



DOUG RICHARDSON

DARK
HORSE

"TERRIFYING...A RIVETING TALE." —*Booklist*

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THE RECIPE WAS dead simple.

A burlap sack, twenty-five feet of nylon rope, and a cash purchase of four live rabbits from the local livestock supply. With the ingredients assembled, the animals' throats were slit, the twitching carcasses dumped into the burlap sack, and the rope used to securely tie the sack closed.

Rabbit stew, thought the cook.

He climbed into his saddle. Small and slender, he was barely a wisp on the nag's back. He checked his watch and patiently waited for the dogs to come.

And come, they did. Right after sunset, on time and howling like the devil. There would be two of them. Both hounds, leading the old man on his Tuesday hunt. They would pick up the smell of the dead rabbits, key on the scent, and set a new heading.

Sure as shit, the old man would follow.

The rider spurred his rented horse and cut a path through the woods, dragging the burlap sack behind him in a snakelike pattern. Not too complicated, though. He didn't want to confuse the dogs. Just the old man. And the sooner, the better, he figured. It would be dark soon. That meant the polls would be closing back in Texas. The rider would want to make phone calls and hear the good news.

But there was work left to do.

As the burlap sack bumped and tumbled along the wooded floor, dragged behind the ever-quickening horse, it marked leaves and deadwood with the deadly, rabbit perfume. The dogs would soon lock on and give chase. The game would be on.

Those damn bitches were too far ahead!

The old man cursed the coming darkness. Night was falling on the familiar woods, and the old man was too fat and too drunk to kick the horse into a full-on chase. He'd surely fall. The tree branches were too low to duck at any kind of speed.

But the damn dogs. Without a tight rein, they'd be sure to run all the way to the next county and tree some poor house cat. The old man urged the animal on past a trot into a canter, turned the horse too sharply, and scraped a tree trunk. The bark took some skin off his arm. It didn't hurt too badly though. The alcohol had certain medicinal effects, taking away the pain and the lousy memories along with it. Had he knocked back any more of the hard stuff that afternoon, the old man was certain he himself would never find his way back home, let alone the poor dogs, who, as smart as he'd sometimes brag them to be, turned dumb once they'd locked onto an animal's scent.

Dumb-ass hounds.

As the howling grew more distant, worry set in. The pale blue of day had vanished underneath a thickening blanket of branches. In the woods it may as well have been night. Trees became shadows. Brush, a fog to be navigated. The old man knew about fog. Had grown up with it in a Gulf-side city far from where he was at that moment. He'd learned to negotiate the fog along with the local politics, becoming a force so great, some likened it to a hurricane. And though the roots had come undone long ago, supplanted onto a horse farm next to that Virginia wood, back home the name "Hurricane" had stuck.

Primary Tuesday. The good people of that Texas Gulf-side city would cast their votes for the old barnstormer, just as they'd done for the past twenty years. Didn't matter a lick that he wasn't even inside state lines. He was the incumbent. And he was unbeatable.

Instead of prepping for the usual electoral bows, the old man was drunk, lost, and chasing a couple of dumb-ass hounds who wouldn't know a fox from a squirrel . . .

. . . from a burlap sack full of dead rabbits.

The old man heaved. He could feel his lunch coming up with the day's booze. The horse returned to a trot. She didn't like the darkness or the trees. She was a thoroughbred, reared and trained in Kentucky for open fields of turf and wildflowers. Hardly the breeding for Virginia foxhunts. But this wasn't so much of a foxhunt as it was a *dog hunt*. And the dogs were winning.

Branches stung the old man's face. *Enough already*. He reined the animal to a halt, took off his Stetson, which was, other than himself, his singular holdover from his home state, and lent his ear to the woods. Listening would tell which way his dogs had run. At first it was dead quiet, save for the pounding of his leaded heart and the horse working the bit. What followed was a rustle of leaves as the wind carried over the trees. Then, fainter than that, the dogs. The familiar yowling came from his left. The horse knew as much and turned forty degrees toward the sound. The old man listened once more and thought maybe they were circling back. On the chase. A fox, maybe. After all, squirrels hide in trees. Rabbits in holes. And foxes run.

