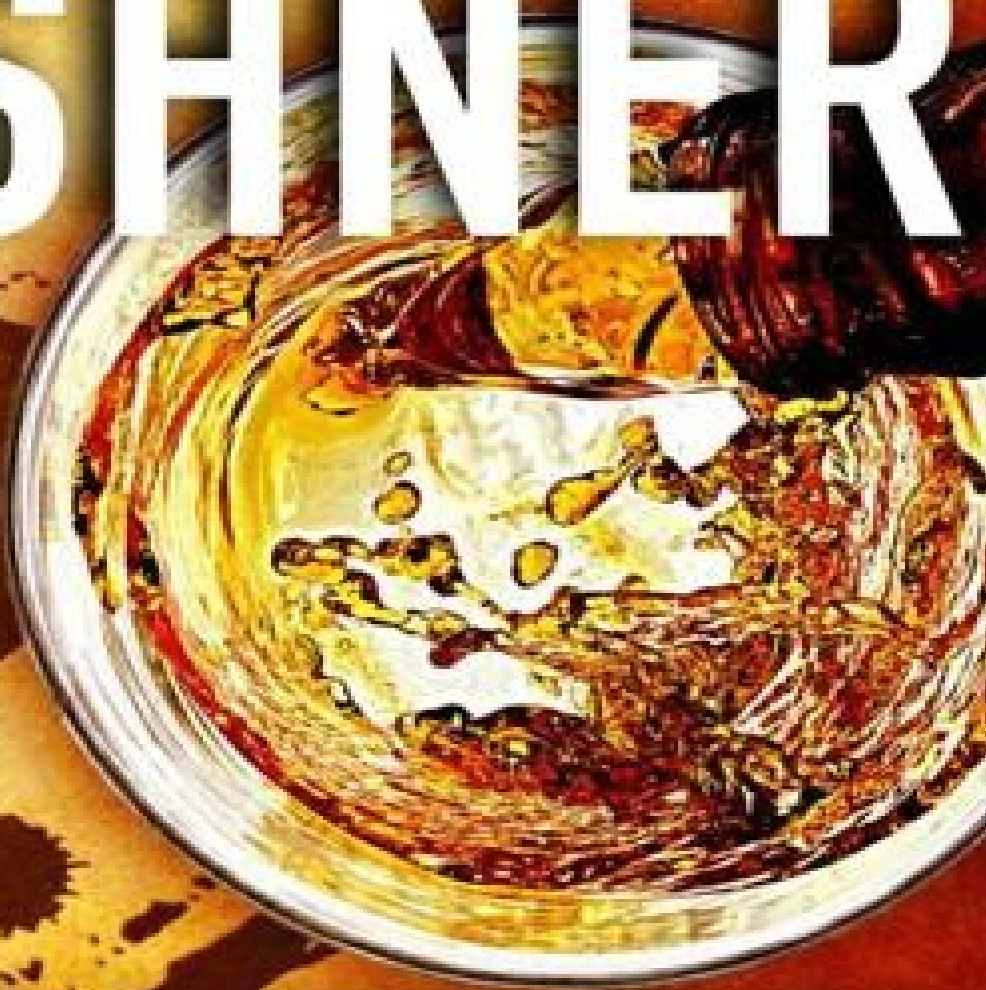


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ACCOUNTING*

WILLIAM
LASHNER



THE
BARKEEP

A THRILLER

THE BARKEEP



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THE
BARKEEP

A Novel of Zenspense

WILLIAM LASHNER

The Accounting
Blood and Bone

THE VICTOR CARL NOVELS:

A Killer's Kiss
Marked Man
Falls the Shadow
Past Due
Fatal Flaw
Bitter Truth (Veritas)
Hostile Witness

WRITING AS TYLER KNOX:

Kockroach

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IF YOU WANT A DOG TO STOP KISSING YOU, turn your head away silently like another dog.

—Jack Kerouac
Some of the Dharma

MOJITO

The old man climbed onto a stool and knuckled the wood to snag the barkeep's attention.

From behind the bar, the bartender nodded his head in acknowledgment. Just then he was in the middle of something because, even at the slowest of times, the barkeep made sure he was in the middle of something. No one wants a bartender looming over the bar, daring you to interrupt his leisure. No one wants a bartender lurching into action to pour you a drink. The barkeep was always busy enough so that when he took your order it felt like a favor. But not a favor from a friend, because this bartender was never your friend. If you wanted a friend, you bought a pet fish; you bellied up to his bar for a drink.

"A Mojito, doctor, if you please," said the old man in a voice ripened by unspeakable vice, "but only if you know how to whip one up with a little pizzazz."

It was a bit of a dig, but the barkeep didn't take it personally. He was twenty-nine years old, thin and hard and handsome as a blade, and he didn't take anything personally. He gave the old man the same look he gave the regulars and the first-timers, the cops and the politicians, the prostitutes and the corporate lawyers who rented the prostitutes by the hour, the same look that he would give to you if you took a seat across from him. He looked at the old man levelly but not intently—a bartender never probes beneath the surface—and he smiled as if he approved not only of the old man's drink choice but of his life choices, of everything that led him to this one moment, where he stepped into this bar and ordered this drink. The whole expression was as crucial a part of the job as a Boston shaker. But truth was, the barkeep never cared what you were drinking, or where you came from, or the evils that were plaguing your soul. And he knew his Mojito rocked, so he didn't need your approval either. You were a customer, that's all there was to it, and behind the bar he existed solely to mix you a drink.

