# LACKLAND LORE:
# 3 BONUS STORIES & COCKTAILS

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And so I swallowed the poison, acerbic, not lingered on the tongue. Razor sharp, unmellowed by the whiskey it was smuggled in, its belated wafts of cinnamon and cardamom too tardy to shroud the nefarious intent from even the most fledgling palate, and I, unlike my guest perched observant across from me, was no novice to these arts. Her name was Meryl Low and I had tolerated her childish ruse now going on one and a half of an hour, and both our patience were frayed. Her calm demeanor betrayed by the driving urgency of her emerald eyes, she had no patience remaining. Mine fast decayed as this amateur, this dilettante, fumbled her way through her schemes. She had performed inexpertly, talking me around the drink, her cadence as smooth as jagged rocks. She had clumsily manipulated the whiskey glasses and bottle, before the attempt to surreptitiously add the poison, a sleight of hand performed with considerable heft. Then the outstretched hand, whiskey still swirling in the glass, and the nearly imperceptible curl of her lips as I had accepted and brought the glass to part with my polite smile. A furtive sip to encourage my own, and then another more enthusiastic to prompt me further. Finally the finish in unison, imagined ruinous behind gleeful green eyes.

"A classic," I spoke, severing her from savoring too ravenously this moment. "Old. And you added something to it. Something rich and something… hidden"

"Yes. I wanted, for tonight, a result more definitive," Meryl teased me, gleefully expectant.

"I must confess my faculties are wanting this evening, for I find no success in discerning the unrealized flavors. Perchance another might vivify my palate and curtail my wandering intellect." I turned from her then, giving her ample seclusion to fetch my drink, presumably with another draught of poison. I meandered to the window of my fifth-floor study, a purposeful pretense of absentmindedness, and with my footfalls barely a whisper upon the floor of well-tread amber rug, I listened to her preparations. I paused until silence heralded their completion, and then one breath more to be certain she had cloistered away the poison, most assuredly still in the milky glass vial I had chosen for it. I then turned towards her and met her offered solution with a Cheshire grin, taking it from hands almost shaking, her last restraint against jubilation. Meryl cracked for only a moment as the whiskey slowly, inquisitively, fell once more upon my tongue. She caught herself, instantly recomposing herself, smoothing her raven dress and straightening her onyx ribbons in silent self-admonition.

"I think I've got it," I mused, after the bitter liquid had rested, overly long, upon my taste. "I think there is cinnamon in this, but not for too long, infused only in this week I'd guess."

"Yes that is right," she replied, before continuing, "but there is more."



"Oh yes I believe there is," I said, as I began a slow walk around the room, passing bookshelves crowded with tomes and writing tables cluttered with papers, days and weeks of research and machinations. "You have been here for nigh on two hours of my night, time I cherish for study. Though I have learned a modicum of truth tonight." I paused to let these words grasp her focus, and turning before the largest of the dark wood tables I saw that they had. Giddy eyes locked with mine of pure animus, though through either ignorance or befuddlement she failed to discern my intent. Oh dear Meryl, you had not done well so far, and yet I am still disappointed.

I continued, "You spoke within my chamber not with me, but to me. You spoke of business and plans, preparations and schedules, admirable goals and lofty dreams. You spoke to me of the role and potential of this place, and the wealth sheltered within. Then of promises, so many promises of all accord. Then you spoke to me of legacy." My voice changed, anger giving birth to every word. "The legacy of this place, MY legacy, of which you shall have no part." Now her eyes had the proper hone.

"Of honor," I scoffed, "You spoke to me of honor, of which you have none. And of worth, of which you have even less." I focused upon her once again, the tone softened briefly, "I think there is cardamom in this, but with a longer stay, infused earlier." I paused, and when she did not reply I prodded her, softly but cruelly, "Meryl? Cardamom? Am I correct in my analysis?"

"Yes," she stammered meekly, before repeating it more stoutly as her elation transformed into contempt, the impetus for this entire enterprise. "Yes you are correct."

"Excellent," I exclaimed, a disturbing cheer briefly infecting my speech. "I knew that was it." Then I turned sharply, my heel finding a familiar pacing rut in the rug, and I began to walk back towards the window, steps brusque and deliberate. I flung the window open to the crisp night air, like a titan's breath into the room that prickled our skin but did naught to temper our fury, so long past the simmering hatred of earlier evening.

"You," I accused her. "You spoke to me of purpose and of a future. You now will have neither." I gestured out the open window to the deep midnight and cream wisp clouds. Only the moon presided there, holding a lonesome court in a star-wanting sky; it glowed soft, gentle brushes of illumination atop the Lackland estate. The estate grounds stretched out, luxuriating before me, beautiful in the unvarying, pristine in their constancy. A vision that would have humbled me, were I able to be so.

As we both watched, the thickening clouds covered the moon like a shroud. I spoke again, voice direct, threatening with cooled rage. "There! See! The moon shines a beacon, but it is veiled by these clouds, dimming its splendor and stealing it for

themselves. Like you people. Grasping at our radiance to illuminate and embolden yourselves, while the estate, my estate, sits suffering in darkness."

I paused again, waiting a long moment until nature acquiesced to my theatrics and the clouds dissipated, revealing once again the moon in all its radiance. Then, certain that my point had been made, I resumed my oration. "We are the moon. You are naught but thieving clouds, and you will always wither before us." I paused to gesture, arm out the window, once more at the last threads of clouds pulling from the moon outside. "And when you do fade to vapor and memory, the light shines righteous upon the estate once more." I squared myself before the now timid visage of Meryl, even now understanding the threat, whilst unable to rebury her heretofore disguised scorn for me. I pointed at a spot on the floor, a mere three feet before me, and I commanded her, "Come here."

She obeyed me, the violence now implicit in my command, as it never had been requisite before. Fixed upon that spot, with nothing to do but endure my condemnation. She was captive, but to her credit, amidst her multitude of failings was one single triumph; she never balked. Were she worthy of any admiration, in the brief time she had left, it would have been for this. Perchance in the future I could cobble together a modicum of admiration for one such as her, but tonight was not that instant.

