

ROBERT B. PARKER'S

BUCKSKIN

THE SPENSER NOVELS

Robert B. Parker's Old Black Magic
(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Little White Lies
(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Slow Burn
(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Kickback
(by Ace Atkins)

Robert B. Parker's Cheap Shot
(by Ace Atkins)

Silent Night
(with Helen Brann)

Robert B. Parker's Wonderland
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Robert B. Parker's Lullaby
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BUCKSKIN



Robert Knott

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ROBERT B. PARKER'S

BUCKSKIN

1



An all-day celebration had been taking place. The sounds of music, dancing, people talking and laughing echoed inside the jailhouse. The blue-eyed kid with a busted lip and bruised face sat on his cell bunk sharpening a spoon handle to a point. He wore a huge sombrero and a short-waisted Mexican jacket. He favored the Mexican culture over the American way of living, but he was no Mexican.

Ever since he was on his own, he'd spent most of his time drifting from town to town along the border. He preferred the Mexican people. Especially the señoritas, and the señoritas took a liking to him as well. He was fond of the Mexicans' food and Mexicans' drinks too—mescal was his favorite. And he spoke the Spanish language well, or well enough to get what he wanted.

When he was in one place long enough and feeling generous, he would wire or write a letter to the old man. The old man was the only person the kid had any tether to on the earth. The kid was never sure how he ended up with the old man, who the old man even was, or where he came from. The kid had a vague memory of moving from one family to another as a child. Until one day, when the kid could put on his own breeches, an old man came and took him away. The old man took him to the mountains and put him to work.

The whistling sound of fireworks interrupted the waltz that played in the

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plaza. The kid sprang up and stood atop his bunk. He could see through the bars of the cell window the tail end of the skyward firework, then it exploded and brightened the night sky.

"Hot damn," he said. "Hot damn."

Another one launched and exploded.

"Damn. I was sure looking forward to this here celebration. I sure was."

"I told you to shut up before I come in there and shut you up for good," the jailer said. "Shut your mouth."

The kid laughed.

"Like to see you try. Like to see you try. I no more than get to town here yesterday, and what happens? You lock me up and for no reason. No reason at all. Two big'ens like you and your soldier-blue buddy slapping me around. You should be ashamed. 'Sides, I was leaving tomorrow. I got to be someplace soon. I told you that. Didn't I? I have someplace to be, ya see?"

More fireworks lit up the sky, one after another after another. A large pinwheel was lit, spewing sparks that cast a bright glow on the kid's boyish face. He beamed like a child, watching in awe.

"You oughta see this. Boy, oh, boy."

He watched, wishing he was part of the fireworks and festivities taking place on the town's plaza. The band ended the slow waltz and started up with a lively tune that brought hoots and hollers from the crowd.

"I should be out there among 'em. Not in here, out there. How about letting me out? I should be out there."

"I told you to shut your mouth."

"I should."

He watched for a minute, then said, "Lands alive, food smells good out there. Don't it? I'm hungry as a bear. If you won't let me out, why don't you go out? You should go out, dance and have some fun. Get something to eat and bring me back something, too. No reason to sit in here with lil' ol' me. Hell, what am I gonna do? Nothing. That is damn sure plain to see. Nothing."

The jailer was fuming but didn't glance up from the newspaper he was reading as the kid continued.

BUCKSKIN

"You know as well as me that it doesn't make good sense, me being in here and all. Hell, I was doing nothing. I was minding my own business yesterday. I was passing through. I'm heading up north. I got business up north. Important business."

The jailer continued to ignore the kid, who'd been talking nonstop since he got locked up.

"I could have danced right off, ya know. I should have, but I didn't. Know why?"

The jailer spoke without looking up from the newspaper.

"Cause you was riding the dead man's horse?"

"I won that horse fair and square. Wasn't my fault that drunk put his pony on the table 'cause he had no money."

The jailer lowered his newspaper. Then tipped back in his chair so he could see the kid eye to eye but said nothing as he stared at him.

