



The First Chase

Book 15

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PREVIEW

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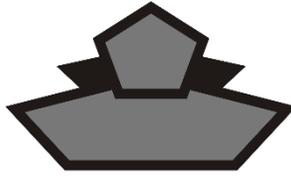
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Chapter I

Monday, May 11, 1931

“I saw Milo run last week.” Jack Stone smoked a cigarette, the end blinking reddish-orange. He paused long enough to build up tension. “I know why you want Ace.”

Henry Langford mirrored Jack’s silence. He couldn’t afford to sound overly anxious. The night air was cold, and the animal smell lingered. Despite the close proximity of almost thirty dogs, only crickets and the nearby river provided background noise. Greyhounds were a quiet breed. “I’m still waiting for a price.”

“Two thousand.”

Langford choked. “I’ve never seen a dog go for that much.”

“A proven winner from out of state, unknown here, who just happens to be a dead ringer for that mutt of yours . . .” Stone started walking down the hill. A path worn through the scraggly weeds led from the abandoned textile mill—now housing a small track—to several mismatched sheds that had been converted into kennels.

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“If you know what I’ve got planned . . .”

“You’ll stand to win a lot more than two grand.” His tone challenged. He glanced sideways at Langford, his face hidden in the shadows. “If you can pull it off.”

“Sure, but in the meantime . . .” Langford stepped ahead to open the shed door. The dark interior space was lined with individual kennels. Nothing but vague outlines and gray shapes were distinguishable in the darkness.

“You don’t have two grand?” Moonlight streamed in behind them. Stone looked down at Milo, sleeping on his back in the straw. Black, with a white, triangle-shaped patch on his chest. All four paws were splayed in the air, and his muscles twitched. “I suppose, not the way your dog runs.”

“That’s too much for a dog.” Langford held his breath and tried to keep his nerves steady. He needed the dog, no matter what. “There’s no guarantee the plan will work. It’s still a gamble.”

“The bookies have never set longer odds.” Stone kicked the kennel door. Milo snarled instantly, flipped over, and launched straight into the air. The dog landed in the straw and put his head down, whining softly, as if embarrassed by his reaction to being startled.

“One thousand,” Langford countered firmly. “I only have your word for it that Ace is a winner, and I still need something left to bet with.”

“Two gees.” Stone faced Langford with a hard glare. “Not a cent less.”

“Fifteen hundred—”

Footsteps outside thudded down the path. A short, chunky man appeared in the doorway, red-faced and panting frantically. “Lenny!” Drew Pratchett leapt into the building and grabbed Langford’s arm, jerking him back toward the doorway. The annoying squeak in his voice made him easily

recognizable. He was a good friend, but excitable and not very bright. “Lenny, I’ve got something to tell you. It’s important!”

“I’m busy.” Langford jerked his arm away and lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “And I told you not to call me that anymore.”

“Frank’s dead.” Drew tugged on Langford’s arm again and babbled, but the rest of his words blurred. His voice rose in an arc that ended with a whine.

Franklin Wagner . . . dead. Langford’s blood froze. He forgot to breathe. “What happened?”

“I dunno, but when I got there, the police were swarming all over the place.” He flailed his arms to illustrate the point, but looked like a frantic chicken. “I saw Frank carried out on a stretcher, and was his head ever a mess.”

Langford nudged Drew out through the doorway. He needed the cool air to clear his thoughts. “Who did it?”

“Some cowboy in a white hat got brought out in handcuffs and shoved into a cop car.” Drew panted and stared with a doglike expression. Loyal, but uncomprehending.

“Buster Cardwell,” Langford muttered. He’d become an annoyance recently, and he wanted information that only Wagner had. Specifically, the names of three men. “Do Victor and Raymond know?”

“I caught up with Vic at his restaurant hours ago, and gosh, was he ever upset. Ray wasn’t home again, but I told his wife.”

“Alright.” Langford paced and tried to light a cigarette. His hands shook too badly to strike the match.

“Here.” Drew lit the match and held it for him. “What are you gonna do without the print shop?”

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“Frank was a liability, anyway.” The cigarette barely settled Langford’s nerves. He paced in a wider arc. Stepping off the path, weeds tangled around his feet.

Nearby, Jack Stone watched.

Langford led Drew farther away. “The print shop was almost irrelevant since our insurance business ended. Ray was trying to keep that going, but . . .” He shook his head. “What worries me is the records Frank stored there.”

“The way the police were going over the place . . .”

“Damn.” Langford kicked at the weeds and thought for several minutes. The insurance racket with Vic and Ray had been profitable, until an investigator named Whittaker had finally caught up with them, and it became too risky to continue. Changing his name from Leonard Calloway to Henry Langford had taken a chunk of money. The rest had gone to the dogs.

With no income, in only a few months, he’d moved from a penthouse to a flophouse. Any lower and he’d find himself sleeping in the kennel. He needed cash to leave town. If the police went through Frank’s papers, he would need it in a hurry.

Drew whined. “Are you in trouble?”

“No, just upset about Frank,” Langford lied. Drew wasn’t involved in much more than running errands, and Langford preferred to keep it that way. He was also too much of a liability.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Keep tabs on Vic and Ray,” Langford said. Giving orders to Drew made him feel in control of at least some small aspect of the situation. “I shouldn’t be seen with them. You can find me here if they have any news.”

“Sure, Lenny.” Drew patted his arm. “You can count on me.”