The Mojito man was lean and weathered and sickly pale. His shave wasn't close enough, his greased white hair was a little yellow and a little long. He had one of those raw faces that bespoke long hard years on the road, and too-bright teeth too big for his mouth that bespoke a cheap set of dentures. There was something about him that the barkeep didn't like on the spot, some arrogant sense of his own damn self that pushed at the barkeep's buttons in a way no one had in years. But the barkeep recognized his dislike as weakness and took a moment to let it pour out of him. You know that voice that's always barking, the one in your head that goes on and on and never shuts the hell up? For the past few years the barkeep had been training himself to turn off that voice like one turns off a spigot.

"You look like you're doing all right," said the old man.

"I've done this before."

"That's not what I meant."

The barkeep was in the middle of preparing the old man's drink, so he didn't quite catch the full drift of the comment. He took his craft seriously, selecting the brightest mint leaves from the

batch he had picked fresh that afternoon, pouring a precise measurement of the simple syrup he had prepped in the kitchen at the start of his shift. He brought to the mixing of a drink all the tranquility and generosity of a formal tea ceremony. He was in the process of gently muddling the leaves into the syrup right in the highball glass, concentrating on the gentle part because anything more and the mix would be ripped apart, leaving the drink with the general consistency of pond scum.

“You look like you’re doing okay for yourself, I mean,” said the old man. “Like things, the way things worked out all for the best.”

“I love my job.” That was the extent of what the barkeep ever said about himself to a customer. “How you doing tonight?” said the regulars at Zenzibar when they climbed onto their stools and asked for their usual drinks. “I love my job,” he’d say.

“That’s a good thing, to love your work,” said the old man. “I loved my work, too. It was a hard job, harder than you can imagine. It took more out of me than I even knew I had. But it was what I did, what I was. Excepting it’s pretty much over.”

The barkeep sliced a lime in half, squeezed the juice from each half into a jigger, dropped one of the emptied hulls into the glass along with a shot of the juice.

“I guess you could say I’m retired now,” said the old man. “Didn’t have no choice about it. My health couldn’t keep up with the demands of the profession. And then my health, bad as it was, it took a turn for the worse. There’s not much left of me anymore but the sickness. My last kidney is shot, my liver, my throat riddled with something. That’s why I’m on this little tour.”

The old man wanted to talk, needed to talk. The barkeep didn’t want to listen, but as he measured in two shots of white rum, he affected a mild interest. That was part of the job, to pretend to listen, to feign concern. There are three professions who play at that game; barkeeps are the ones who do it on their feet.

“You ever hear of a fellow named Walter J. Freeman,” said the old man, “a doctor of sorts?”

“No, never did,” said the barkeep as he opened a bottle of sparkling water and poured it into the glass. He used San Pellegrino in his Mojitos because the bubbles were so fine they gave the drink an admirable tightness. He filled the glass to the top with crushed ice and stirred with a straw.

“Quite an interesting man. He invented an operation that scrambled the front part of the brain like an egg. Lobotomy, he called it. He’d go right through the bone above the eyeballs to do it, with nothing more than a hammer and an ice pick. The man performed thousands of the operations all over the country. Claimed his lobotomy calmed the mind and aided digestion. Dr. Walter J. Freeman.”

When the drink was chilled and the glass frosty, the barkeep twisted off a sprig of mint and smacked it between his palms to activate the scent, and dropped it on top of the drink. He placed the glass atop a coaster and slid it before the old man. The old man looked at the drink as if it were a lover slipping her legs beneath his sheets. He rolled up his sleeves, lifted the glass, closed his eyes and pursed his lips daintily as he took a sip. His eyelids fluttered with pleasure.

“That works, boy,” he said. “That’s just jimmy. Simple and pure. I feel like I’m back in the whorehouse in Cuba where I tasted my first.”

“Twelve fifty,” said the barkeep.

“That’s damn stiff for a drink.”

“It’s a stiff drink.”

“You mind if I run a tab, doctor?”

The barkeep glanced over at Marson, sitting like a sentry at the other end of the bar, before sizing up the chances of the old man being a runner. Marson would take it out of the barkeep’s check if the bill went unpaid. On the old man’s newly bared forearms were two matching tattoos.

monochromatically blue but intricately wrought. On the left forearm was the head of Jesus; on the right forearm was the head of the Devil. Both were staring up at the barkeep.

“Suit yourself,” he said. He set up the tab as the customer rambled on.

“So this lobotomy doctor, this Dr. Freeman, late in life he was cast out by all them fancy-pan doctors who claimed his operation did more harm than good, which is always the way of it. And so Dr. Freeman, he drove all over the country, visiting his old patients, trying to see for himself how it all turned out. Sort of a farewell tour. And to him, his handiwork looked pretty damn sweet. Gave him a little bit of satisfaction as the end approached.”

“I suppose it would.”

It was still quiet at the bar, early afternoon, before the happy-hour crowd arrived with the after-work bonhomie, and even as the barkeep kept himself busy wiping bottles and slicing limes, he had no choice but to nod and listen. He liked it busy at the bar, he liked it when the crowd was thick and deep and the calls for drinks came from all sides like a rising tide of feverish chants, when there wasn't time to take in the stories and the gripes and he was able to lose himself in the work. That was the quest in everything he did: the work, the meditation, the exercise, the sex. To lose himself. And as the barkeep would be the first to tell you, it was not without reason.

