



Twilight Crossing

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GEORGE THOROGOOD WAS PLAYING ON THE JUKEBOX WHEN I tossed Ollie Janks out on his ass. Wasn't the first time. Wouldn't be the last. Or so I thought, when I said, "Nothing personal, Ollie."

Little did I know everything was about to change.

The grizzled drunk staggered to his feet and made a half-hearted attempt to brush off the seat of his bib overalls. Lacking the coordination to complete that simple task, he decided to flip me off instead. "The fuck, Ray?" he shouted. "My money ain't good enough for the Willowbrook Tavern?"

"Not when you confuse Shirley's ass with the produce aisle."

"Practically keep this dump in business," Ollie said, "much as I spend here."

"We appreciate your support," I said. "But Shirley's not on the menu."

"And what do I get for my hard-earned dollars, eh? Watered down liquor and the bum's rush, that's what!"

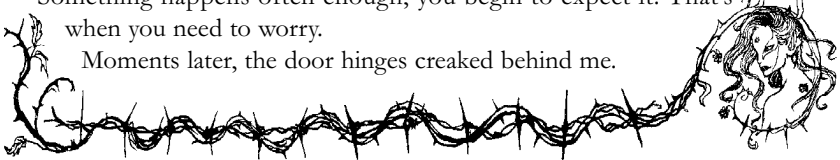
"Time to walk it off, Ollie. Or should I call you a cab?"

"Need no fuckin' cab," Ollie said with a dismissive wave of his hand. He plodded toward the shoulder of the road. "Live three damn blocks away."

Shaking my head, I returned to the dark confines of the Willowbrook Tavern. By morning, Ollie wouldn't have the slightest recollection of the events preceding or following his unceremonious ejection from his favorite watering hole.

Something happens often enough, you begin to expect it. That's when you need to worry.

Moments later, the door hinges creaked behind me.



I turned, bracing for round two with Ollie, but the drunk had stayed true to form. Instead, a slender young man with dark hair and a harried expression on his gaunt face brushed by me, tossing a mumbled apology in his wake. My first thought was: *Underage*. My second: *Trouble*.

The clock above the bar displayed midnight.

Then the red second hand began to descend.

Ignoring the social invitation of the bar stools or the shadowed privacy of the side booths, where most of the evening's crowd were huddled, the young man chose the nearest of three unoccupied, wobbly tables, and dropped into one of the four rickety chairs that surrounded it. A hanging brass light fixture seemed to deconstruct his face into pale slivers of flesh and harsh shadows. Otherwise, he looked unremarkably ordinary in a green and tan Rugby shirt, dark jeans and black running shoes. One heel beat an insistent tattoo against the warped floorboards, as if he were keeping time with a frenetic drummer.

About ready to vibrate out of his skin.

Wearing her customary red-and-white-checked blouse, jeans, a beer-stained apron, and calf-high leather boots, Shirley strolled over to the table to take his order. She gave him a one-second appraisal. "There's a law against serving minors."

The young man looked at her, gauging, challenging. "Is that so?"

"That's what they tell me," Shirley said, punctuating the comment with a little chuckle. "So what can I get you?"

"Whatever you've got on tap."

"Gotcha. Back in a jiff, hon."

I shook my head in disbelief. *She's flirting with him! Ben finds out, he'll break that kid in half.*

"Thanks." He tapped both index fingers against the side of the small bowl of pretzels in the center of the table, ran one hand through his hair, then heaved a sigh.

I drifted back to my regular booth, first one on the left, and picked up the well-worn baseball I'd snagged at a Phillies' game over a year ago. Foul ball, unsigned, no sentimental value, but it helped me think. And I needed to understand what was happening.

From my booth, I could observe the entire front half of the tavern, and peek down the short hall to the back room, with its side-by-side pool tables. Only the modest kitchen, with its small grill and deep fryer, was hidden from me. Although, occasionally, through the porthole window in the scuffed kitchen door, I caught a glimpse of the bald head of Oscar, our night cook. With Ollie gone, the place was relatively calm, but I sensed trouble brewing, an inexplicable prickling of the short hairs on the back of my neck. Wasn't sure from which direction the trouble would come. But I knew its target. Had since the moment he bumped into me.

I scanned the crowd, seeking anything or anyone unusual. The tavern was less than a quarter filled, all regulars, fewer than twenty people, huddled in the booths that lined the walls. A few pairs quietly conversed. Some loners scanned the sports