“Thanks.” Correcting him about the name again wouldn’t have done any good.

Drew scampered up the hill like a clumsy rabbit, moonlight shining on the seat of his faded overalls. Langford lit a new cigarette from the old one, dropped the butt on the ground, and crushed it under his shoe.

Behind him, Stone cleared his throat. “Well, that was interesting. Lenny.”

“Don’t ever call me that. And I’m still not giving you two grand for a dog.”

“How about one thousand now, and . . .” He made strong eye contact. “More later.”

“Deal.” Langford accepted Stone’s handshake and returned the firm, threatening squeeze. He held his glare until Stone awkwardly released his hand and looked away.

If Jack Stone thought he could get away with blackmail, he would be in for a surprise. After all, Langford—or rather, Calloway—had already killed Tim Whittiker.



Chapter II

“About the list . . .” Tuesday morning, Detective Lieutenant Marx set a handful of papers on Lowan’s desk. He glanced back at the door, making sure that Fritz Gallop had left.

“It is not my case.” Lowan ignored the papers. Instead, he took out his wallet and put away the crisp fifty-dollar bill that Gallop had just paid him—a debt owed since St. Patrick’s Day. The money itself meant less to him than enforcing a principle. He didn’t like being cheated.

Marx looked from the papers to Lowan and back again. Lowan felt Marx’s thoughts spinning. As often as they worked together, Marx had begun to rely on him far too much. He didn’t mind sharing information when he had it, but as a private investigator, he wasn’t obligated to handle police cases for free.

The awkward silence lengthened. Lowan circled his desk and sat. Though the day had hardly begun, he was already eager to rest his feet. Rita, his secretary, watched them from her desk across the room.

“Uh . . .” Marx fidgeted. “There were the three names on the first list, the men who were presumed dead in the fire. Leonard Calloway, Victor DeSalvo, and Raymond Mercer. Then there were three names on the second list, and judging by how strongly Wagner refused to give it up, it might be what they changed their names to by using fake documents from the print shop. Henry

Langford, Guido Genovesi, and Lester Strickland. We couldn't find much on Strickland or Langford, but Genovesi owns a restaurant and seems pretty harmless for the moment." He trailed off and looked away.

"Where do you intend to start?" Lowan wanted to be encouraging, but without implying that he would help. Mostly, he wanted Marx to leave so that he could enjoy a quiet day without getting dragged into another case. "With Genovesi?"

"I think he'll keep. Of the three names on the first list, only Calloway had a record, a couple of armed robberies and an assault. I'd like to go after him first. If the two lists are in the same order, that would make him Langford, but I couldn't find an address."

"Then . . ."

"Calloway was obsessed with dog racing. If he's still in the area, he wouldn't have given it up."

"Dog racing?" Lowan looked for a clearer image of it in Marx's mind. "I have never heard of such a thing. Not horses?"

"Greyhounds." Marx shivered and put his hand to his forehead. He imagined tall, thin dogs with long legs, but the details were blurry. "It's illegal. There was a track in town that got shut down a few months ago, but they probably set up again somewhere else. We just haven't found it yet. I was going to ask around at the butcher shops if they have any large orders of meat for dog food that isn't coming from a kennel or breeder."

"A good starting point," Lowan agreed. "The police are capable of handling that without me."

"Sure." Marx looked down and scuffed his shoe on the floor. He still wanted another favor. "I just thought you'd want to know what's going on, since you found the list of names."

"I appreciate the update. If you find Calloway, let me know."

"I was wondering . . ." He risked a glance, but didn't quite make eye contact, and his naturally quiet voice sank into a hesitant whisper. "Could you have O'Malley ask around? Since the same kind of crowd who goes to the Green Light would also go to places like an illegal dog track. . . . I mean, if you're not going to help

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find Calloway . . .” He barely looked up, his brown eyes like an abandoned puppy’s.

“I will ask him.” Lowan exhaled through his teeth. How did Marx, who possessed no hypnotic persuasive powers, always talk him into doing things?

“Thanks.” Marx stood straighter and headed for the door. He passed Rita’s desk, paused long enough to glance at her, then hurried out without saying anything.

Lowan reluctantly left his desk. He crossed to the door and took his hat from the rack. “Please call a taxi.”

“Right away.” Rita reached for the telephone.

He closed the door behind him. His footsteps echoed down the empty hallway. The stairs remained too much of a challenge. If moving his workshop wasn’t such an issue, he would have considered finding a ground floor office elsewhere. Or a building with an elevator. He paused in the middle of the staircase to catch his breath. By the time he reached the bottom, the dull ache in his ribs bothered him worse than his exhaustion.

Still, it wasn’t nearly as bad as it had been three weeks ago. Another three or four weeks, and his broken ribs might finally be healed. He couldn’t remember looking forward to anything quite so much.

He loitered on the sidewalk for several minutes, watching the traffic while he recovered from the exertion. After meeting with Sen, hopefully brief, he intended to spend some time learning as much as he could about greyhounds and racing.

A taxi pulled over, and he climbed carefully into the back seat. “Water Street.”

The cab navigated through traffic. Within ten minutes, they left the business district and entered a far shabbier neighborhood not far from the waterfront. Lowan gave more specific directions. After another half a dozen turns, the cab stopped near an alley.

“I’m not waiting more than five minutes,” the driver complained. “Even in broad daylight in a place like this, they’ll steal the hubcaps while I’m sitting here.”