Bearing some sixty degrees even further ahead of the dogs, the old man dug his heels back into the thoroughbred and charged ahead into the darkness. Louder were the dogs. Still moving left. Faster, too. He could hear them like a slow-moving truck across an intersection, tracking from right to left. The old man dropped his head under a low-hanging branch. *As quick as a prize fighter*, he thought. The alcohol was wearing down under the onslaught of adrenaline. Blurred vision turned into a tunnel effect. *Aw, to hell with the darkness*, the old man snarled. *We're huntin'.*

Yahoo.

George "Hurricane" Hammond fit well into the saddle, his hefty frame resting on a back strong enough for two men. And if any fellow were to ask the old man when he'd begun his day's drinking, Hurricane

would have quickly resurrected a story about his Daddy, his fifteenth birthday, and a Mexican whore from San Antonio. The story never failed to produce a laugh from the listener, but in fact it demonstrated his usual and practiced sleight of hand in the art of changing-the-damn-subject.

The drinking? That was a problem and the old man knew it—figured he would eventually die from it. Give it up, though? Never. It religiously stopped the pain from the loneliness life had served Hurricane some twenty years back when he'd lost his one and only wife, Renatta, to leukemia. If the truth were told, *that's* when he had started drinking. He hadn't really stopped since. And it kept him from nothing. Not working. Not raising the roof at public functions. And certainly not from his Tuesday evening foxhunts.

A typical day for the Texas congressman, whether at the Virginia farm, Washington D.C., or on his home-state terra firma, would begin with delegating assignments to his various aides and assistants. The earlier the start, the faster the work, the speedier the finish, the sooner he could drink. If The House was in session, he'd hit the floor juiced, greasing the opposition with rehearsed homilies and C-SPAN-savvy sound bites.

"Prep me, prep me, and point me at the camera," he'd tell his staff. "And don't gimme no guff about the booze. It makes me loose. It makes me happy. And it makes for better Goddamn government."

And the *boozing* usually began at lunch.

One administrative assistant described Hurricane's style as "100 proof politics," named for the alcohol content one would normally expect in the famed congressman's blood. The *real* day would start with a Bloody Mary lunch and a willing lobbyist, followed by an afternoon in the corner booths of a variety of Washington lounges. Then there was always the nightly cocktail receptions and black-tie dinners. Thereafter, bed and the hope of a dreamless sleep. The next day would begin at 5:30 A.M.

One hundred proof. Yahoo.

But on Election Tuesday in Texas, the bottle nipping had started earlier than usual. By late afternoon—despite the warmth that his old friend and campaign manager, Marshall Lambeer, had brought to the party—Hurricane's warm alcoholic glow had turned malicious.

The polls for the Texas primary would soon close. The incumbent congressman was expected to carry an eighty-plus percent of the Republican majority. So popular was Hurricane that he didn't even need to be

there to take home the prize nomination. He was an arrogant bastard, all right. And with good reason.

The old man couldn't see the dogs, but he could hear them racing ahead in an utterly untrained pursuit. He found a patch of clearing and the last bit of blue sky overhead. He looked up, but everything swirled. The booze was fighting back. The adrenaline was in retreat. Yet the dogs howled ahead. *It must be a fox*, thought Hurricane. It was too fast. The dogs too sure of their course. After all, they had their instincts, as Hurricane had his. Heels digging in again, he galloped the horse across the clearing, plunging into wooded darkness again.

"That's far enough!" he growled when he found the howling had turned silent.

At first, he thought they'd gotten away from him again. But the familiar sound wasn't distant. It was nonexistent. The woods were quiet again. Just darkness and trees and the strange sound of sweat clogging the old man's ear.

"Goddamn it-all."

Hurricane cleared out the goo in his ear canal and gave the mare a good kick, and she shifted into an easy trot.

"The little shits!"

Silence meant but one thing: They'd actually caught the damn fox. And now they were somewhere nearby, devouring it like packed carnivores. *Regressive beasts*, he thought. They should know better.

Squeals punctured the wooded silence, and it wasn't a hound's normal yowl. One of the dogs was in pain, wailing for help in the not-so-far distance. Panicked, the old man wheeled the horse toward the mournful cry and, without so much as a second thought, brought a long rein down across the mare's flank. The horse got the message and sprang into a sudden gallop, almost leaving the old man in the dirt.