"I won that pony, even got a bill of sale."

He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, jumped down from the bunk, and moved to the bars. He held out the paper, waving it at the jailer.

"Take a look-see, why don't you? I tried to show you and that other brass-buttoned bastard this, but you wouldn't look at it. I didn't do nothing wrong. Nothing at all. Here, take a look. I didn't have nothing to do with shooting that fella. Got this telegram, too." He removed a telegram from his pocket. "Requesting I come as soon as possible."

"Shut up, kid."

"I didn't. I was nowhere near that cantina where he got shot. I mean, yeah, I had been there earlier, like I said, when I won the pony, but was nowhere near there when it happened."

"Save that crap for the judge."

"You don't know nothing . . . You're a dumb shit is all."

"What'd you say, boy?"

"You heard me."

"Don't you push me, boy. I've had enough of your yapping."

"Or what? What you gonna do?"

The jailer stared at the kid. And the kid could tell he was getting to him.

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The kid smiled.

"You're just one of those dumb-shit soldier boys. One of those that follow orders 'cause you can't think for yourself. I should have just danced, just danced right off."

"Keep it up and I will come in there and dance your ass around till you quit breathing, save the court money."

"Fuck you, dumb shit."

The jailer slammed down his newspaper. He lifted out of his chair, snatched the keys from the desk, and marched to the cell.

The kid moved away from the bars as the jailer fumbled with the keys, trying to unlock the cell.

"No need to get all worked up," the kid said.

The kid was small, not tall at all and one hundred thirty pounds soaking wet. He backed away as the cell door opened and the burly jailer charged him. He slapped the kid so hard blood flew from the kid's mouth and splattered on the wall. He hit him a second time, sending another stream of blood flying in the opposite direction. The next strike came from the kid. It was swift and to the jailer's throat, and it was the sharp spoon handle that buried into the man's neck. The jailer felt his neck where blood was flowing. He reached for the kid, but the kid was swift and moved out of his grasp. Then the kid kicked the jailer hard in the groin and stabbed him again, another blow to the jailer's neck. The jailer stumbled, hurt and bleeding. He dropped on the bunk and the kid stabbed him again and again. Then the kid held up the stabbing tool. He showed the spoon knife to the jailer. The jailer was now weak, and blood flowed from the many wounds to his neck.

"This here spoon was from that lousy plum pudding your asshole buddy gave me yesterday. That was all I had to eat. You realize that?"

The jailer stared at the kid and blood poured out of his neck and bloomed out across the front of his shirt.

"You dumb fuck," the kid said. "You and him didn't have smarts enough to make sure you got the pudding spoon back, did you? I was up all night working on this. While you and that Yankee friend of yours were playing checkers with each other like little children. Telling each other lie after lie.

BUCKSKIN

About how you did this or how he did that, I was working on this. I told you I had business to attend to, didn't I? Didn't I? Now look at you. All you had to do was go out like I said and have some fun, bring me something to eat, and this might not have happened. But it's happened now, ain't it? Ain't it?"

2



Two coyotes stood on the road, staring at us as we approached. They were and bleached white by long days of harsh sun. It'd been hot and bone-dry all summer. And like most critters enduring the continuing drought, the coyotes were suffering. They were skinny, parched, and hungry-looking. When we got closer, they moved off the road and into the short brush. The smaller of the two stopped and stared at us as we passed.

Virgil and I were riding out of Appaloosa to pay one of two competing mining camps a visit. There'd been ongoing friction between the two outfits. Ever since the first day they found gold in the jagged hills north of town, there'd been nothing but trouble.

Half of the gold discovery was on land owned by a consortium: a group of Appaloosa businessmen known as the Baptiste Group. The other half belonged to two Irishmen, ranchers, the McCormick brothers.