“This will not take long.” Lowan stepped out and glanced down the narrow, grimy street bordered by brick warehouses. Waves crashed in the distance, and the stink of fish pervaded the atmosphere. A seagull landed to pick at crumpled litter. Its feathers shimmered with greenish slime.

Lowan stepped into the alley. This wasn’t where he normally met with O’Malley Sen. At this time of the morning, none of the usual speakeasies would have been open, including the nearby Green Light. He passed one door that had been boarded up long ago, leaned against the brick wall to rest for a moment, and made his way to another door farther down. It was unmarked and unpainted. The splintered wood had dried and shrunk in the frame.

And it was unlocked. Anyone who invaded Sen’s subbasement wouldn’t have walked out again.

He opened the door and stepped inside, finding a space no larger than three feet square at the top of a dark staircase. It went down two flights, and he couldn’t stomach the thought of the exertion—or the destination. He paused at the top and stared into the darkness, unable to see more than halfway to the next landing. A cold breeze blew up from below, carrying the scent of something more revolting than fish.

The steps led to an abyss, a purgatory, an unearthly predator’s lair.

Lowan shouted a greeting. The sound echoed. No response. He gripped the railing, closed his eyes, and extended his telepathic senses further into the basement. Sen’s presence was strong and familiar enough to be noticeable, even from a distance.

He found Sen, but not in the expected direction. Quickly, he stepped outside again.

A man in a black uniform strode down the shadowy alley, carrying a side of beef over his shoulder. He wore no hat, and his coarse, blood-red hair looked matted. When he spotted Lowan, he took on a more focused expression, his peculiar yellow-green eyes as threatening as a snake’s. “What do you want?”

Lowan couldn’t help taking a step back. His full height barely came to the middle of the giant’s chest, and he preferred not to

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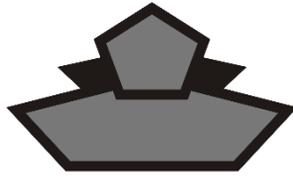
stand within reach. Disturbing Sen at home instead of a neutral location might have crossed a line. He should have waited until the evening, then gone to the Green Light to speak with him.

“Somewhere in this city, there is a place where they race dogs. It is illegal, and would also involve alcohol, betting, and a great deal of money. I need to find this place.”

“Dogs.” Sen grunted. He hated dogs.

“I need to find someone who goes to the dog races, but to do that, I first need to find where the dog races are.” Lowan kept his tone polite. The last time he presumed to give orders to Sen, he found himself slammed against a wall. “There are probably men at the Green Light who know. Racing dogs are called *greyhounds*.” He emphasized what to Sen would have been an alien word. Speaking Sen’s harsh and growling language burned his throat. “Can you ask about greyhounds tonight?”

Sen shifted his grip. The side of beef was an awkward load, but not heavy. With his carnivorous appetite, he probably went through a steer a week. “Ask them yourself.” He ducked through the doorway. His boots thudded, echoing down the stairwell.



Chapter III

Marx stopped his car half a block away from another butcher shop. He'd already been to all of the ones located downtown. Spotless windows filled with plump sausages, gleaming counters, glass cases of succulent cuts of meat arranged on ice, men in white aprons and paper hats, who all looked about the same.

Every one of them had been eager to open their record books as soon as he showed his badge and explained his objective. Every large order of dog food was accounted for. Reputable breeders and kennels, with all of the contact information listed.

Unless they sold meat to the track and simply didn't record it. That was a possibility, but as straightforward as each of the butchers had been, he didn't suspect it too strongly.

He was reaching the end of the list, unless he wanted to search farther outside of town. Other possibilities included looking for taxi drivers who might have taken people there, or tracking down an alcohol supplier, but neither option sounded any less frustrating.

This next butcher shop was at the edge of town. The windows didn't quite gleam, and the customary string of sausages looked wilted. Marx walked past the shop first, looking through the smudged glass. The room was empty. He doubled back and stepped inside. A bell rang, but nobody answered.

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The air was stale, lacking the usual scents of cleaning supplies and fresh meat. Fly papers hung in loose spirals behind the counter, covered in black specks. A chopping sound came from the back. Marx waited for a moment and held his breath. Every *whack* made him flinch. His stomach tingled. He leaned over the counter to look through the next door.

A big man in a stained apron swung a cleaver. *Whack!* The knife stuck into the chopping block. He pulled it loose, pushed his cuts of meat around, raised the cleaver to line up another swing, then glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

Marx played a hunch. Rather than immediately flashing his badge as he had with the others, he rubbed his hands together, rounded his shoulders, and looked sideways at the butcher. His profile didn’t look anything like a stereotypical cop, and neither did his ragged beige raincoat. Sometimes, that was an advantage. He edged closer and spoke quietly, but a little higher pitched than normal. “I’m looking for . . . dogs.”

“I don’t sell no dog meat here.” The butcher huffed and brought the cleaver down again. *Whack!*

“No, no, no,” Marx whined. He avoided eye contact, sniffled, and rubbed his nose. “I want a little betting action. That’s hard to find around here, you know? I was away for a while, and when I got out . . .” he coughed like he’d embarrassed himself, “I mean, when I got back to town, the track at the back of the mechanic shop was all closed up. Nobody’ll tell me where it’s gone to, but I figured, the mutts gotta eat, don’t they?”

“Ah . . .” The butcher stepped through the doorway. He wiped the cleaver on his stained apron. “Why don’t you just ask Sammy?”

