"The M.E. will be here in an hour," Paris said. He looked over at Wishniak. "What time did the fire start, Constable?"

"About ten o'clock," Wishniak said. "Some folks by the name of Tremont have a camp across the lake. They saw the blaze and telephoned into the town hall. We came out in the fire truck. By the time we got here the house had gone down to the ground." He brushed sooty flakes from his jacket. "It was a log cabin lodge and those burn down fast. The lake is down the hill in back. You can't see it from here because of the trees. But that's where we pumped the water from."

"And where was the body?"

"In the corner where one of the bedrooms used to be. I called Troop D at Corinth. They sent these men down. Then they got in touch with Inspector Carew."

"There's a smell of kerosene," Carew said. "It's all over the place. I'm going to take some tests, Wade."

"You think the fire was set?"

"Yes," Carew said. "And I think it's a homicide too." His face looked grim in the oblique light. His foot scuffed at the pine needles. "Not only because of the fight in town and the smell of kerosene. But because of the position of the body. It wasn't near any of the windows. That means Gregg didn't try to get out. If he made no attempt to leave the place, then he was dead before the fire started. To my way of thinking, the fire was set to conceal the murder."

"All right," Paris said. "Tomorrow we can get Mr. Wishniak to look at some pictures. This stranger might

have a record. If not, we'll have an artist's sketch made of him. It won't be much, but it'll give us something to begin with. Now, where are these people who saw the fire start?"

"You mean the Tremonts," Wishniak said. "They were over here before, helping to put out the fire. They went back to their camp."

"I'd like to go over and see them now," Paris said, looking at his watch. "Do you think it's too late?"

"I don't think so," Wishniak said. "They left here not long ago. They're probably still up. Do you want me along?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," Paris said. "But first I ought to call the Eastern City Police. I want them to check from their end."

"I called the Eastern City cops," Wishniak said. "I called them an hour ago. Gregg's house there is dark and locked. They're keeping a lookout."

"Good," Paris said. "Then that takes care of that end." He stepped across the scorched embers and walked slowly down the slope to the lake. There were tire marks in the soft earth leading to an unpainted shed. He heard the sound of footsteps following him. He turned around. It was Constable Wishniak.

"That's the garage," Wishniak said, pointing to the shed. "Mr. Gregg keeps a rowboat and an outboard there, too. You want to see his car?"

"Not now, thanks," Paris said. He turned away from the shed and continued down the hill. He came to the lake and stopped at the edge of a warped wooden pier.

Water lapped gently along the pilings. There was no other sound. A mist was rising from the lake, and through it a faint eerie light came across the water.

"That light is from the Tremont camp," Wishniak said, his voice surprisingly loud and resonant in the stillness. "It's the only other camp on the lake which isn't closed up."

"How did the Tremonts get over here when the fire started?"

"They have a little inboard motorboat," Wishniak said. "They came across the water. But we can get to their place over the road."

"Yes," Paris said. "We might as well go now."

Wishniak stood there rubbing his large, bony hands. "It's lonely here," he said. "But there's some who want it that way."

Paris had been thinking of the loneliness. He thought of a widower of sixty and the solitude of the life he would normally lead. But here he had come to this place in search of more loneliness. There were some who wanted it that way, Wishniak had said. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps it was otherwise, and the man had no choice but to accept loneliness. Because Paris himself knew of loneliness—of his own bachelor life and the travel and emptiness of police work. He knew all these things, and he had come to accept them as part of his job. But he wondered why a man like Gregg would deliberately go out of his way to seek such seclusion. It was not normal. Somewhere in the background there was a reason for it. And he knew he would have to find that out too.