"You are a foolish girl, and whatever paltry station you think you have risen to, from whatever filth-laden humble beginnings, know this: As lofty as the clamber from your wretched birthings, it is that ascent and myriad more to where we sit adorned. Even if you lived beyond tomorrow, which you will not, you will never have any place among this family." I knew I had to wait then, for the response I knew would come, and come it did, though more rapidly than I had expected.

"Yes I will," she shouted at me. Cheeks flushed crimson, fingers curled into fists shaking with impotent rage, and eyes that would slay me if they could; she bellowed at me, "I will have all that and more!" Even gripped by the terror of my threats she stood resolute, confident, one might even say a bit arrogant, and arrogance was an unearned color on one such as her.

"Oh is that so," I countered, my voice a low hissing whisper, drawing her in for my final reveal. I tilted back my head and in one quaff I finished my toxic whiskey, the clumsily prepared libations of a neophyte assassin. Even with the astringent taint of the poison, the whiskey still delighted me with its rich warm bouquet, it truly was the best in the world. A final smirk for her efforts, I let the emptied glass tumble from my fingers to clatter at her feet.

"Is it because of the poison?" I asked with a honeyed voice, my stare passing through her, not wanting to focus until I had laid bare the full breadth of my victory. "The



stolen poison in the milky glass vial? The one with the silver stopper? The very one that I have been drinking the antidote for all week?"

Now I allowed myself to rest my gaze upon her, and the finality of my work, my exquisite plans too meritorious for such an ignoble foe. Meryl stood pale and still, an alabaster statue transfixed before me. Her hands fell open, hanging from the end of limp arms. Her knees shook, about to buckle, as her shoulders slumped. The greatest piece though, in this impeccable tapestry that was her defeat, was her face. The burning verdant flames of her eyes, now replaced with somber ashes atop wilted grass, wet with the dew of tears forthcoming. Behind her eyes there was the unmistakable extinction of hope, a demise of the most fundamental part of the human soul, a passing that I never want to miss. Those shrank though in comparison to the main course.

Surprise. It pervaded her every twitch and glance, every tremble and flutter. Meryl's red lips pursed and quivered at the shock that every plan, every decision, every step I was always there ahead of her. I tilted my head back and exhaled, deep and relaxing. More glorious a victory tonight my mind could have not assembled. Every part was played to perfection, exactly as I had arranged, but the surprise was so much more delectable than a feast. This was, without a doubt, the most surprised I had seen anyone be. So I can only imagine the surprise on my own face when, without a single warning, Meryl lunged forward and shoved me out the open window.

And so I fell, headlong, down to the rocks below my study's window. Having stalwartly supported that corner of the manor for generations, they now waited impassively for my body to splinter upon them, until they waited no longer. This was the first time that I died, though if you are reading this I imagine that you can discern that the solemn state of being dead did not agree with me, and as my fateful finality was not so final, I may write this entry.

- An excerpt from The Journal of Eustice Socrates Lackland, the son who died thrice, vanished heir to the 4th generation of the Lackland family.

Words by Eustice Socrates Lackland

Unearthed and published by Roger Walton Clementine

# THE ANTIDOTE

A poisoner's trick in a glass: sweet and sharp at once, gone before you can name it.

## INGREDIENTS



- 2 oz rye whiskey
- 1/2 oz Cardamaro (or another cardamom-forward bittersweet amaro)
- 1/4 oz fresh lemon juice
- 2 dashes absinthe, for the rinse
- 1 dash black walnut bitters (or aromatic bitters)
- Garnish: a cardamom pod and a flamed lemon twist: rim half the glass with activated-charcoal black sugar

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Rim half of a chilled coupe with black sugar. Rinse the glass with absinthe and discard the excess.
2. In a mixing glass with ice, combine rye, Cardamaro, lemon juice, and bitters.
3. Stir until well-chilled and diluted.
4. Strain into the prepared coupe.
5. Flame the lemon twist briefly, express it over the drink, and garnish with the cardamom pod.

### TASTING NOTES

Sharp and sweet at once ~~-~~the same trick a poisoner uses to hide a bitter truth. Cinnamon and cardamom linger just behind the rye, gone before you can name them, and the flamed twist leaves a ghost of smoke behind, like a study window thrown open to the night. Drink slowly. You may not get a second.





# A BRIEF INTERLUDE:

Desperately needing a break, Lily plopped herself into the tall-backed plush velvet chair before the fourth fireplace, which would be the twelfth fireplace if you started counting from the other side of the room. The second great room seemed an uninviting destination, with its polished dark oak floors, matching walls and complete absence of windows, that is until you lit all fifteen of the fireplaces evenly placed around the vast circular space. The night of the masquerade, for the first time in years, all the fires were lit, and the room was transformed into a warm, inviting, and most importantly private space. As uncharacteristic as it was, that was what Lily needed most right now, a place to hide and a moment away from the crowd.

Lily leaned back deep into the embrace of the fireside arm chair and let out a long awaited sigh. She was a practiced socialite, always ready to shake a hand, pay a compliment, or laugh at a terrible joke. It was all in a day's work, and anyone watching would say that Lily Manhattan makes it look effortless, but it wasn't. At least not tonight. Some of these people were more than she could tolerate, even within the comforting charade of the masquerade, and they never let up. She just needed a few minutes away from them, time to regain her composure, and in that brief splendid moment of silence, a voice.

"Well look who it is," a boisterous voice exclaimed from behind her. She recognized the voice immediately and her shoulders tightened as a shudder of restrained irritation ran through her body. The room was what she wanted, warm and comforting and quiet, and the man behind this voice was the opposite of all that. She turned her head as little as she possibly could to make eye contact with the invader to her solace, and, just as she had feared, there stood Ricky Bellini.

"Hello Mr. Bellini," Lily said with a formal coldness that she hoped would tell him she wanted to be left alone, but no matter how low the hint, it never failed to go over Ricky's head. He strode over to her and slid comfortably into the chair around the fireplace opposite her own.

He made no pretense of a polite greeting, but continued as if she had invited him to sit and chat. "Have to say I am surprised to find you in here. Surprised to find anyone in here really." Then he paused.

Lily looked at him and his stupid smile, waiting eagerly for the prompt to keep talking. After a weary sigh she gave it to him. "And why is that?"