“S-Sammy?” Marx froze.

“Yeah, everybody at the track knows Sammy.” The butcher stared a little too intently. “He’s around. Why don’t you ask him?”

“I . . .” Marx watched the butcher’s reaction, disconcerted by the testing stare. Hesitation was the right answer. “I don’t know any Sammy.”

“Alright.” The butcher nodded. “What’s the last dog you bet on?”

Marx choked again. He wasn't always the best at thinking on his feet. He knew there'd been a track in a mechanic shop shut down at the end of last year, but hadn't memorized the whole file. "I'm no good at remembering names. I don't look at what they're called; I pick the ones that look pretty."

"Na-ah." He wiggled the cleaver in a scolding motion. "Nobody forgets a dog that won him a pile of dough. Or one that lost too much."

"I never won big, and I never had that much to lose. I just like to watch 'em run." He rubbed his nose again, hoping that acting like an addict would get him a little leeway for a bad memory. "Where's the dogs?"

"Out." He pointed toward the door.

"Aw, come on," Marx whined again. "Gimme a break, won't you? I just wanna watch 'em run—"

"Out!" The butcher waved the cleaver and started for the end of the counter, moving with the posture of a territorial grizzly. "And don't ever come back around here again."

Marx bolted for the door. The bell rang on his way out. The butcher stared through the glass, still holding the cleaver raised until Marx slunk back to his car.

He raced to Lowan's office, took the stairs two at a time, and burst inside. Rita dropped her novel and gave him a startled glare. Though a few hours had passed, he found Lowan sitting at his desk, exactly as he had been earlier.

"I've got a lead." Marx leaned on the back of a chair and panted. "A butcher who I think is selling dog food to the racetrack. He wouldn't tell me where it is, but . . ." He swallowed hard and focused on breathing. His nerves refused to settle. "You don't have to come if you don't want to, but can I use your tracking box? The box with the spinning arrow that points to the . . . the thing . . ."

"The *thing* was broken the last time we used it." Lowan stood, pushing himself up slowly.

"Oh. Yeah." Marx sighed and looked down. "I wanted to watch if somebody came to pick up the dog food, then use it to follow him."

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“I already made a replacement thing. It seemed likely that we would need it again.” He crossed the room to the door at the back and disappeared inside.

Marx paused at the doorway. Lowan’s workshop seemed like hallowed ground, a private inner sanctum where few were ever invited. He peered at the worktable, the stacks of papers and organized components, the incomprehensible prototypes and works in progress . . .

Lowan went to a shelf and touched a wooden box approximately the size of a milk crate. He lifted the lid to check inside, then grabbed the crate and braced himself.

“I can carry that,” Marx offered. He stepped into the workshop, tentatively at first, awed by the complexity of the biggest diagram spread across the worktable. Most of Lowan’s projects had to do with radios, as far as he knew. But he wasn’t completely sure.

“Thank you.” Lowan stepped aside.

“And the other part?” Marx hefted the crate off the shelf. It probably didn’t weigh much more than ten pounds, but that still would have strained Lowan’s broken ribs.

“Inside.” He accompanied Marx back into the main office and shut the workshop door. “Push the battery into place before putting it into the vehicle you want to follow. The homing device is easy enough to replace, if you are unable to retrieve it.”

“I’ll bring it back later, I promise.” Near the front door, he balanced the crate on the edge of Rita’s desk for a moment.

Rather than return to his own desk, Lowan still followed him. He reached for his hat. “I may as well accompany you, in case it needs adjustments.”



Chapter IV

“There.” Marx stopped the car and motioned to a business in the middle of the block. The dingy glass didn’t show much. “When I asked him about where to find the dogs, he acted like he knew, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“We may be waiting for a while.” Lowan studied the storefront. They were too far away for him to sense anything definite.

“Dogs have to eat every day.” Marx stared intently through the windshield like a terrier watching birds. “If they go through a lot of meat, they might have to pick it up daily.”

“You could have assigned someone to this task.”

Marx looked away and down. His mood shifted from anticipation to guilt, as if the statement had been criticism.

“Marx . . .” Lowan didn’t expect the tracker box to need any adjustments. He’d come because of Marx’s tendency to handle everything alone, no matter how dangerous it might become. “I asked Sen earlier, but he did not seem eager to help. In the meantime . . .” He opened the door and started to step out. “I will speak with the butcher. Maybe he will tell me.”

Climbing out of the car took effort. He paused to catch his breath, then strode past the window. The shop looked empty, but he sensed someone inside. A bell rang when he opened the door.

Rummaging sounds came from the back room. “Just a minute,” the butcher shouted. He stepped out of the back room, wiping his hands on his stained apron. “You’re early, and—” He stopped.

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“Oh, I was expecting someone else coming to pick up an order. Something you’re looking for?”

Lowan approached and focused, trying to get a better sense of the butcher’s character. He put a stronger musical cadence into his voice and spoke slowly. “I am here to inquire about dog food.”

“Big dog, small dog . . .?”

“A kennel.” He brought his hand to his chin, as if he was thoughtfully studying the display case, though the motion was to show off his large, purple ring. It implied money, and he caught the butcher’s eyes following it. “At the moment, I have six large dogs, but I am expecting two litters. I have been informed that you can supply the correct grade of meat in large quantities, and that you can be discreet.” He held eye contact long enough to see that the butcher was just trying to make a living in a competitive market. Supplying the track paid well.

“I think we can come to an arrangement.”