A horse trail switched back and forth through the trees, requiring a speeding rider to lean with every turn. But the alcohol surging in the old man's bloodstream placed a numbing vise on his motor memory. To regain his balance he reached for the saddle horn and found none. It was an English saddle. Hurricane hadn't ridden western since last year's annual Fourth of July parade down the famous Strand of his hometown, Cathedral Island. English was the tack of Virginia, and hell if that wasn't what Hurricane wanted. English horses and English saddles. That's what the

upper-crusters rode. Then so would he. Damn it if right now he didn't want a western horn on which to hang his overbloated body.

Another hanging branch raked the congressman's puffy face as the horse cut another turn in the path, homing on the lamenting dog. The trail had become a tunnel, ever-constricting underneath sprawling oaks and willows. He wanted to call for help, but his stomach had once again turned and clotted his throat with his lunch of salami and cheese. *It was the last vodka*, thought Hurricane, *that was cutting his reflexes*. He damned Marshall for letting him drink it. His arms were stiff across his chest as he hunched over the animal's neck, feeling the cropped mane stabbing his forehead with every surge.

Help me.

The reins had long slipped from his grip. The two leather straps dangled dangerously from the horse's bit, knotted together at the ends. The mane left little for him to hang on to except the horse's neck, leaving others to wonder if maybe that was what caused the accident.

The old man plunged his weight onto the mare's neck, forcing the poor beast to dip her head until one of those galloping, outstretched hooves caught in the knotted reins. The animal hurtled to the earth, and Hurricane followed.

How the old man crawled from the wreckage of his accident was beyond his recollection. Consciousness returned only after he'd managed to prop himself up against a nearby oak. The mist that was his vision lifted with barely enough detail to make out his poor, twisted mount. Neck broken, but still alive. Her nostrils flaring, clearing leaves with each heavy exhalation.

Nor could Hurricane move. His neck was stiff. Blindly feeling down along his left leg, he came upon a protruding bone. His femur, decided the old man. The cotton of his trousers felt wet, warm, and sticky with blood. But feeling was nil.

The Goddamn vodka.

He laughed at his own dumb self, then coughed blood. And though ribs had obviously pierced his lungs, hell, he seemed alive and fit enough to survive until somebody found him. Or at least until the alcohol in his bloodstream held the inevitable pain at bay. After that, the old man didn't want to think about it. If he didn't talk, he could breathe. He tied his belt just above his thigh-high injury for an adequate tourniquet. That would

do until dawn, when his staff would arrive, discover he was missing, and send out a search party.

Until then, he reasoned to let his eyes close and conserve his energy. He tried to let his thoughts drift away from the woods and all the way to Texas. The polls would soon be closed. After which he would be declared the winner of the Republican nomination. The winner of the Democratic primary, some poor, nameless nobody, would rejoice in his meager victory.

The TV and newspapers would tout the opposition candidate as a *dark horse*. They always did. Every two damn years. A new face. A new challenge.

Followed by a landslide defeat.

But those media folks would give the candidate free publicity. Pictures, newspaper articles, and on-camera interviews galore. The candidate would get a brief feeling of confidence. Power even. Then the *real campaign* would begin. The Hurricane Hammond political machine would gas up and slowly roll over the enemy, crushing the poor bastard's hope of political ascension forever.

Hurricane, you arrogant old fart.

If he'd only gone to Texas, put in his obligatory campaign-day appearances, maybe he wouldn't have gotten drunk. Or gone hunting. Maybe he wouldn't have been paralyzed there against that damn tree, looking out over the darkness and his dying damn horse.

Serves me right.

The old man laughed and spit up more blood. That one hurt. So he made a pact with himself not to think amusing thoughts. Try to sleep, maybe. Morning will come soon enough. Then the rescue. A short hospital stay. Notes of health and encouragement. Gifts of fine scotch and vodka from all those loving lobbyists. Recuperation. And eventually a good-luck call from the President of the United States himself. Then back to business.

The old man forced his eyes closed. That's when he heard the hounds again. Closing fast. His eyes snapped open and peered against the blackness, finding a light swirling at the edge of his periphery. Painfully he swiveled his neck to the right. He instantly recognized the beam of a flashlight tracing the floor of the wood. He caught glimpses of his dogs, leashed, and tugging along a man.