"Well this is a quiet and boring room of course, I am sure you have noticed." Yes she had noticed. "I love it though, because I know something about this room that nobody else does." Lily expected another pause, but Ricky was so enthralled with the sound of his own voice that he jabbered on. "This room holds a secret. A secret that leads to the greatest secret of the Lackland dynasty. It's why all the fireplaces are lit whenever anyone is in here."

Ricky~~s~~ hands surreptitiously fidgeted as he tried to pause for dramatic effect, and after only a few seconds, when he felt he had sufficiently enticed his listener, he continued. "Under one of the fireplaces is a hidden passage leading down into hidden catacombs, where the legendary Lackland Onyx Whiskey is said to reside."

"Is this a bit? Are you doing a bit right now?" Lily questioned, a little irritated but now also curious.

"No I am DEADLY serious," Ricky assured her. "You have heard the story of the last bottle of Onyx Whiskey, haven't you?"

Lily's "No" came out before she could even think. Dammit. A "no" means he gets to explain his whole little story now, Lily thought while scolding herself.

Ricky seemed giddy. "Oh you're going to love this," he prefaced, and then he began to recount the legend as he knew it.

## RICKY'S STORY:

Many, many years ago there was a distiller who worked for the Lackland family. His name is the lost to sands of time, but he has been referred to as Mr. Black, so that is what we will call him here. He had started working for the Lacklands from an early age and showed great promise. He studied hard and was humble in his successes. After several years of diligent work the master distiller offered him the opportunity to create his own batch. One small batch that he would brew and flavor all on his own.

Mr. Black leapt at the chance and he worked tirelessly into the night for weeks to come. Finally he had produced something that he felt was worthy of both his name and the faith that the master distiller had in him. When the day came he was joined by his master as well as members of the Lackland family who were excited for a preliminary tasting before it was poured into barrels for aging. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the multitudes of praise being heaped upon Mr. Black did stoke his ego. The whiskey was sealed into barrels and the last action Mr. Black took before the long wait was to paint a red stripe above the top hoop of each barrel, dubbing it his "Red Band Whiskey."

Then the wait came. Mr. Black continued his work during that time, working on the standard whiskey that the Lacklands were so famous for. As time dragged on though, it became more and more obvious that all of the praise for his Red Band Whiskey had gone to his head. He began to become arrogant and impatient. This made him an awful coworker, but this combination of arrogance and impatience made him into a bit of a celebrity in the bars and taverns of the city.

To feed his growing ego, Mr. Black had begun going around to all of the drinking establishments in the city that could afford to purchase a bottle of Red Band once it was done. He would introduce himself as an artisan and expert of his craft, one whose passion and accomplishments were soon to eclipse those of the Lackland family, under whom he was employed. He told them of the fabulous whiskey that was going to be ready with the next few years, and his story and bravado made him quite the popular character everywhere he went. Every night he reveled and partied, basking in a success that had yet to come to fruition.

Finally, after years of waiting, it was time to open the barrels and bottle the Red Band Whiskey, and all of the fame and accolades that were due Mr. Black were finally going to be his. The first barrel was opened and inside was a dark, nearly opaque, slurry of whiskey and decayed wood. The taste was atrocious, harsh and bitter and hard to swallow. Mr. Black opened the next barrel and to his horror it was more of the same. They opened barrel after barrel and the extent of the disaster began to become apparent, and with this dawning revelation Mr. Black's heart sank to his feet.



The barrels came from a bad batch: the wood, too soft or porous, was disintegrating into the aging whiskey. It was remarkable that none of them had started leaking. The bad barrels made up almost the entire supply of what he had sold as a masterpiece of distillery. Of all of the barrels they had been aging, only two of them had been barrels from a different group. Only those two barrels were unaffected, and what they contained was a near perfect example of whiskey making. It was just as delicious as he had imagined, and just as delicious as he had been telling everyone who would listen for the last two years.

Two barrels weren't enough to go around though, and they were relegated to a private reserve, and its distribution canceled. The bad whiskey was discarded and with it went Mr. Black's reputation. He had spent the last two years as a man of burgeoning greatness, on the cusp of success, and now he was either a failure or a liar, and the whole city knew it. He was driven out of his many watering holes and mocked by his former friends. Even his job turned sour, as his braggadocious attitude these last two years was embarrassing for more than just himself. The master distiller and the Lackland family were ashamed of Mr. Black's behavior and though they didn't fire him, he was never again treated with the faith and respect he had so recently squandered.

For a long time afterwards, he was deeply depressed, but he wasn't the type to stew in his own misery, so less than a year later he began his climb towards redemption. All day he would work, without so much as a single complaint or moment of aspiration. He was a perfect little worker bee. At night though he would work on his own brew, a secret concoction that would redeem him in the eyes of everyone, the master, the family, and all of those fair weather friends in the city. Having to operate in secret, it was slow going, and eventually he was caught.

One night, after sneaking back into the distillery, he opened the door to his secret laboratory and found the master distiller awaiting him, along with two of the Lackland family's private security personnel. He had been caught stealing ingredients and equipment, and he was promptly fired and escorted from the grounds of the distillery, where he had spent most of his adult life. The master distiller was so disappointed he couldn't even face Mr. Black, so it was the security guards that made it clear he was never to return, lest there be something terrible done to him. And then they left him, dumped in the dirt past the gate to the distillery, and nobody ever saw or heard from Mr. Black ever again.

The story doesn't end there though, because, unbeknownst to anyone at the time, the previous night Mr. Black had completed the last batch of whiskey he would ever make. It was found the next day, as they disassembled his lab, reclaiming all of the equipment he had stolen for his personal crusade. In the back they found a single barrel, marked with a date two days prior, Mr. Black's last night of work before his capture. Smaller and constructed of an amber-colored wood, the barrel was not one of the standard Lackland barrels, and, aside from the marked date, the only other adornments were a black band painted around the top, and, in the same black paint, a single word "Onyx." In a strange mix of guilt, curiosity, and hope, the master distiller could not bring himself to destroy it, and so he secreted it away in his office to wait out the years.