“I require the finest quality. These dogs are athletes, imported directly from Italy, and they must have the best in order to perform well.” He lowered his voice and leaned in, as if sharing a confidential secret. “I expect to cause quite a stir in a certain . . . local industry.”

“Ah.” The butcher grinned. “I don’t think you’ll have much competition around here. Have you been out to the mill yet?”

“No. I prefer to keep my arrival a surprise.” He focused, catching blurred glimpses of an abandoned textile factory that had been converted to a track. It was somewhere west of town. “I run my dogs until there is no competition left, then move on to another location.”

“The guys around here won’t like that.”

“Losers rarely do.” Lowan kept his posture haughty, though it was difficult to look down his nose at someone taller. “I can handle any problems that might arise. In the meantime, if you are unable to supply the meat, I can find another butcher.”

“I’ve got the meat,” he said quickly. “As much as you need, and you can see for yourself that it’s good.”

“I see—”

The bell rang. Lowan turned. A balding man in faded overalls sauntered in and grinned.

“Drew.” The butcher waved. Recognition flashed through his mind. This order was from the track. “Just hold on a minute. I almost have your order together, but I’ve got another customer.”

With a magnanimous gesture, Lowan stepped back. “You may help him first.”

“Thanks.” The butcher motioned for Drew to follow him into the back.

Lowan hurried to the window. He looked toward Marx’s car and stretched his senses in that direction, trying to send Marx a sense of urgency. He touched Marx’s mind, but in his own hurried panic, fumbled the connection, and he wasn’t sure if the message went through.

The butcher and Drew stepped out of the back room, both carrying several large paper bags. Lowan stepped ahead of them to open the door, then stopped while blocking their exit. “Have we met before?”

Drew’s face went blank. His eyebrows moved closer together, and his forehead wrinkled. “I don’t think so.”

“Surely, we have.” Lowan resisted the urge to look back. Marx would need a little more time.

“No . . .”

“In New York.”

“I’ve never been there, and I don’t ever want to. I hate cities.” His voice squeaked a little, and he shifted his grip on the bags. “Even Milford Falls is too big.”

“In . . . Arkansas?” Lowan didn’t know where that was, but it was the first place that came to mind.

“I haven’t been there in years. Now . . .” A bag started sliding out of his grip. He floundered to rescue it. “Can we talk about it later? This stuff is heavy, and it don’t smell too nice.”

“Oh, certainly.” Lowan dawdled in stepping out of the way and pulling the door open. Drew and the butcher gave him slightly resentful glances in passing. Their paper bags crinkled.

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“Hey!” The butcher yelled. He rushed ahead of Drew. Lowan stepped out in time to see Marx standing beside a rusty truck. The butcher continued his charge, snarling and scolding. “Get away from there!”

Marx slunk back, then bolted. Rather than heading for his car, he turned at the next corner.

“Him again . . .” The butcher tossed his bags into the back of the truck, then leaned on it. Perspiration ran down his face. “He was nosing around here earlier, wanting to know where the track was, but he’s no good. Nothing but trouble. I thought I ran him off. Don’t let him follow you, okay?”

“I’ll watch.” Drew added his bags to the back. “I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“Good.” The butcher patted him on the shoulder. He turned to Lowan. “About your order . . .”

“I will meet you inside shortly.” Lowan acted like he also needed a moment to catch his breath. He waited for the butcher to walk away.

Drew gave Lowan a quick glance, decided he’d rather not talk about Arkansas, and darted into the truck. The big engine rumbled and belched exhaust. It rumbled to the next corner. Lowan strode down the block toward the car. Marx peered around the corner and followed.

“Did you place the tracking device?” Lowan climbed into Marx’s car as quickly as he could.

“Yeah. And I remembered to put the battery in it first, too.” Marx looked a little pale and shaky. He slid behind the wheel. The keys rattled in his hand. “I had a hunch it was the right truck.”

“I believe it is.” The box was on the floor at Lowan’s feet. He switched it on. The arrow turned slowly, then held a steady direction. “Ahead and left.”

Marx pulled away from the curb. There was no reason to drive faster than the flow of traffic. They could follow through the city by taking parallel streets or staying far enough behind to remain out of sight.

“I believe the track is somewhere to the west of the city,” Lowan said. “In an abandoned textile mill.”

“Huh.” Marx kept his eyes on the road. “Must be taking the highway out of town.” He turned two more corners, moving from a parallel road onto the highway. After spotting the truck ahead, he slowed to widen the gap.

“It could be several more miles.” Lowan broke the awkward silence. The evening sunlight glared on the windshield, causing him to squint.

They passed the city limits sign. Marx swept his hand toward it. “Not good. If we do find Calloway out here, I can’t arrest him. We’re outside of my jurisdiction.”



Chapter V

“That looks like an old mill.” Marx eased the car along a dirt road, barely more than tire tracks through a muddy field. He stopped at the top of the hill. In the valley below, a large building nestled beside a wide stream among some scraggly pines. The roof was patched in dozens of places, and the water wheel that once powered it lay on its side in the river, rotten from half a century of abandonment. Dozens of cars were parked in front of the building. “Should we try to get closer?”

“We may slip in with the crowd,” Lowan said. “Unless you would rather leave now and report this to the county sheriff.”

“There’s not a whole lot to report, yet.” He eased the car down the hill, pulled roughly in line with the other cars, and looked at the tracker box. “The dog food truck must have gone around to the other side of the building.”