The McCormicks purchased the land from the Baptiste Group a year prior to the discovery. The transaction turned out to be a misstep that prompted Henri Baptiste to regret the sale. So much so, he hired gun hands to intimidate the Irishmen. But the move only made the McCormicks hire their own gunmen in case tough talk turned to triggers pulled.

The two groups had camps on opposite sides of the discovery, but they had to share the same road coming or going. Virgil and I had not encountered any of these men. We'd heard about them and about reports of skirmishes on the road, but that was it, only reports. We figured it'd be a matter of time before we had the pleasure of making their acquaintance.

And sure enough, now, on this sweltering day in mid-August, Virgil and I were riding out to get our introduction.

Two days previously we moved some convicted felons down to Yuma. When we returned and stepped off the train in Appaloosa, Deputy Book was waiting there to meet us. He let us know one of McCormick's men had been missing for three days. Book informed us that the missing man was not one of the hired gunmen but rather one of the miners.

The McCormicks, of course, suspected the Baptiste outfit and threatened retaliation.

Virgil and I had paid a visit earlier to Baptiste's office and the hotel where he resided in Appaloosa, but we did not locate him. Nor did we find any of his business partners, so we took the short ride out to the mines to see what we could find out.

When we arrived at the Baptiste location, the foreman, Frank Maxie, walked out of the office to greet us as we neared. He was a grizzled old-timer Virgil and I had known for years. Frank was a retired man of means who knew the gold-mining trade likely better than anyone in Appaloosa.

Before taking a position with the Baptiste group, he'd made a considerable amount of money. He'd worked for decades operating his own strike in Laverne that played out a few years ago.

He stepped off the porch and shook his head as we came to a stop.

"Well, well, well, if it's not Virgil Cole and Everett Hitch. I'd ask you what I did to deserve the pleasure of being visited by you marshals of this here territory, but I won't, because I know why you are here."

"You do?" Virgil said.

"Not dumb," Frank said, squinting up at Virgil.

"No?" Virgil said.

Frank smiled.

"Henri Baptiste here?" I said.

"No, too dusty out here for Henri . . . Now and again he comes, but not much."

"Know where he is?" Virgil said.

He shook his head.

"No. I'd offer you some coffee if it weren't hotter than a well digger's ass."

"So, what can you tell us?" I said.

"Come down, let's go inside."

When we entered the office Frank moved around a small table covered with maps and papers. He poured Virgil and me a glass of water. We sat across from him as he dropped his big frame into a swivel chair.

"I come up here to show these nincompoops how the cow ate the cabbage," he said. "I know my veins."

"And?" Virgil said.

"And that's it. That is the extent of my business here. I don't know a damn thing about what happened."

"What did happen?" Virgil said.

Frank took off his hat and dropped it on the table. He leaned toward the rear wall in his chair then put his big hands on top of his baldhead. He grinned as he looked back and forth between Virgil and me.

"Look, I told him, the Frenchman, not to hire no gun hands. I told him. I'm not saying they had anything to do with the McCormicks missing a hand. But I warned Baptiste and them other dumbasses working with him to not go and get greedy."

"Meaning?" I said.

"Meaning, let the McCormicks work their side and we work ours."

I don't have to tell you boys gold makes people crazy. It just does. Like giving an Apache corn liquor, they can't handle it, can't handle the rush. Don't forget I started on the big one, in California back in the day, and I know what gold does to a man's soul. It eats it up."

"How did you know about the McCormick hand that was missing?"

"I heard about it from one of my miners. He said he was drinking beer at the Rabbit Inn and he heard about it from some of the other fellas. Shit happens, people talk."

"What do you know about these men Baptiste hired?" I said.

"Very damn little."

"What little do you know?"

"They don't come around here, really."

"But they've been here," Virgil said. "You've met them?"

"Met? No. Been here? Yes. They come and go."

"More than once," I said.

"Yes, more than once. They make themselves known, then go."

"How many are there?"

"For sure there are seven of them. As far as I know . . . Just talk to Henri Baptiste. He'll tell you . . . Well, maybe."