And there the barrel stayed, for a few years, it and Mr. Black almost completely forgotten. Until one day the master distiller stumbled over the accumulated clutter and found himself face to face with the small barrel, mostly buried under the stacks of ledgers that had made their home in his office. So he brought it out, and for reasons even he couldn't explain, he decided to open the

barrel and tasted it. He expected something strange or experimental or perhaps just rotten, but what he found was the smoothest, richest, and most diverse tasting whiskey he had ever experienced.

He quickly set about bottling it, knowing it would only fill fewer than a dozen bottles, and his mind raced through a carousel of emotions, ending, unexpectedly, on regret. This was the most exquisite whiskey he had ever tasted, and nobody here had any idea how to recreate it. He brought the bottles to the Lackland family and they also were enraptured by the complex flavors and smooth finish of this new drink, but then he had to tell them the unfortunate news. That this was not made by him, or any man currently in his employ. The creator was a man banished years ago, having not been seen nor heard of ever since.

They drank what they could, knowing that they could never let anyone outside of the family be aware that their greatest creation was not even of their own doing, and they could never again reach such heights. The last bottle was buried in the walled off catacombs beneath the manor, its heavenly draught never again to pass the lips of man. And there it still lies today, in a place where neither stairs nor doors arrive, though rumor has it that under one of these fireplaces is hidden a secret tunnel into that lost sanctuary.

"And so that is the tragic story of Mr. Black, and his great redemption, and the shameful secret of the family that didn't recognize his greatness." Ricky stated solemnly, wrapping up his story with, what appeared to be, real sadness in his eyes.

"That is..." Lily began, and then paused. "That is so stupid a story. You can't possibly believe that, can you?"

"Of course I can!" Ricky countered, in a loud voice, overplaying the offense he took to her rejection. "It IS true. I have heard it from men who knew that very master distiller. Men that I trust, and we wouldn't lie to each other."

You most certainly would, Lily thought. You're actors, lying is all you do.

Before she could retort though another voice chimed in from behind their fireside chairs. "What is this fool claiming is true now?"

Lily sighed as she turned, to see that Odile Cointreau had strolled over to add her voice to the interruption. She was going to respond, when Ricky raised his voice in his own defense.

"I am telling her the truth of one of the great mysteries of the Lackland family."

"Oh," Odile responded with a snide smile, "have you managed some discovery about the famed family murders?"

Rickys face shifted into a mask of offense, but not the feigned reactions he used to weather the insults of the press, this was a look of genuine disappointment. "I wouldn't be concerned with something so pedestrian as murder. This is the tale of artistry and the betrayal of the masterful artist who created it. The Onyx Whiskey."

"What?" Odile whispered, her eyes opened wide in shock. Ricky was too busy appreciating the sound of his own voice, but Lily noticed the profound surprise that crossed Odile's face. It was gone a second later, as she regained her well practiced composure.



"He told a whole story about it," Lily interrupted, her eyes now affixed to Odile's face, studying it for any cracks to reveal themselves. "He had imagined some fanciful bottle of whiskey, made by some disgraced brewer, and hidden in the catacombs."

"Typical Ricky," Odile mocked, "getting one thing right and then surrounding it with nonsense."

"Yeah...wait, what part of it was true?" Lily asked in confusion.

"All of it was true," said Ricky, trying to regain his control of the conversation. "Mr. Black was a masterful artist and at the end all of his critics knew it!"

Odile was smiling to herself, having stumbled upon the very kind of conversation she was seeking, and neither of these two fools had any idea that she was here to find this legendary whiskey for herself. She needed to hear what they knew, without revealing anything she knew about its hiding place, but what Ricky had said was ridiculous and she couldn't let that stand.

"The Onyx Whiskey is real," Odile finally spoke. "Any other things he told you are the absurdities of a vain man, but the whiskey itself is real. Now let me tell you the real story."

## ODILE'S STORY:

The Onyx whiskey is not new, though few bottles of it have ever existed, and it is tied to the dark legacy of this very manor. No recorded history can agree on when it was first created, nor on its first creator, but it may have existed for as long as the Lackland family itself. The story begins many generations ago, when a much earlier Lackland patriarch was still directly involved with the creation of their now famous product. Still building a reputation, he worked in the distillery, supervising the brewing and bottling while also experimenting with new flavors. From that experimentation the Onyx Whiskey was born.

There are no records of who tasted it, but the quality was immediately spoken of with great reverence and the tales of its flavors seemed almost too grandiose to be true. What we do know is that it was never distributed, and that nobody outside of the family and their most trusted inner circle were ever allowed to even see the bottle. It was like it was so good that it was a spiritual awakening and they knew that it should never be shared. Can you imagine that, a flavor so good that your immediate reaction is not one of pleasure or amazement, but a selfish desire to keep it all to yourself. This was the true legacy of the Onyx Whiskey.

It was also what started the peculiar tradition that carried forward through the generations. Each generation would make only two batches of the Onyx Whiskey. The first was made when the heir ascended to the head of the family, after the passing or retirement of their predecessor. The second was when the first born reached adulthood, and the creation of that second batch would serve as the single instance of instruction for the next heir. This continued for generations, with two batches of Onyx Whiskey, the ascendant and the instructional, for each head of the family. The older batch was never fully consumed, leaving one bottle to wait, until the next batch had begun. This continued for generations, until a night of terror and murder broke the lineage, along with everything else the Lackland Family had worked for.

With the tradition broken, there should still be one bottle of it remaining, hidden somewhere here in the estate. It could be anywhere. A real-life treasure hunt in an ancient manor with a murderous history. Why, it's like something out of a story. A great quest to uncover something rare and fantastic.

"And that is the truth of it," Odile finished.

"No, it's not," Ricky shot back immediately. He had been biting his tongue through her every word, waiting with rapidly decreasing patience for his moment to denounce the whole of her argument.