They stepped out and looked around. Others loitered in the parking lot, talking in groups or smoking. Men and women, some in respectable evening clothes, others in rougher attire. Long shadows streaked across the weedy lot. Lowan led the way toward the building, striding boldly, as if he belonged there.

Marx slunk along beside him, continually glancing at the nearby visitors. “There’s a lot more people here than I was expecting.”

“It is a popular social event. Some come for the betting or the alcohol, others simply for the excitement and the atmosphere.”

Lowan paused, sensing Marx's heightened anxiety. "If you would rather not go inside . . ."

"If we're going to report this to the sheriff, I need something to tell him." Marx wiped his face on his sleeve and took a deep breath. Crowds gave him a strong feeling of claustrophobia, no matter how much effort he put into hiding it.

Lowan pulled the front door open. Marx's tension put similar knots into his own stomach and shoulders.

Inside, a big man blocked their path. "Never seen you before. Who invited you, and what's the password?"

"Langford invited us," Lowan said. "And the password . . ." He touched the guard's mind and found the answer at the front. "Sparkles."

"Alright." The guard stepped aside and motioned them into the large, dim space. Sawdust and straw littered the floor. Animal smells—wet fur and urine—mingled with a cloud of tobacco smoke.

Marx inhaled and held back a grimace. "Is Langford around?"

"He should be here somewhere." The big man snorted, motioning vaguely across the building. "Did he invite you here just to watch his dog lose?"

"Is his dog that bad?"

"The worst." The guard shook his head and turned to acknowledge a new entrant.

Lowan took Marx's arm and guided him away. The crowd was thicker inside, and the constant hum of conversations filled the air, punctuated by an occasional bark.

Marx fidgeted and scuffed his shoe in the sawdust. "How'd you know the password?"

"A lucky guess." Lowan shifted his attention across the tight group of people. He wasn't fond of large crowds, either, but for a different reason. Too much telepathic interference gave him a headache. He couldn't block it all out, and it filled the back of his mind like unfocused background noise. "Shall we explore?"

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“Sure,” Marx said, though his voice was less than enthusiastic. He followed Lowan through the crowd. “No wonder why so many people were standing around outside, the way it smells in here.”

“It is a bit pungent.” Lowan stopped at a fence. On the opposite side of it, a sandy track stretched around in a tight oval. Floodlights cast bright splotches across it. For the moment, the track was empty, and the sand was raked even and smooth. Clusters of people loitered in the wooden stands. Larger groups gathered around a concession stand and a betting counter. “Would you like something to eat?”

“I . . .” Marx hesitated and studied the people in front of the hot dog stand. When he was busy, he often forgot to think about food. Today hadn’t been an exception. “Sure.”

Lowan joined the line and purchased two hot dogs, then gave one to Marx. They moved toward the betting counter. Marx examined his hot dog as if he was unsatisfied about something, but Lowan was too distracted by the crowd to see what Marx thought.

Chalkboards on the wall listed the odds for each dog. Men in rumpled suits gathered around, murmuring and clutching slips of paper. Lowan edged through the spectators, pressing closer to the counter, while Marx hung back and picked at his food.

The betting counter was a little window under a yellowed sign. A gruff-looking man with rolled up sleeves leaned out, reciting dogs and odds from memory, handling bets and making change efficiently. Orderly rows of numbers filled his mind. The line moved forward.

“Which dog belongs to Langford?” Lowan asked.

“Milo.” The bookie laughed harshly. “Unless you like throwing your cash straight into the fire, steer clear. That dog runs worse than a one-legged goose.”

“The dog competes that poorly?” Lowan glanced back at Marx, who had commenced picking at his hot dog. “How often does he run?”

“A couple times a week. Comes in dead last every time. Why does Langford keep entering that mutt? Beats me, you’ll have to ask him yourself.” The bookie shrugged. “But hey, it’s your money,

and I don't mind taking it. What are you betting? The first race starts in a few minutes, so make it quick."

"Two dollars on the favorite." Lowan took the money from his wallet and passed it across the counter. He accepted a slip of paper in return, then stepped away. Others crowded in ahead of him to place their bets at the last moment. He motioned for Marx. "We should find a seat."

"Sure." Marx choked down the last of his hot dog and followed. They moved with the flow of the spectators and found themselves swept into the bleachers. "I guess all we have to do is keep an eye on Milo and see whoever's with him. That's our guy."

Lowan navigated them into an open space several rows up, but with a clear view of the track. They took their seats and waited for the crowd to settle. Voices buzzed. The spotlights gave off an electrical hum, cutting through the fog of cigarette smoke. The hazy effect made the track look distant. He checked the betting slip and found that his money was on Jolly Roger.

Below them, six men walked slim-waisted, long-legged dogs across the track, leading them back and forth and massaging their overmuscled haunches. Each dog wore a numbered vest.

"Funny looking dogs," Marx said. He glanced at the numbers on the boards near the betting window, then back to where a heavyset man in overalls pulled one of the dogs along by the collar. "Milo's the black one, number six in the blue vest."

"The man handling him is not Langford," Lowan said. "That man picked up the dog food from the butcher shop. His first name is Drew."

"Langford can't be far away." Marx shaded his eyes and studied the crowd.

The handlers finished warming up their dogs. One by one, they shoved them into the boxlike structure that functioned as the starting gate. More checks followed to ensure that each dog had been loaded properly and the doors were latched.