“That's what I'm doing now,” said the old man. “That's why I'm here. I'm taking my farewell tour. Before the sickness closes me down for good. To see how things, they worked out, to see the results of my handiwork.” He picked up what was left of his drink, examined it as if he were appraising an uncut diamond. “And from where I'm sitting now, things look like they didn't work out half-bad.”

The barkeep stared while the old man guzzled the rest of his drink. Truth is, a bartender is once ever a sounding board. You don't care about his opinion when you are spilling your guts, and why should you? But the barkeep still would stand there like he cared, nodding now and then, never reacting with more than a casual raise of the eyebrow. And you would see in his affect what you wanted to see in his affect rather than the truth, that he didn't give a damn. But there was something about this old man and the buttons he pushed that seemed to make what he was saying personal to the barkeep. The barkeep watched as the old man greedily drank the dregs of his drink, like a vampire trying to suck every last ounce from a pale stretch of neck.

“The name's Grackle,” said the old man after he thumped down his glass. “Birdie Grackle.”

“Birdie?”

“You know Gene Vincent?”

“‘Bird Doggin’.”

“There you go. Not so dumb as you look. I'd be hunting still if anything worked. But now it all just sets there like an old hound sleeping 'neath a cottonwood in the midday heat.”

“Another Mojito, Birdie?”

“Not at those prices,” he said, trying to laugh but ending up with a sputtering cough that turned his raw face red and brought tears to his eyes. “Why don't you pour me up a gut puncher, just for the kick of it?”

The barkeep turned and grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the bottom shelf, something more suitable for stripping paint than drinking. As he poured, Birdie Grackle stared at the rising brown liquor as if it were some golden elixir that could transform body and soul.

“How much is that?” said Grackle.

“Four dollars.”

“That's a crime.”

“I’ll put it on your tab.”

—“You do that,” said Grackle, picking up the shot glass. “And put two more on while you’re at it.” He downed the shot with a snatch of his wrist, let out a small slurp as his mouth and throat absorbed the alcohol, and slammed the glass onto the bar. “Another one for me and one for you on the boot.”

“Thank you all the same,” said the barkeep, “but I never drink with customers.”

“Pour them both out, doctor. You’ll do me the honor before we’re through here.”

“And why’s that?” said the barkeep as he laid out a second shot glass next to the first and filled them both.

“Because, Justin boy, on this stop of my farewell tour, you’re the old patient I came to see.”

“You know my name.”

“I know more than that, doctor.” Grackle took hold of one of the glasses. “Here’s to blood and your eye.”

“What are we drinking to?”

“Your mother.”

The barkeep stared at him for a long moment, took in the old man’s alky eyes, his pale, ruined cheeks, the peculiarly self-satisfied twist of his lips. He glanced again at the tattoos of Jesus and the Devil on the old man’s forearms and realized, with a start, that despite the differing hair and expressions, the features on each were the same, they were the old man’s features, those of Birdie Grackle himself, both savior and Satan. The barkeep took the second glass of whiskey and downed it quickly, let the cheap rotgut burn his throat until something close to pain slipped out.

“Good for you,” said the old man before he drank his own.

“You knew my mother?”

“Not really. I only met her that once.”

“When was that, Birdie?”

Birdie Grackle sucked his dentures for a moment and then said, “The night I done killed her.”

FUZZY NAVEL

Justin was filled with the sudden urge to punch this Birdie Grackle in his filthy mouth. It came upon him so unexpectedly that he actually savored the bitter teeth-grinding pleasure of it. He didn't feel much these days—he worked hard not to feel much—and so it was almost a novelty, the bitter anger that soaked through his flesh and into his gut. But it was a disappointing failure too, and so he bit his lip and stifled the urge. The barkeep had learned to stifle most of his urges, which is what happens to sons who stumble upon their mothers' murdered bodies, or to bartenders when the customer is always right. Back to apparent calm, he stared evenly at Birdie Grackle, the rheumy eyes and the uneasy lips working hard to keep the dentures from falling onto the bar.

Justin figured the old man for a liar, and with good reason. First, Grackle had made his confession in a bar. Justin had learned long ago that looking for truth in a bar is like looking for sex in a convent, you might eventually find something worth all the trouble, but the search will be long and full of the deepest frustrations. And second, Justin knew enough about life to know that your mother's murderer didn't just happen to walk into your bar and introduce himself to you over a Mojito. But Justin's emotional response to the old man and what he had said was so unusual that he felt compelled to explore it. It was like, liar or no, the old man was a test that Justin needed to pass.

Justin leaned forward and poured another shot into Birdie Grackle's glass. With an especially laconic voice he said, "Are you hungry, Birdie?"

"I must admit to being a mite bit peckish," said the old man.

"With all your infirmities, can you still chew yourself a prime piece of beef?"

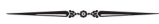
Grackle's smile was revolting enough to force Justin to pull back. "So long as I cut them pieces small enough."

"Capital Grille on Broad Street, then. Let's say half past eight?"

"Let's say," said Birdie Grackle, "so long as you're treating."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," said Justin. "And forget about your tab here. I'll take care of that, too."

"That's mighty neighborly, considering," said Birdie. "And seeing as you're being so generous to an old man on death's door, what say we have ourselves another Mojito?"



Marson bitched about the change in plans, but Justin had become the beating heart of Zenzibar's evening trade, and so there wasn't much the boss could do about it. The on-call sub showed up seven to take over Justin's shift, which left Justin enough time to prepare himself for another dose of Birdie Grackle, as pleasant a prospect as another dose of clap.