Those dumb hounds! *But maybe not so dumb after all*, the old man thought. They were coming for him, bringing help at the end of their leads. A little man with a flashlight.

The rider.

The hounds yodeled as they closed the gap, getting good sniffs off their master's scent and happy to be reunited. The rider, though, yanked on those leashes and, twenty yards from the old man, tied the dogs to another tree. The dogs grew louder.

"Hush up," said the rider. "I want your boss to hear me." The dogs didn't understand the command. Nor did the rider seem to care. With the flashlight held at his side, he approached as a shadow. "You okay, old man?"

Hurricane didn't speak, fearing another hacking fit accompanied by blood and sharp pains. He was saved. He simply shook his head weakly.

"Gonna live, huh?" said the rider.

He nodded this time.

"I'll hand ya this. You ride pretty good for a drunk old fucker." The rider knelt. "Figured you for a tumble a good thirty minutes ago. Those hounds of yours are plumb tuckered."

The old man didn't understand. The words were a jumble of sound and garble. The alcohol, maybe? Or even the clots in his ears? When would this little savior call for help? Did he have a cell phone? Everyone nowadays had a cell phone. Why hadn't he called 911?

"I need to go to the hospital," choked Hurricane. As expected, the hacking followed. The worst pain yet.

"Sure you need a hospital. Need more than that, I reckon," said the rider, his face still nothing more than a shadow. "Betcha wish you was in Texas."

Texas?

Hurricane recognized the accent, instantly wondering what other luckless Texan would be found in a Virginia wood after nightfall. Was it fate? Chance? But hell, a savior's a savior, no matter the flavor of a man's voice.

"Need help," gasped the old man.

"I know, I know. First things first. Can you move?" The old man shook his head. Nodding in affirmation, the rider dug the flashlight into the dirt, directing the beam into Hurricane's face. "Well, whaddayou know? It's Hurricane Hammond in the flesh. Son of a gun!" But the

surprise in the little man's voice sounded disingenuous. Hurricane recognized bull when he heard it.

Never bullshit a bullshitter.

The rider put on a pair of rubber gloves, then reached into his back pocket and removed what looked like a wallet or a small purse. A zipper sound followed. The old man couldn't see the movements, but hoped the savior had some kind of emergency medical training. Military, even. After all, the shadowy figure sported the short crop of most of the military men he had known and supported with congressional votes over the past decades. Hurricane was red, white, and blue—all the way to his marrow.

Then came the syringe. Its needle gleamed when it caught the flashlight's beam and startled the old man. "Oh, don't be scared. Just a little something to help you along," echoed the rider's words between the drumbeats of Hurricane's heart. And as if to distract, he spoke in the practiced tone of a nurse with a nervous patient. "So who'd you vote for today? Absentee, I'll betcha."

"Me," whispered Hurricane.

"Yeah. Me too," said the little man, gently touching a bloody scrape around the old man's neck. "What about that guy Mitch Dutton? Know him? He's gonna get the Democratic nod."

Mitch Dutton. That was the fellah's name. He'd surely be the challenger in November. This year's dark horse. Marshall's spoken well of him. Too bad he'd spend the race as designated loser.

"Now look up this way," said the little man, raising his left hand for Hurricane to follow. "This shouldn't hurt at all."

With that, the syringe plunged into the old man's bulging vein, followed by a volley of air that sucked back into old man's heart.

"Betcha wanna know who killed ya," whispered the rider, picking up the flashlight and shining it into his own eyes. Otherworldly. Cobalt blue.

The old man's heart gulped with air, losing the prime as the ventricles grasped for liquid. The hiccup turned into an instant heart attack. He wheezed for some air, his arms flailing.

The rider withdrew, syringe in hand, and remotely observed the final moments of the great man's life. The cardiac arrest was instant and killed quickly. Hurricane's eyeballs glazed and rolled back and his body contorted in one last painful convulsion. Yet all the rider cared to consider was whether or not he'd been seen. If, in that brief moment, the old man had actually gotten a good look at his killer, peered into the eyes and seen

the man who'd finally beat him. Or if he'd felt the power of his prolonged incumbency diminish along with life itself.

Heady stuff, thought the rider.