"The dogs are in the trap." The announcer's voice crackled over the loudspeaker. The crowd quieted. "Jolly Roger in box one, a strong favorite. Two is Smoke; three, All the Candy; four, Fast

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Patch; five, Danny Boy; and all the way over in number six, our track regular, Milo. Long odds on that one, but miracles can happen.”

After the trap inspection concluded, a woman stepped out and waved a flag. The crowd fell silent, collectively holding their breath and leaning forward, scraps of paper clutched in sweaty hands. Anticipation charged the atmosphere like electricity before a thunderstorm. One of the dogs started whining.

A buzzer rang, and a rabbit-shaped mechanical lure clattered down a track along the inside rail. The trap sprang open. Six greyhounds exploded onto the track.



Chapter VI

“**A**nd they’re off! Jolly Roger breaks well, right on pace with Smoke.” The announcer’s voice echoed above the roar of the crowd. “Trouble in the back. Milo’s nowhere near the mix.”

The dogs shot past the bleachers, paws throwing up sand. A black and white dog pressed ahead, its white face skull-like against a black neck and shoulders. Beside it, a blue brindle vied for the lead, long legs reaching and pumping, head nodding with every stride. Three more followed close behind, forming a tight pack. At the rear, Milo broke into a half-hearted jog.

“Gosh, they’re fast,” Marx mumbled, shifting on the edge of his seat. He leaned forward.

“They are.” Though the bet had merely been an attempt to fit in with the crowd, Lowan couldn’t help hoping that Jolly Roger would win. At the first curve, the blue brindle pulled slightly ahead.

“Coming down the back straight, Smoke is ahead by a whisker . . .” The crowd’s roar drowned the announcer’s commentary. Overlapping shouts of dogs’ names, cheers, chants, curses, and prayers blended into chaotic music.

Their paws were almost silent on the sand, far different from the pounding hooves at a horserace. Lowan gripped his betting slip in both hands and held his breath. The anticipation made his ribs

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ache. He watched the blue brindle gain ground as the rabbit-shaped metal lure rounded the final curve.

While the skull-faced dog stayed tight against the inside rail, the blue brindle ran wide and lost ground. Smoke frantically lengthened his stride and stretched himself further, but Jolly Roger had already reached his top speed. With only yards left, the number one dog held his advantage. The crowd erupted into a crescendo.

“It’s Jolly Roger!” The announcer’s shout squeaked from the loudspeaker. “Jolly Roger takes it home. Smoke a close second, and Danny Boy third. Milo is taking a scenic tour. Somebody go check if he’s still running. He might finally show up by the end of the next race.”

The crowd broke into laughter. The mechanical rabbit disappeared into a box. With nothing to chase, the dogs stopped. Their tongues lolled. Handlers crossed through a gate in the outside rail and unfurled leashes. Drew, not Langford, collected Milo.

Marx looked at his watch. “The whole race was less than a minute. All this . . .” he motioned across the room, “for less than a minute?”

“Depending on the number of eligible dogs, they hold several races per evening.” Lowan clutched his betting slip tightly. It was now worth more than he had paid for it. The crowd around them stood and filed down the steps. Some still whooped and cheered, while others grumbled and tore their betting slips into confetti.

“Huh.” Marx pushed himself to his feet and held his arm across his stomach. His face looked unusually pale. “I think I’ll go outside for a little air.”

“I will visit the betting counter.” Lowan stepped down from the bleachers and followed the stream of winners. Marx disappeared in the opposite direction.

Lowan waited in line. The crowd jostled together. He put his arm against his side to protect his broken ribs and turned around, looking for someone to start a conversation with. A couple waited behind him.

“That poor dog,” the woman complained. “Why do they keep making him run, when he obviously doesn’t want to? Not like all the others.”

“It was the same in the last race,” her companion agreed. “A real shame. The trainer ought to retire him.”

“Milo?” Lowan asked.

“Yes,” the man said. “Bad show, running a dog like that race after race.”

“The trainer must be losing money,” Lowan said. “Why would he continue? If he knows the dog will lose, he must have another reason—”

“Next,” the bookie interrupted.

Lowan set his betting slip on the counter. “What are the odds on Milo?”

“A-hundred-to-one,” the bookie recited. He read the slip. “At two-to-one on Jolly Roger, you won your two bucks back, plus another four.” He counted six and handed it over.

“If someone bet a thousand dollars at a-hundred-to-one, and the dog won, how much would the payout be?”

“That would be . . .” He stared into the distance while the numbers ran through his mind. “A-hundred-and-one thousand. But since we’re talking about Milo, it’ll happen when pigs fly. And I’d put my money on that, first.”

“I see.” Lowan stepped back while the couple moved ahead and presented their slip. He looked around.

Nearby, a man in rough clothing counted a stack of money with a sharp expression, then checked the odds for the next race.

“Excuse me,” Lowan interrupted. “Is there a reason why a trainer would want the odds on his dog to be as long as possible?”

“Sure.” Annoyance crossed his face. He held his finger in the stack of money, marking how far he had counted. “If you bet and win, you win big.”

“But suppose that this dog has little chance of winning. How might a win be arranged?”

“It’s easier to fix a dog to lose than it is to fix it to win. If this dog ran second, and you make the favorite run a little slower, for

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example.” He cleared his throat, stepped back, and resumed counting.

Lowan pretended not to notice the withdraw. “If this dog ran poorly and had no chance at all . . .”