Justin Chase lived in a nineteenth-century “trinity” he rented on the cheap. The real estate agent, before she showed Justin the little tiny town house, described it as cozy. What he discovered when he toured the place was that each of the three floors was about the size of a prison cell. But the agent needn’t have worried her perfectly coiffed head of hair about it; Justin thought the place perfect. The first level now held a couch, a small dining table, and a galley kitchen. The second level was taken up by a futon on the floor, a bureau, and the bathroom. The third level was completely empty, the floor covered with light-green tatami mats Justin had picked up off Craigslist.

He showered on the second floor to get the stench of the bar off his skin and then, with his long dark hair loose about his shoulders and clad only in a blue silk robe, he slowly climbed the stairs. Without haste he took his position on one of the tatami mats.

A Zen master was once visited by an acclaimed scholar who intended to make a study of the master’s religious practices. As they sat for the tea ceremony, the master poured tea into the scholar’s cup until it overflowed and then kept on pouring. “Stop,” said the scholar. “No more will go in.” “Like this cup, you are full of your own opinions and emotions,” said the master as he kept pouring. “How can I teach you anything until you first empty your cup?”

In the wake of his mother’s murder six years before, Justin had zipped through the first three stages of grief—shock, denial and bargaining—got hung up a bit on the guilt and the anger, and then he crashed headfirst into depression, where he moldered without relief, as if locked within a dark, dank cage. It was in the midst of this breakdown that he stumbled onto an answer for how to get out of his prison. He found it in a book, of all places, pressed upon him by the shaking hands of a fellow patient at the mental hospital where his brother had sent him. The volume was small, black, bound in frayed, moth-eaten cloth, old and musty, Eastern and mystical. The first time he opened it, he found it filled with the most ridiculous of gibberish. It fit his mood perfectly.

The book was a methodology for allowing his mind, as the text described, to rest undistracted in the nothing-to-do, nothing-to-hold condition of the primordial void state. Easier said than done, and not so easily said. But Justin, at the time, intuitively saw in it a route out of his pain. Whatever horrors he faced in this world, whatever demons approached, the answer was not to flee in terror. Instead the book taught him to face the horror of the world with a calm courage. *Fear it not, read the book. Be not terrified. Be not awed. Know it to be the embodiment of thine own intellect.*

There was a rational side to our thinking, and there was an emotional side, and the book gave him a clue how to separate one from the other. He gave the book’s methods a try and, shockingly, they seemed to work. He saw clearly the futility of trying to leave a mark on the shifting planes of reality, like trying to write his name in the foam of an ocean wave. He learned to discard his dreams of worldly success and let his entire existence float on the winds of chance. As he quieted his hopes, his emotions dimmed; as he made fewer and fewer choices, he became more and more content to let his life come to him. And slowly, from the words of the book and through his practice, he found for himself an equilibrium outside his pain. That was how he finally left the cage of his depression, and then left the institution, and then flitted across the surface of the country with the perfect mindlessness of a moth. That was how he ended in this house, in this life, that was how he became a barkeep.

But now that old bastard Birdie Grackle had done the one impermissible thing: he had threatened to breach the floodgates of Justin’s emotions. Justin had no doubts where that would lead, so he let it continue: with Justin lying curled on the floor, unable to stand, unable to breathe, unable to see anything but the darkness. That way led to the asylum. He had been there and back already, but he wouldn’t go again. But by hard experience Justin had learned how to deal with rogue emotions that pierced his placid surface. He sat cross-legged on the tatami mat, closed his eyes, evened out his

breathing, and began to empty his cup.

—Slowly and carefully, he called forth his emotions and let them rise within him. He didn't no try to stifle them or dim their force. Instead he thought of his mother and her lovely face. And he remembered lugging the great fusty bundle of his laundry, like the great burden of his youthfulness and ambitions, along the dark path from the street to the large stone house with bold white pillars. And he remembered slipping on something and almost losing his balance, figuring it to be a smear of mud left over from the rain. And he remembered reaching the front door, which was slightly ajar. And the wedge of light that leaked out of the narrow opening. And the slick of red he could now see on the sole of his running shoe. And, even as the inkling that something was deadly wrong blossomed monstrously in his heart, the way he called out "Mom?" as he pushed the door open. "Mom?"

And as he remembered, he let the emotions flow, as if he were an urn being filled with a never-ending stream. They poured into him, dark and roiling, and he tasted each of them, the silver bitterness, the shock and the hurt, the pain of betrayal, the despair, the fury, the sadness, such sadness, the sense of loss, the sense of being lost, loneliness, anger, fury, guilt. Yes, guilt. Despite his even breaths and quiet body, his heart raced as the emotions rose to choke him. They filled him with the trial and turmoil, and for a moment he had the panicky sensation that he was drowning.

He wanted to escape, to flee, to swim to the surface and cast everything aside, but he maintained his posture. The emotions kept rising, one pushing up the next, each pushing out the other. He became a deep pool of these dark and swirling emotions, the bottom unfathomable, the emotions themselves rising so quickly a stream fell out of one low edge of the pool and plunged down a craggy slope until emptying into some great sea. And each of these emotions, after they filled him with their power and pain, followed one after the other down that fall and away.