"Oh, we will," Virgil said.

"Like I said. I told Baptiste and the others to leave well enough alone. But that's gold for ya."

"Know where these seven gun hires live?" Virgil said.

"No," he said. "Appaloosa, I imagine."

"Lot of good they are doing there," I said.

"Fine with me," Frank said. "We have guards here to guard. So do the McCormicks. The gun hands are just chest puffers, ya know?"

Virgil nodded.

"Know the gun hands' names?"

"No. Well, know one. Heard one's name and 'spect he's the leader, too. Bart, he was called. Looks to be the oldest. He's a tall, skinny fellow, meaner than a windblown grass fire, too. He put one of the

others in his place with a fucking bullwhip to the back of his head.
No shit. Just like that. Whap!"

Virgil glanced at me.

"Victor Bartholomew?" I said.

Frank shook his head.

"Bart was all I know. That's what they called him. Why?
Know him?"

"Skinny fucker with a bullwhip?" I said.

"Victor Bartholomew," Virgil said.

"That's not good," I said.

Virgil moved his head from side to side real slow.

"No," he said. "It ain't."

"Was there another. Looked similar to him, but bigger, taller,
older?" I said.

"No," Frank said.

I glanced to Virgil.

"That's good," I said.

"That is," Virgil said.

3



The McCormick brothers and Baptiste had offices on opposite ends of the prestigious Appaloosa Avenue. The avenue was the central thoroughfare of the city. It was the only road in town made of cobblestone and it was lined with fancy brick buildings that stretched out across three city blocks. Known before as Vandervoort Avenue. But the Vandervoort name was history. Removed from all the previous places bearing the Dutch namesake—the brick factory, the town hall, the theater, and the avenue.

After the death of Vernon Vandervoort, all vestiges of his name were no longer visible. Vandervoort, it turned out, was a criminal and murderer. Less than six months ago, an altercation in the town hall unfolded before a huge crowd. Vandervoort shot and killed his own son and wife before Vandervoort was also shot and killed.

Before we paid Baptiste a visit, Virgil wanted to stop in to see Allie at her dress shop on the avenue. We'd been away a few days, and without my encouraging Virgil, he thought it a good idea to let her know that we had returned.

Allie's shop—Mrs. French's Fine Dresses—flourished into a profitable business ever since it had opened its doors. And it was situated

in a prime location: the center of Appaloosa Avenue, directly across from the town hall and the theater.

As we walked down the boardwalk we could see Allie through the window, setting up a large poster on an easel. It was a colorful poster with big block letters announcing *Appaloosa Days*. An upcoming street fair with food, shop sales, street dancing, and music.

Virgil shook his head.

"Appaloosa Days," he said. "Always something."

"Allie and her ladies' social pretty much put the whole thing together," I said.

"Pretty much all her doing."

"She's quite the entrepreneur."

"Among other things."

We watched her for a bit. Once she got the poster secured, she retrieved one of the dresses out of the window display.

"Successful," I said.

Virgil nodded.

"That she is."

"One of these days you can quit marshaling altogether, Virgil, and let Allie support you."

I was watching Allie but I could feel Virgil's eyes on me.

"Could," I said. "Or I suppose you could work alongside her."

"Alongside her?"

I nodded.

"Sure."

"Doing what exactly, Everett?"

"Oh, hell, I don't know. Who knows? You might make a good salesperson or hell, even a seamstress."

We waited on a buckboard followed by a buggy and when the buggy was past, Virgil moved on across the street without saying anything. I smiled and followed.

Allie opened the door as we neared.

"There you are," she said.

Virgil moved ahead of me, and when he got up the few steps to the shop's entrance, Allie met him and they kissed.

"Welcome back," she said. "Are you just getting here?"

"Got here a bit earlier, but we had to do a few things."

"Before you visited me, you had to do a few things?"

"I'm here visiting you now, Everett too."

"Well, I missed you."

"We was only gone two days."

"Well. So? Still, I missed you."