"Oh but it is, and there is so much more to it. There are rumors of a hidden set of keys that open secret walls, but the keys are different flutes and the notes are the real key. Or there could be"—Odile was giddy with excitement, her serene exterior breaking as she began to ramble out every tidbit and conspiracy she had heard. She didn't even notice the bewildered looks worn by her two listeners as she chattered on. "The hedge maze is supposed to have an entire underground maze built beneath it, and maybe it's a mirror of the regular maze. Or maybe the entire manor is a maze that secretly connects all of the rooms. If all of the rooms were just one foot smaller on each wall, you could have secret passages between all of them and nobody would notice. That could be how you get to the other catacombs, not the ones we know about, the secret ones that they use to hide things. Oh and there is said to be a hidden passage beneath a waterfall, but there aren't any waterfalls on the grounds, so what if the waterfall is a metaphor and..." Odile trailed off suddenly, looking at the confused and slightly concerned expressions on the faces of both Lily and Ricky. Her mind and mouth were moving a mile a minute and suddenly the realization caught up with her that she was embarrassing herself, and, more importantly, she was giving away all of her secrets.

"Sorry," Odile said meekly, doing her best to compose herself. "I had just read a book about this, just this morning, and I guess I got carried away with the stories. That of course aren't true, but I do love a good story."

"I don't know if I would call that a good story," Ricky snidely remarked. Lily gave him a sideways look, the disdain she had for him plain on her face.

"Well I certainly enjoyed it," a new voice interjected from behind the tall-backed chair of an adjacent fireplace. "I hope you don't mind that I was eavesdropping, but you were spinning quite the yarns there and I couldn't help myself." The voice was careful and measured, each word considered before being carefully uttered, with an unusually stringent diction. The group turned towards the newcomer to see the smiling face of Jackie Sazerac peeking out. A woman whose every word and thought were rigorous in their precision: her actions were much less so, rising to her feet and clumsily lifting the chair under her to turn it around to face the group. She made the simple act seem far more complicated than it should be, shuffling her feet in a circle as the chair scraped behind her.

"Good evening, detective," Lily greeted her.

"Former detective," Ricky corrected, "or is it disgraced detective?"

Jackie shot Ricky a warm smile, "You played a detective in one of your films didn't you?" and then before he could answer she added, "I can't remember the name, they were all so very long ago." Having chided the insufferable man into awkward silence, Jackie turned her gaze towards Odile. "Your book must have been very interesting, and you did seem to get one thing right."

"What?"

"That it was all untrue."



"Well part of it must be true," Lily said, welcoming an explanation.

"Interesting you should say that, young lady," Jackie responded, straightening in her seat. "Because there are some truths to the legend of the Onyx whiskey. Some of them much darker than any of you could imagine"

## JACKIE'S STORY:

The Onyx whiskey isn't just a bottle and a recipe, it represents the most valuable, most hidden and most secret treasure in all of Champagnia. The legends surrounding it are a swirling miasma of imaginings and deceptions, and the true path to it is shrouded in a mystery of a thousand red herrings. Just as happened here tonight, the varying fictions were passed around and everyone went away with a new collection of untruths. Next time you'll tell some of these, and they will all be added to the clouded legend that surrounds this treasure. Ironically the infamy of this legend only serves to protect the treasure. Whatever the real truth is about the Onyx Whiskey, it has been so obscured over the generations that nobody has any guess as to the real truth.

That hasn't stopped the leagues of adventure seekers and treasure hunters. Every so often there would be someone caught breaking into the estate, and we would be called to arrest them for a B&E. Those were the times when the family security got a hold of them, and the culprits were always two bit thieves that had more ambition than ability. They would get caught on a fence or fall from a window, never really getting very far. I always wonder if there were others. Better thieves that wouldn't get nabbed by the radio and flashlight gang. I wondered if there were some that made it into the mansion, and following some conglomeration of clues they ended up in the secret parts of this house that nobody was meant to tread. I wondered if those were the ones we never got the call to arrest, because they had been otherwise dealt with.

I know that might sound a bit... conspiratorial, but there were times when I'd catch a rumor of a known thief coming to the city, and the scuttlebutt was that they were going to attempt to find the Lackland treasure. We would try and keep tabs on them, waiting for the call to come and get them when they were inevitably caught, but the call never came. They just fell off the earth. It became like an urban legend amongst the detectives. We had nothing to go on, and no reason to look any further, so it was the game of idle contemplation. I always liked to think that they would make it to the catacombs under the estate and there they would find a series of devious traps, each deadlier than the last. Maybe a thief got shot by poison darts fired from holes in the walls, or maybe a spiked ceiling descended and crushed them. It could have been a giant boulder or a swinging blade or a pit of snakes. I know none of that is very likely, but it adds a spark of whimsy to my day.

The thieves and adventurers pretty much stopped after the murders happened. Without the constant stream of business associates and party guests there was no guise under which anyone could sneak onto the grounds, and the security team, along with the rest of the staff, continued to work the estate, so it wasn't abandoned either. That may have been it, or perhaps the air of the macabre that hung around the grounds had become too great to risk life and limb on an urban legend.

It is ironic that we are speaking of this tonight, because just yesterday I heard a rumor that a certain master thief was going to attempt to find the Onyx Whiskey. Almost any thief would make

a name for themselves by finally retrieving the lost Lackland treasure, except perhaps for this one. He had already pulled off legendary heists, and were my contact a lesser man or anything less than certain I wouldn't have believed it myself. The thief goes by the name Mr. Oceanbreeze, perhaps you have heard of him, or perhaps you haven't. Perhaps all of this is just rumors and speculation amounting to nothing but rambling stories to fill a night. As we have done here.

"I wouldn't take any of this to heart," Jackie advised her listeners as she finished. "Legends such as this only remain legends because they aren't true."

"I listened to all of that just to learn that none of it was true," Ricky exclaimed in frustration. "I think it is time to return to my adoring fans." With that Ricky rose from his chair, smoothed his coat, straightened his lapels, and then replaced his mask before strutting off without another word. Odile let out another sigh and was about to speak when Lily stole the open air.

"I hate to agree with Ricky on anything, but I think I should also leave." She too rose from her chair, with much less flourish than Ricky had, and then spoke, "I feel that my refuge has become a bit crowded, but I do thank you for your words and your company." Then she too strode off, leaving Jackie and Odile alone. The last thing Lily heard as she left the room was Odile hesitantly asking, "So Jackie, do you really think that a master thief is going to steal the treasure, like tonight?"