After a long period of turmoil, Justin's heart slowed, and the pool cleared, and he felt he had overcome with calm. A perfect stillness, a moment of absolute tranquility. It wasn't an easy place to get to, and he struggled to stay there once he found it, but it felt like home when he was there. And home was there now.

Have you ever seen the road shimmer before you on a hot summer's day, the way it looks more like a dream than a hard piece of reality? When Justin's mind was clean of cant and emotion, when both past and future fell away, the whole world shimmered like that for him.

Shimmered like the harmless illusion that it was. And what kind of barkeep would he be if he could be spooked by an illusion?

SOMETHING HARD

There are two types of the mentally deficient in this world. The first type mistake their lack of understanding for bold perception. This type of deficiency is often found in urologists and presidential candidates and is as dangerous as the plague. The second type are acutely aware of their own limitations and embrace the narrow range of their capacities. Think of the idiot savant with a rare genius, who gives the world a great artistic gift that can be both stunning and transformative.

Derek belongs to this second class, being himself a bit of an idiot and a bit of a savant.

Derek knows all that he does not know. Plots and plans fly in the air about him, conspiracies flourish. He can sense the purposes and cross-purposes battling around him, but he is unable to appreciate their true import and so he has left off trying to understand. Schemes are hatched and thrive and die ugly deaths while Derek goes about his business blissfully unaware.

He lets Vern take care of the plotting now. He trusts Vern because he has no choice but to trust Vern. He cannot find the jobs, negotiate the fees, avoid the double cross, count the money. He knows how hard it is to keep the business end of things straight because Vern constantly tells him how hard it is to keep the business end of things straight. And after that job went sour with Tree, and Derek was left holding the bag in Harrisburg, he is grateful that Vern has stepped into the void. Vern counseled him on how to make his mark in prison so that everyone would leave him alone. Vern counseled him on how to play the parole board when his time was up. Vern counseled him on how to get back into the business. Vern stepped up when Derek needed someone to step up for him.

And so now he trusts Vern. As he had trusted Tree before Vern. And had trusted Rodney before Tree. And had trusted Sammy D before Rodney. They were the smart guys, they were the ones who understood the world. And that they all are dead, except for Vern, only reinforces Derek's satisfaction with his place in the world. Let the others scheme their way through life, using him as a tool; Derek just goes about his business. Coolly, efficiently, brutally. He might not be an artistic savant, but he is not without talents. And in their strange way, his abilities put a song in his heart.

It is still light when Derek slips along the alleyway to the back door of the Kensington row house north of Center City Philadelphia. He examines the lock, a simple Yale with a rusted cylinder before taking the proper torque wrench and a half-diamond pick from the vinyl envelope he always keeps in his pocket. A lock like this Derek can scrub open as quick as a breath.

Sammy D taught Derek how to open locks. Sammy D knew everything about lock-picking, but by the time Derek was through with his lessons he was better at it than Sammy D. Rodney could open locks too, but he was a squirrely little guy, always worried about who was coming up behind him or what was waiting for him inside or how long the job was taking or how much noise was being made. It was the powder that made him nervous. Sometimes Rodney, under pressure, would fail repeatedly by throwing all the timing out of whack. But Derek never has such problems. He trusts his handler and worry about everything else but the step-by-step of the job. So when he is working a lock, all he cares about is raising the pins and manipulating the cylinder. It is just him and the lock and after a moment

—*click, plock, click*—the pins align as if on their own.

—Once inside the row house, with the door closed behind him, Derek takes out his flashlight and begins to navigate his way. He knows he has enough time to get in position because Vern has told him he has enough time. The rear door opens into a basement filled with boxes and junk and smelling slightly of crap. A cockroach scurries away from the light, and Derek follows it with his beam until it slips beneath a sagging carton. Derek leans down and sees the slight antennae wave at him. He wags his tail back.

Derek is fascinated with animals of all kinds—bugs, rabbits, muscular mastiffs—and they all seem just as fascinated with him. But of all the animals, Derek is most fascinated with horses. He loves their coats, their smell, the way they lift their front hooves, the way they feel between his legs when he rides them. And Vernon has promised Derek his own horse if all works out right. He has always wanted his own horse and has been promised one many times before, but as of yet he is still waiting. Derek is tired of waiting. Derek is going to hold Vern to that promise.

A set of rough wooden stairs climbs to a doorway that leads into a large eat-in kitchen, with bare counters, an old rusted stove, yellow linoleum flooring. Derek passes through the kitchen like a shadow, through an arched passageway to a dining alcove, and then to a living room with the front door on its far wall. A sagging sofa, an old television, a telephone set by a greasy green easy chair in the corner. The room smells of mold and body odor.

Derek walks over to the phone and picks up the handset. He dials the number Vern told him to dial. He has instructions for what to do if the phone is answered and what to do if it is not answered. There is no answer now, so he waits for the voice-mail message and then stays on the line, humming to keep it from shutting off. Vern told him to hum something, but Derek needed more specific instructions, so Vern told Derek to just hum his favorite song. Derek had to choose between “God Bless America” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and he worried about that decision for the longest time until he decided to sort of mix them together. When he is done humming, he hangs up the phone, sits in the green chair, and waits.

And here is another advantage of Derek’s mental deficiency in his unique line of work. There could be a difficult moment, the waiting, when doubts start sprouting like weeds. Rodney could never bear these moments. He could not stop himself from nervously talking when they were in it together. Yap-yap-yammering about plans and angles and things that Derek never could follow. Rodney had never learned the trick that seems to come naturally to Derek. As the outside darkens into night, Derek’s mind goes just as dark; in the quiet of the room, Derek’s mind is just as quiet. His pulse remains low, his breathing even. And it stays that way, until he hears the scuffing at the front door.