"Missed you, too, Allie."

"You did not."

"I did."

"Phooey."

"Everett missed you, too, didn't you, Everett?"

"I did."

Allie smiled.

"You two. Y'all come in, I'm just helping someone." Allie leaned in to me. "Some someone you might want to meet, Everett."

"We got some business," Virgil said.

"After you already had some business? Now you already have more business?"

"It can wait," I said.

She smiled.

"Come, I have some lemonade, too."

When we entered, a tall, slender woman was standing in front of the mirror. She was holding up the gray gingham dress Allie had retrieved from the window. She held the dress in front of her, looking at her reflection. She turned toward us when we walked closer and smiled.

"Martha Kathryn," Allie said. "I'd like you to meet, Marshal Virgil Cole. He's my . . . my companion."

Virgil removed his hat.

"How do you do?"

"Fine, Marshal Cole," she said. "A pleasure to meet you."

"And this is his partner, Marshal Everett Hitch."

I, too, removed my hat.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"A pleasure," she said with a sweet smile.

"I take it you are new to Appaloosa?" I said.

"Well, not exactly."

"She would be hard to miss," Allie said. "I know."

"I arrived here about six months ago."

"Six months?" I said.

She nodded and I smiled at Virgil.

"Appaloosa has gotten way too big," I said.

"It has," he said.

She blushed.

"I have been sequestered, I have to say, though. Pretty much the whole time."

"Locked up?" Virgil said.

She laughed.

"No, I've been working in the Appaloosa Theater just across the way."

Virgil smiled and nodded some.

"We are in and out of the jail all the time," he said. "I'm sure we would have caught wind of you being locked up."

"Martha Kathryn is an actress and a singer," Allie said. "She has been practicing there for the new play."

She nodded.

"Rehearsing."

"Yes," Allie said. "Rehearsing. And I took the opportunity to ask Martha Kathryn if she would perform something for our upcoming Appaloosa Days, and I'm grateful to say, she has accepted."

"That's good," I said. "You're with the traveling theatrical company?"

"Yes, that's right. Our manager heard the theater was not in use, so he rented it out to develop shows for our season on the road."

"Yes, I remember reading something about that," I said.

"I saw her a few times on the street," Allie said. "She caught my eye, let me tell you, but she never came in until last week."

She nodded.

"We have been doing nothing but working and sleeping and working and sleeping."

"But all that is about to end," Allie said.

"There's a show opening," I said. "Right?"

"Tonight," she said.

"I remember reading about that, too," I said.

I could feel Virgil looking at me, but I didn't look at him.

"It's her opening night here in Appaloosa," Allie said. "Isn't it just divine?"

"Sure is," Virgil said.

"And we," Allie said. "We will be there."

"We will?" Virgil said.

"We will," Allie said. "We will be dressed for the theater."

"Allie you don't need to speak for Everett?" Virgil said. "And there are a few things that need some tending to."

"You have something else you need to do, Virgil?" I said.

"He does not," Allie said.

I don't?" Virgil said.

"You do not," she said. "And neither does Everett."

I smiled to Martha Kathryn.

"We look forward to it," I said.

Allie looked back and forth between Martha Kathryn and me then cut her eyes to Virgil.

"Lemonade," Allie said. "Let me get us some lemonade."

Allie started off toward the rear of the shop. She said over her shoulder as she walked, "And Virgil, you will assist me?"

"Anything you say, Allie."

He smiled at Martha Kathryn then followed Allie.

Martha Kathryn turned to the mirror and held the dress up in front of her again.

ROBERT KNOTT

"What do you think?" she said.

I moved behind her to look into the mirror.

"Don't think that is your color."

She smiled.

"Really?"

"Really."

"And what would be my color, pray tell?"

"White, black, yellow. No, not yellow. But not that, not gray, gray
is not right for you."

She met my eyes in the mirror and said nothing.

I said nothing back as I returned her look.

She smiled.

I smiled.