Lily exited the sitting room, and shuffled slowly to the right, following Ricky down the hallway. Ricky reached the end of the hallway and without looking back he turned the corner. The moment he was out of sight Lily spun on her heel and quickly marched in the other direction. She turned a corner and then another, the sounds of the party fading with each step she took. Finally she turned down a hallway with no door and no windows, and a small alcove set about halfway down. In the alcove were two chairs, sat facing one another, with a small table between them. In those two chairs sat two men, and Lily strode right up to them.

"Hello Lily," said the man in the chair to the right. He was an older man with short salt-and-pepper hair and a ruffled black sport coat over a white dress shirt. His companion across from him was only a couple years his junior, but his look played on that youth. He sported a textured Ivy League haircut and an outfit that matched the first man's, though this was two different shades of mustard. He wore light aviator sunglasses, despite them being indoors and it being night, and below them was a warm smile for Lily. Both men were dashingly handsome, and you could tell that they knew it as they greeted Lily.

"Sorry I'm late," she whispered.

"No problem," the man on the right replied. "I saw that you were with a crowd, and I didn't think it the time to interrupt you." His companion said nothing, but took another bite of the apple in his left hand.

"Okay good," Lily relaxed. "It's actually funny. I was in there alone, waiting, and then one after another they flocked to me, all to tell me stories. Stories of a treasure that the Lackland family had kept hidden for generations."

"Ya don't say. Were they all wrong?"

"It's the strangest thing, each of them was actually right, just a little bit." She held both men's full attention with this statement. "Odile was right about the history. It is a bottle to pass down the



legacy through the generations, being recreated with each new heir. I think Odile might be a little bit obsessed with this particular legend, she might even try to find it herself." The companion chuckled at that, and Lily smiled at him and continued. "Ricky was right about the fireplace, though how he knew that I haven't yet figured out. And then Jackie, well Jackie was right about you."

"I'm flattered she remembered us," the first man responded.

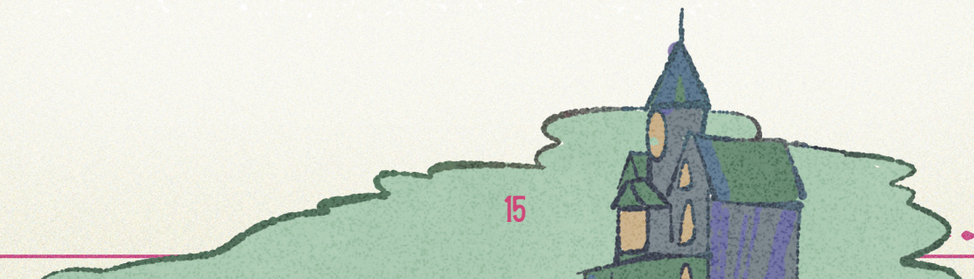
"Very flattered," his companion added, speaking for the first time.

The first man continued, "I guess that makes this on topic then. This is for you." He nodded at a messenger bag by his companion's feet. At that word the other man gently nudged the bag towards Lily. Lily took a step forward, and bent over to delicately pick up the bag. She held it cautiously for a silent moment before taking a small peek inside. A wide smile crossed her face, and then she hung the bag at her side and took a step back.

"Thank you for this," Lily said, ready to leave with the bag securely at her side.

"Any time," The first man replied. Then the two simultaneously rose from their chairs and turned to walk away. He glanced back over his shoulder with another warm smile, "It was nice to see you again Lily."

"It was nice to see you too, Daniel," Lily responded. Then she turned away from them and walked back the way she had come, while they turned and exited the hallway in the other direction. She walked back towards the front of the mansion, towards the party and the exit. She smiled an accomplished smile as she walked, bag still firmly in her grasp. The night had started off rocky, but this had really turned it around. She thought to herself, as she approached the ballroom, that as long as nothing else went wrong, this would be a perfect night.



# THE ONYX

Dark, rich, and worth more than the family lets on.



## INGREDIENTS

- ~~2 oz~~ bourbon
- 3/4 oz blackberry liqueur (cr~~me~~ de m~~re~~)
- 1/2 oz fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 oz honey syrup
- 2 dashes chocolate or black walnut bitters
- Garnish: a torched rosemary sprig, a pinch of edible gold flakes: rim half the glass with activated-charcoal black sugar

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Rim half of a rocks glass with black sugar.
2. Add bourbon, blackberry liqueur, lemon juice, honey syrup, and bitters to a shaker with ice.
3. Shake well and strain over a large ice cube in the prepared glass.
4. Torch a rosemary sprig briefly and rest it across the glass so it keeps smoldering.
5. Finish with a pinch of edible gold flakes on the surface of the drink.

### TASTING NOTES

Deep, dark, and richer than it has any right to be -~~e~~very generation hides a bottle just like this one somewhere they think no one will find it. The blackberry runs almost onyx-black in the glass, the rosemary smoke curls like a secret passage, and the gold dust on top is the only hint of the fortune this drink is named for.



# AN EXCERPT FROM:

## WHISKEY SOURED: THE SCANDALOUS HISTORY OF THE LACKLAND FAMILY

### CHAPTER 7: NEFARIOUS HALF-TRUTHS AND INFAMOUS LIES – THE TABLOID PERSPECTIVE

Like any famous family, the Lacklands were a favorite subject of the tabloids, rags of garbage that they are. Tabloids love to latch onto anyone with an overabundance of money, fame or controversy, and the Lacklands had the trifecta. They were an obvious target, and as long as rumor held more interest than the truth they served as a fount of content for any writer of dubious morals. Writers writing cheap trash is not a new occurrence, existing as scandal sheets long before the Lackland family distilled their first cup, but the new tabloids have moved so far from the truth that it should reasonably be considered fantasy. These are the publications that comprise the majority of this chapter.

Here in Champagnia there are three tabloids that command any real viewership. The first and oldest of them is The Scribe of Truth. Starting out as a proper investigative paper by legendary muckraker Julius Chambord, The Scribe had a reputation for taking on the corruption ingrained in Champagnia's owning class. After Chambord's passing the paper grew even more fervent in its quest to confront corruption, with a focus on targeting the wealthiest families and their ties to politics. A panel of editors, Chambord's students, ran the paper, with that mission, for years, though the panel slowly shrank in size due to death or retirement. The fate of this prestigious publication changed when a tragic fire claimed the lives of the last two panel members, who died without a clear plan of succession. The paper fell into the hands of a cabal of investors, who quickly filled the leadership vacuum by appointing a heretofore unknown man to the position of editor-in-chief. The output of the publication immediately changed, a perversion of its original intent. Instead of targeting the rich and powerful for their amorality and corruption, now the paper focused on imagined dalliances and overblown scandals. A bastion of ethical journalism had fallen into the very depths of corruption that it had previously combated.