When the front door finally opens, a man slouches in, shuts the door behind him, and flicks the light switch by the door. The room is bathed with a dull yellow from an overhead fixture, but the man is so preoccupied with emptying his pockets onto a side table and examining the contents, including a small packet with white powder inside, that it takes a moment for him to realize that someone else is in the room.

“What the hell—” says the man. He is old and skinny, wearing a pair of dirty jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. His shoulder-length gray hair is stringy with grease, his face is bathed in sweat, and he smells bad, as if he has not showered in weeks. When he opens his mouth, Derek can see a set of rotting teeth behind his thin, scabby lips.

“Are you Flynn?” says Derek. His voice is slow and deliberate, and every syllable is equally accented.

The old man examines Derek for a moment, and then a smile emerges. He is calmed by

Derek's voice. Everyone seems to be calmed by Derek's voice. "Yeah," says the old man. "I'm Flynn. What, did Mac send you?"

"Who did you talk to?" says Derek, only asking what he has been instructed to ask.

"No one. Why?"

"The DA?"

"She called. No biggie. I just repeated what was in the thing I signed. She insisted that I come to the office to talk to her. I'm going tomorrow. If I had a choice, I'd say no. But, you know, I'm still on probation and so—"

"Who else did you talk to?"

"No one."

"The son?" says Derek.

"Frank? No, of course not. The son of a bitch almost killed me last time I saw him."

"And the other son?"

"Who, the kid? No, jeez, I told Mac I'd seen him in the street, but he passed me by like I didn't know me. I haven't talked to him since the whole thing happened." Flynn bounces his weight nervously from one leg to the other. "You tell Mac it's all clean. I know I owe him. I was jammed up before, but this I can handle. Tell him he can count on me."

"Where were you?" says Derek.

"Out. Getting some provisions."

"Drugs?"

"Food and stuff."

"Drugs?"

"Okay, yeah, if you can call them that," says the old man with a derisive snort. "There's so much talcum in each bag, it would be more worthwhile to dust my dick with it than to put it in my arm. But it's tough staying here, waiting, like I'm supposed to, and I got this thing tomorrow. I just needed something to take the edge off, that's all. You tell Mac not to worry."

"I have something for you," says Derek. He rises from the chair, walks over to the table where the old man has dumped the contents from his pocket, and drops a small box on top of the pile.

It is covered with a bright-blue paper, a red ribbon wrapped around it and tied into a bow. It's pretty.

"What's that?" says the old man.

"A present," says Derek. He backs away and sits again in the chair.

Flynn looks at the box, raises his head to look at Derek in the corner, and turns his attention back to the box. He waits for a moment before attacking the box like a kid on Christmas morning with a real family to take care of him, sliding off the ribbon, ripping the paper, opening the lid. He pulls out a small plastic bag filled with a few large chunks of dark-red powder.

"What's this?" says Flynn.

"A present."

"From Mac? I don't understand."

"Go ahead."

Flynn opens the bag, takes a sniff. His eyes flutter.

"Go ahead," says Derek.

"Oh, I see. Something to keep me busy, to make sure I play my part and don't talk to anybody. I told you he doesn't have to worry, but you tell him I appreciate the gesture. You want a taste?"

Derek simply shakes his head. He tried heroin once, Derek has tried everything once, including

sex, but like sex, heroin did not take. Derek does not need drug-fueled flights of fantasy or an escape from the hard truths of reality. ~~Because Derek does not pretend to understand the hard truths of reality.~~ He lives in the simplicity of the moment, and there is beauty there, even in this crumbling Kensington row house. So, content in the limitations of his own mind, he watches as the old man sits down on the couch by the table and makes his preparations.

Sammy D, Derek's first partner, was an addict. Derek watched Sammy D shoot up hundreds of times in the worst kinds of shooting galleries in Baltimore, watched Sammy D follow the step-by-step path to oblivion, with the spoon and the candle and the cotton and the needle. Sammy D was the first to promise Derek a horse, when Derek was just starting out in the business and Sammy was hustling for jobs. "Horse" was also what Sammy D called the powder he threw away their money on, and Derek watched the horse slip needleful by needleful up Sammy's arm. When Sammy finally expired, all Derek could think was that if he had gotten the animal, they both would have been better off.

Now Flynn has the needle prepared. Derek watches as he rolls up his sleeve and ties the rubber strap around his biceps, grabbing it with his teeth. The old man flicks his forearm, like Sammy used to flick his forearm, and then sticks the needle in, drawing blood into the syringe before releasing the dark-brown fluid. The last thing Derek sees is a dreamy smile before the old man nods off.

Derek sits in the chair and waits for the old man to wake up. Vern told him what to do. Derek likes his instructions simple, and that is what these are. If the old man wakes up, Derek is supposed to slice his throat. But from the way the old man's breathing catches, stops, and starts again more weakly, Derek knows the old man is not going to wake up. The way Sammy D did not wake up when Derek prepared a second batch and gave it to him while he was still nodding off to the first. "What are you doing?" Sammy said dreamily as Derek gently pressed the plunger.

When the old man's breath catches for a second time and stops again, Derek does nothing. He sits and waits, and waits some more. When he is sure, he stands and goes over to the table, picking up the wrapping paper, the ribbon, the box, the plastic bag. He does not know why the old man had to die. He does not know who wanted him dead, does not know how much Vern has been paid for the job.

All he knows is that he has done exactly what he was supposed to do. And that Vern better give him a horse.

JOHNNIE WALKER RED

The Capital Grille was one of the big-bellied, flushed-faced steak joints that had taken over Broad Street. Old guys like Birdie Grackle fervently believed the height of living was a hunk of grilled cow, hold the veggies, which was why Justin had suggested the place. Steak as bait.

They were at a white-tableclothed table in the corner of the restaurant, set away from other diners at Justin's request. The porterhouse on Birdie's plate was the size of his head, and his dentures danced as he chewed. Between bites he slurped his Scotch like it was mother's milk. A few intrepid drops escaped his greasy maw and slid down the side of his stubbled chin. It was altogether a lovely sight, and Justin was paying for every disgusting inch of it. But Justin figured it was worth the price because even as Grackle chewed with his mouth foully open, he was talking all the while.

"I like a good cut of meat now and then," said Birdie Grackle, grease glossing his lips. "Have you ever noticed how a fine piece of strip has the faint taste of pussy in it? Meaty and plump. That's why men eat steak. And why Marges all love their tuna fish, because ain't nothing faint about that. But you get a taste of something, it can be hard to get it out your mouth. Like killing. What's that green gunk you're eating?"

"It's spinach," said Justin. "Creamed."

"You don't take to steak?"

"I don't eat meat anymore."

"What, are you a fruit?"

"No."

"Then you're like a veterinarian or something."

"Something like that, yes."

"Well, that's a cause of concern right there. I haven't met too many veterinarians that wasn't something wrong with their heads. So what is it, you trying to live forever? Or are you forgoing me out of empathy with the cow? Because if that's it, I got to tell you from long experience that your basic cow is as dumb an animal as exists on this good earth."

"I work in a bar, so you'll be hard-pressed to convince me of that."

"You might be right at that," said Grackle with a wink as he sliced off a slab of beef and held it in the air with his fork so that it dripped red onto his plate. "So tell me, doctor. What turned you off one of the great pleasures in this life?"

"Let's just say when you come home and find your mother in the hallway, facedown on the floor, her head smashed open and her blood and urine soaking into the rug, the sight and the smell, it steals away your taste for meat."

Birdie Grackle looked at Justin for a moment, stared right into his eyes, and then, still staring, he shoved the bleeding piece of steak between his false teeth. "That might do it," he said as he chewed, "for some. But I never let the dead stop me from living. I learned that piece of wisdom in the war along with my technique."

“Technique? What kind of technique does it take to bash a defenseless woman in the head?”

“You don’t want to go into the details, son, trust me.”

“You’re wrong, Birdie. Into the details is exactly where I want to go.”

“Suit yourself.”

Grackle picked his napkin off the table, wiped his greasy lips, laid the napkin neatly on his lap. Before Justin could react, Birdie’s arms leaped at Justin with the quickness of two cobras. One hand grabbed hold of the right side of Justin’s skull and pulled him close, the other stuck something sharp into the skin behind Justin’s left earlobe.

“What the—”

“Right now I got an ice pick pointed at your brain stem. A quick punch and that will be all she wrote about your pathetic little story.”

As the sharp tip of the pick pressed against his flesh, Justin felt no fear, just a placid stillness and the faint glimmerings of a strange and unreadable hope. “Is that what you claim you did to my mother?” he said calmly.

Grackle pressed the sharp thing deeper into Justin’s flesh and then suddenly let go. Justin caught a glimpse of something dully metallic in the old man’s right hand as his arms dropped beneath the table.

“It’s just a technique of mine is all,” said Grackle. “One of them. I learned me a bunch, a courtesy of Uncle Sam. But the most important was, it don’t matter how many bullets you put in a fellow’s chest, if you want him dead, you better ice-pick his brain. You want to order me another drink?”

Justin raised his arm for the waiter.

“I wasn’t a young man when I found myself in the middle of the killing,” said Birdie Grackle after the liquor came. “A judge in Odessa gave me a choice, prison or the army, and I chose wrong. But one night in the jungle, a fat-faced lieutenant asked me if I wanted to volunteer for some sort of counterinsurgency unit. He said I’d be sent to Saigon for training and then would work primarily behind our own lines. Fresh sheets at night, hot and cold running bar girls, a chance to shack with a piece of hooch. Counterinsurgency? Count me in. But I’ll tell you this, in a lot of ways it was more than I bargained for.”

“What were you, in an intelligence unit?”

“Don’t be a fool. I ain’t exactly dumb, but no one in his right mind woulda hired me for something to do with intelligence. No, we was only about elimination. We’d get our orders, go out and take care of it. Small villages within our sector, spies working in Saigon itself. When we showed up they all shit because we never left nothing breathing behind, not even the pigs, that was our way. It was hard at first, coming to grips with what we was doing, but I managed, and it sure as hell be crawling through the jungles at night, pissing my pants in fear. It’s funny what kind of hell you can get used to. And the things I learned, boy, you couldn’t get them things on your own in a hundred years. When I came back, what I fell into just seemed like a continuation of my war. I was in a slaughterhouse in Texas for a bit, killing those dumb pieces of beef with a bolt gun at that same spot in the head I showed you, pulling out the stinking stomachs full of acid. And then I got an opportunity to raise it up a notch.”