Not as old as The Scribe, but with the greatest number of readers by far, The Champagnia Enquirer is the leading tabloid. This paper did not begin with noble origins. It was a sensationalist rag from the first day, formed to cannibalize the readership of The Scribe of Truth by preying on the fears of its growing readership. It presented similar fictions, but The Enquirer did so with a conspiratorial tone that captured the attention of the readers. The readers wanted more and more and soon even the faintest embers of truth had been extinguished. Now it produces only nonsense, with the truth being restrained to the names of the article subjects.

There is a third publication that will get mentioned only here, as its work is so specific that you can't even reasonably link it to current events or actual scandals. This is the quarterly paper The National Inquisitor. More so than any other publication I've ever encountered, this paper has an ironclad editorial mandate. This mandate is so overarching that there isn't a single article published that doesn't have a commentary by the editor-in-chief and founder Edward Morris Peror. This commentary isn't just some editorial notes: it is the main focus of the paper and also it's most unique (subsequently insane) feature. The paper, despite its appearance as a run of the mill tabloid, is actually quite faithful to its name, specifically the "Inquisitor" part. Every

article either begins or ends with comments from the editor-in-chief that are inquisitorial in nature. This will accuse the subject of being a heathen, or heretic, or witch, or just a run of the mill damned to hell sinner if Editor Peror is feeling generous that day. Every famous person that becomes the subject of an article, which are normally just day late knock offs of the articles in "better" tabloids, would then be aggressively accused of being some sort of enemy of God. It is an entirely unreadable waste of paper, but I must admit there is a charm to the ramblings of a man who accuses hundreds of people a year of being the literal Antichrist. Since it carried with it no new information, and even less societal impact, this rag need not be mentioned again.

To start at the beginning, the Lackland family, like all wealthy families, was not free of rumors, but before the tabloids came along they were more akin to folklore than the mass-distributed lies we saw later. Only a few things from that time gained enough traction to remain part of the heritage of storytelling that persists to this day. The most interesting of those was the scandal of one Henry Lackland, who stewarded the family over 200 years ago. Henry had an ailment that he himself described as a lust for love. Others would have described him as a predator, equal parts charming and lecherous. He was too wealthy and too handsome for the good of anyone he set his sights on, and that would have been a minor problem had he not so frequently changed his sights. The man I have described thus far is nothing more than the expected depravity of a man long on wealth and short on morals, but Henry also had another peculiarity. He was devoutly religious and did not believe in premarital sex, but he also didn't believe in divorce.

You can probably see the problem now. Henry would meet and develop an immediate infatuation with his target, and then would utilize his considerable wealth and standing to woo (or more likely threaten) the unfortunate woman. A marriage would soon follow, and for some time Henry Lackland would retreat from the world. For weeks, or months, his every waking moment would be focused on his new bride, until one fateful day he would catch a glimpse of another woman, and the cycle would begin again. This time there was one additional detail to account for before he could speed headlong into another wedding: he was currently married. Since he was steadfastly opposed to divorce, his real problem, as he saw it, was that his current wife was still alive.

Thus began a very real cycle of lust, infatuation, marriage, and murder, with every part, save the last, being performed in the public eye. The murders were all accidents, none of them particularly believable, but also none so egregious that law enforcement would pursue a contest against a man so powerful. The press was also reluctant to craft a piece that attacked, or even critiqued, this murderous lech, at least not officially. It could even be said that the first tabloids in Champagnia were the Henry Pamphlets, as they came to be known, having no real name or author attached to them. Distributed anonymously, as piles on doorsteps of boarding houses or upon every table of a pub, the small pamphlets dealt with one topic only, Henry's wives and their grisly ends.

While we do not have every pamphlet, a great number have been preserved by collectors or fans of guerrilla journalism. Julius Chambord himself had a substantial personal collection that he donated to a museum upon his death. The museum does not have many of the original available for viewing, but a substantial photo registry exists to catalog every one they could find. Through that we can mostly discern the timeline of his life, his wives, and their unfortunate ends.

The earliest one, and possibly the first, reads: "Henry Lackland weds new wife Elizabeth just three weeks after the tragic loss of his previous wife Anne." This is rather tame in its presentation compared to what was to come. Soon after was: "Life and Beth - What we know about the new Mrs. Lackland having survived her third month." This was ironically followed only a week later by: "A tragic horsemanship accident has claimed the life of Elizabeth Lackland - Who is next in the saddle?" A week after that: "Henry Lackland rides again - Whiskey titan seen courting a new (un)lucky lady."



This went on for many horrifying years, Henry having had 31 wives by the end of his grotesque life. He tried to stamp out the creation of these pamphlets during that time, but to no avail. The fact that so many survive to this day feels like a modicum of justice, however faint. Stand outs during those years include ones such as:



- "No Funeral without Fun - Henry Lackland seen aggressively flirting with shipping heiress at his own wife's funeral."
- "Bear-ly a wife - Newly married Annabelle Lackland mauled to death by a black bear just one week after wedding."
- "A Blie for a Blie - Henry weds Margaret Blie, exactly nine days after the death of his previous wife Katherine (Blie) Lackland, Margaret's older sister."
- "Why has nobody stopped him? - Marjorie Lackland died tragically last night from "falling on a knife." Come on. He can't keep getting away with this."

Finally this concludes with my favorite, and the final Henry Pamphlet in the collection: "A Fall For Grace - Josephine Lackland mourns the sudden, accidental, death of her beloved husband. In the early hours of the morning of January 28th, the head of the Lackland whiskey empire was found dead. The coroner's report states he had apparently fallen from a third-story window and onto several bullets. The family is in mourning as surviving wife Josephine, and every other woman in Champagnia, breathes a sigh of relief."