“By becoming a contract killer, Birdie? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I was what I was, is all. Was a man named Preacher who gave me my running orders. Never knew who was running him and never cared. He gave me a name, an address, any sundry instructions for the job, and a do-by date. That was all I needed. It doesn’t take long to shadow a name enough

figure all the angles, as long as you know how to finish it off.”

—“And you were hired to kill my mother.”

“It wasn’t much of a job, truth be told. She was too nice a lady to make it hard. I put on a brown uniform, told her through the door I had a package to deliver. At one point she turned her back to me, and that was it.”

“Who hired you?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? But Preacher, he never told me that. Ever. It was just a name, an address, special instructions and a do-by date.”

“That’s a hell of a story.”

“You don’t believe me,” said Grackle. “I can tell. But it don’t much matter either way. Was a whore in Lubbock named Stella who used to scream out like a gut-shot bear in the middle of the action. I never believed a bit of it, but it still felt good. You’ll carry this with you a long time. And I want you to know, I did a clean job before I messed it up for them police. Your momma, she didn’t feel nothing. She went peaceful as a piece of veal.”

“Fuck you,” blurted out Justin, surprising himself at the vehemence of his words.

“Maybe, yeah. But in time you’ll be thanking me. It just needs some curing is all.”

Justin stared for a moment and tried to gauge his own emotions. They were pretty damn raw, as raw as if he actually were face-to-face with his mother’s killer. Something in the old man was drawing the worst out of Justin, had been drawing it out from the first, and he couldn’t quite figure out what. It was more than just his false claim about Justin’s mother, it was something in the old man’s smell, maybe, or in the old man’s very being. Justin took a moment to let his emotions rise within him, rise and burn and wash through him until he was left with nothing but the placid stillness.

“Okay,” said Justin. “I think I’ve heard enough of your story, and seen you chew enough burnt muscle to keep me nauseous for a week. So what is it you want here, Birdie? What’s your angle?”

“No angle. This is my farewell tour, like I said. A chance to offer a confession and to ease my soul. An opportunity to meet face-to-face the son of one of my victims and see that my life hasn’t been all that ruinous. And a chance, maybe, to make some sort of amends.”

Justin stared at the old man, saw the devious glint in his wet eyes, tried to fight a smile and lost.

“Amends?”

“Well, most of my jobs you could see the reason behind. Miserable sons of bitches, fat slobs and corporate types. You know, nothing to get all misty about. I even laughed when I drowned a banker in his own marble tub. But your momma, that was something different. Couldn’t see no reason why she got what she got. And she was nice enough to let me use her bathroom.”

“You crapped in our bathroom?”

“I pinched a loaf there, yes I did. A two-flusher for sure. That was why I always felt a bit bad about that job there.”

“You have a kind and gentle heart.”

“So I thought, maybe, as a final gesture, I’d do one more piece of work, just for your mom. I’ll take care of whoever it was what set her up in the first place.”

“But you don’t know who it is. You said so yourself.”

“Well, maybe I have myself some clues.”

“Maybe I do too,” said Justin. “And since the killer is already in jail for the rest of his miserable life, maybe I don’t need your amends.”

“If he’s the right one.”

There was something in Birdie Grackle's smile that hooked Justin's gaze like a barb hooking skin. "Oh, he's the right one, all right."

"Don't be so sure," said Birdie. "'Cause Preacher, when he hired me, he let slip with something that says he ain't."

"And you can't wait to tell me."

"For a price."

And in that moment a knot in Justin's gut loosened. He wasn't facing the fiend who had murdered his mother. All he was facing was a pathetic old man lying through his false teeth. He had figured the old man was lying about the killing from the start, but Justin couldn't quite figure out why. All the lies ever told in a bar could be distilled into three: I'm not a drunk; I'm not trying to pick your pocket; I'm not looking for meaningless impersonal sex. Justin already knew the old man was a stevedore and he hoped to God he wasn't after sex. Which left Birdie Grackle trying to pick Justin's pocket, and Justin was curious as hell as to how the old man intended to use his mother's murder to do that. Maybe he had done it already, what with the drinks and the meal, but Justin sensed someone like Birdie was after more than a meal. And now here it came.

"You want me to hire you to tell me who hired you to kill my mom."

"That's part of it."

"And the other part?"

"To take care of it, like I said."

"By take care of it you mean..."

"That's right."

"And how much will this cost me?"

"Being as I'm half-dead and feeling sentimental, I'm going to give you a discount. Ten thousand flat, plus expenses."

"Up front?"

"Half now, half on completion."

"That all?"

"A bargain."

"I mean you did all this, learned all you had to learn, sought me out for a mere five thousand dollars. It hardly seems worth it, Birdie."

"Ten thousand."

"Let's just talk about the half you want now."

"Even half ain't no chicken feed."

"But still."

"Well, you know, it's more the spirit of the thing than the money."

And that's when Justin burst out laughing. This whole hit-man act, played by a soused Texan con man with an old-time baseball name, was comical enough. But then to top it off with his self-satisfied mien as he tried to pawn off his moneygrubbing as charity was just too damn rich. The whole show had been worth the price of dinner, and Justin was almost sorry to have to piss on the old man's well-laid plans.

"What's so funny?" said Grackle.

"You, Birdie. You've worked this up pretty well, I must say, this whole I-killed-your-mom thing. You've been digging through the old newspaper accounts, no doubt. But there were a couple of parts you didn't think out. First, I don't want to kill anyone."

"Even the person who killed your mom?"

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