The tabloid era saw many more headlines with much more creative writing, about topics that are far less dour than those preceding this. To their credit, there was not another extremely murderous Lackland until the infamous Mortimer. There were other topics that captivated audiences, such as the one of escalating absurdity that occurred at the birth of The Champagnia Enquirer and its initial competition for headlines with its long-in-the-tooth rival The Scribe. This story began with a gala and ended with a war of make believe.

The Lackland Gala, one of the many parties thrown by the family each year, was the springtime celebration of fortune and fashion. It wasn't a party for the merchants, traders, or other business associates of the Lackland family. Dukes, duchesses, princes, and princesses were always the first on the guest list, followed by anyone keen to put their extravagant wealth on display. They would arrive in suits and gowns designed specifically for the event, adorned with pieces of jewelry that are taken out of their case once in a decade, rather than every week. Even the cars were showpieces this year, unique vehicles borrowed from the most prestigious collectors in Champagnia.

So the Gala began, with a parade of incredible cars delivering opulent guests in all their finery. Everything went along as expected until dinner started. Then the guests began to get sick. It started with just a few, then more and more, or at least that is our best speculation. There was

no accurate reporting about this event, and it will become clear as to why that is. The sickness got so bad that they decided to cut short the party, and that's when the real problems started. Guests pushed and shoved their way out the front door to find nothing waiting for them. Which is a problem since they were expecting to find an array of priceless cars waiting for them. They moved back inside, raising hell about their missing cars, when the next catastrophe found its voice.

The first shout rang out, "Where is my necklace? The Sol Crest Diamonds are gone! They were around my neck and now they are gone!" There was a collective gasp and the outset of whispers barely given a moment to breathe, when another scream was heard, "The bracelet! It's gone. It was... it was from Princess Serenity. It was on my wrist a second ago." Soon after another shriek and then another as priceless jewelry was noticed to be missing all through the party.

This is all speculation of course, as we have no real reporting of what was said. We don't even know if the police were called, though I suspect that they were. Even those two pieces mentioned were some of the few named pieces that were officially declared lost. Many other pieces also went missing, and those, along with the many cars, rendered such a black mark across both the Lackland family and the various guests entrusted with their care. It was no surprise that not a lot was revealed about what had gone missing and who was responsible for the pieces when they vanished. This information was deliberately concealed to shelter the reputation of the guests, but what effect they didn't expect was that this would stir the imaginations of tabloid journalists, and give rise to a fierce rivalry.

The first article released (as far as I could find in the archives) was by The Scribe, titled "An Ignoble Gala - The grand Lackland event was rocked by reports of theft." The next morning a piece was released by The Champagnia Enquirer titled "Was the Lackland Gala robbery an inside job?" The content of this article was almost identical to the one in The Scribe, but it also added in the speculation that some member of the Lackland family or household was responsible. There was no evidence then, nor has there been any since, that anyone associated with the Locklands had anything to do with the theft, but that didn't stop both tabloids from latching onto the idea. That idea was the continued focus of more articles, for example:

- "Could Arthur Lackland himself have orchestrated the Gala theft?"
- "Was the Gala theft a plot by the Locklands to save their failing business?"
- "Heirs to the Lackland family may have committed the heist to pay excessive gambling debts."
- "The rich are robbing the rich. Did the Locklands commit the gala heist in an attempt to drive the old-money families into poverty?—

Then came a deliberate shift in the tabloids' target, and though the impetus for this is unknown, it did keep the narrative fresh after many weeks of no actual news. The focus on the Lackland family was promptly discarded in favor of a new culprit, the very royals themselves. "Prince Arturo reported to have been seen with the missing Sol Crest Diamonds" read the first article. The Scribe countered with their own piece "Could the Prince have committed the jewelry heist to discredit the other royal families?" This new narrative built over the weeks, with more and more outlandish articles each day. The culmination, though not the end, came with the Enquirer article: "A secret cabal of royal families perpetrated the Lackland Gala Heist, and now they are turning on one another. Is civil war in our future?" That would be the most ridiculous article that week, but there was a piece in The National Inquisitor (I know I said they wouldn't be spoken of again, but this bears mentioning) that was mostly giving a summary of the various rumors and speculations about the heist. The great part, per usual, came with the trailing editorial that proposed the idea that the various Royalty (reprehensible sinners that they were) faked the theft of the cars and jewelry so that they could sacrifice them in a dark ritual to summon the devil himself.

The truth was that we never knew what really happened, but the prevailing sentiment is that they got away with it. The cars and jewelry were never recovered, and not only was nobody ever caught, but there was never even someone that carried a reasonable suspicion. There wasn't enough information for continued interest amongst everyday people, but the tabloid readers were drip fed stories for years about possible plots or motives. My personal favorite of these resurgent rumors was that the stolen cars had been sighted years later, far to the south, where they were being prepared for some sort of luxurious death race.

Continued in: Whiskey Soured: The Scandalous History of the Lackland Family

Chapter 7: Nefarious half-truths and infamous lies - The tabloid perspective

Written by Taylor Stockton Thompson.
Published by Column Still Press.

# WHISKEY SOURED

Tart, a little bitter, and impossible to put down —just like the rag it's named for.

## INGREDIENTS




- 2 oz bourbon
- 3/4 oz fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 oz cr~~me~~ de cassis (blackcurrant liqueur)
- 1/2 oz simple syrup
- 1 egg white (optional, for the classic frothy head)
- Garnish: Angostura bitters dashed across the foam, a lemon wheel, and a small cocktail pick styled like a mini tabloid headline flag

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Add bourbon, lemon juice, cassis, simple syrup, and egg white (if using) to a shaker without ice.
2. Dry-shake vigorously for about 15 seconds to build the foam.
3. Add ice and shake again until well-chilled.
4. Double-strain into a chilled coupe.
5. Dash bitters across the foam and drag a toothpick through them for a marbled ~~headline~~ ~~swirl~~. Garnish with the lemon wheel and tabloid-flag pick.

### TASTING NOTES

Tart, a little bitter, and impossible to put down —just like the rag it's named for. The foam holds the ink-dark bitters just long enough for one good scandal before it sinks out of sight, same as every rumor in this chapter.