“Dope can only do so much. Unless you want to fix every other dog in the race to lose, you’d need a faster dog.” He looked up from the money and faced Lowan with a questioning glare. “Why so many questions?”

“Just curious.” Lowan backed away. He glanced around, but couldn’t spot Marx in the crowd.



Marx’s stomach wouldn’t settle. He gravitated away from the crowd, finding it easier to breathe among fewer people. Handlers led dogs in different directions. Drew had removed Milo’s vest, revealing a triangular white patch on his chest. Milo lay at Drew’s feet, panting, while several handlers chatted. His tail thumped rhythmically against the floor.

Another handler walked against the flow of traffic and led his dog to a back door. A cool breeze blew in, then the door slammed shut. Marx waited, checked to see if anyone was watching, and followed. More than anything, he wanted a few minutes of fresh air away from the crowd before joining Lowan for the next race.

Outside, the cool air hit him in the face. He breathed deeply, realizing how quickly he’d become accustomed to the smell of the track. The stomachache twisted, combining with slight dizziness. Crowds usually had that effect on him. In this instance, he blamed the hot dog. It tasted odd. He shouldn’t have cared that it probably wasn’t kosher, but some part of him still did. At the moment, the part that cared was his stomach.

He walked farther along a shadowy path. The terrain sloped downward, with a river in the distance. Moonlight flickered off the rippling water. Crickets chirped. Several sheds occupied a sort of a courtyard filled with scraggly weeds. Two men stood nearby, their rough tones muffled by distance. One handed the other a

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leash. A greyhound moved around, sniffing the ground and both men. Its whiplike tail flicked.

The man who had taken the leash pulled the greyhound toward the nearest shed. The dog was night black, and when it turned, the moonlight showed a triangular white patch on its chest.

Marx stopped and looked back uphill. Unless the hot dog had also caused hallucinations, Milo was still inside with Drew



Chapter VII

“That is a fine animal,” Lowan said, speaking to one of the trainers near the track. “How many races has he won?”

“Eight.” The trainer bent over a solid gray dog and scratched his head. The dog’s coat shone. Thick muscles stood out in his shoulders and haunches. “Eight races, so far. He’s one of my best. Be sure to bet on him in the next race. His name is Blue Max.”

“I will.” Lowan held his hand out for the dog to sniff. Blue Max touched him with a cold, wet nose, then licked his fingers. His tail wagged. “What do you think of the possibility of legalization?”

“That would get rid of the betting and the alcohol, and that’s half the fun.” The trainer smirked. “There’d also be more regulations and inspections, and . . .” he scratched Blue Max’s ears again, “that might not be all bad.”

“Would it improve conditions for the dogs?”

“My dogs are treated well,” the trainer objected, raising his voice as if responding to a personal accusation. “Look at him. Blue Max eats better than I do. Do you think a dog that’s been mistreated is going to run his best?”

“It was only a general question.” Lowan projected a sense of calm and tried to bring the situation back under control. “I can see that your dog is in prime condition. I was wondering what happens

to greyhounds when they are no longer able to perform. Do you find new homes for them?"

"I keep mine. Do you think anybody wants to advertise retired racing dogs for sale to the public, when that could get the track shut down? If racing was legal, that wouldn't be such a problem."

"Providing for an unusable dog must be an expense, and surely not every trainer is as conscientious as you. Does everyone keep their retired dogs?"

The trainer's jaw set. He ended the conversation and jerked his dog away, but not before Lowan saw the answer in his mind. There was a farm over the hill that would permanently retire any unwanted dog for two dollars.



Marx stepped behind the corner of a nearby shed. He peered around the edge, straining his ears, but the conversation was too far away. It looked like a sale, and the merchandise was unquestionably a ringer for Milo. The man who had brought the greyhound now strode up the hill unaccompanied. The buyer pulled the dog into the shed.

If the dog was intended as a replacement for Milo, that would make the buyer Langford. Or Calloway, if Marx's suspicions were correct. And it would explain why he'd needed someone else to handle Milo during the race.

More footsteps padded down the hill. A dog collar rattled. Marx chanced another look around the corner. Drew plodded along the path, with Milo following at his side. The man in the kennel doorway—Marx thought of him as Langford—motioned him inside. Drew greeted him and followed.

Holding his breath, Marx stepped out from behind one shed and approached the other. Weeds caught around his ankles, and he stumbled over the rough ground. He refrained from swearing and crept closer. Inside, Langford explained the situation slowly and clearly, as if he didn't expect Drew to understand the first time.

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“Take that Milo down by the river, somewhere out of sight, and tie him up overnight. Tomorrow morning, I need you to take him over the hill. Here’s two dollars.” Money crinkled. “Don’t spend it on anything else. That’s to pay the farmer to take care of the old Milo.”

“But . . . two Milos . . .” Drew’s voice squeaked with confusion.

“Yes, and I don’t want anyone else to know that. The new Milo is going to run in the race tomorrow, and he’ll win. Everyone’s going to be so surprised. And after he wins, we’ll both be rich.”

“Ooh.”

“Go on.” Langford paused, presumably to make shooing motions. “Go hide the old Milo down by the river. And remember, tomorrow morning, take him over the hill and give the farmer the two dollars, but don’t let anyone else see you. Got it?”

Footsteps scuffled. A door creaked, but Marx didn’t see anyone come through the front. The kennel must have had another exit. He edged along the side of the building and peered around the far corner. Drew led Milo down the hill toward the river. Marx crouched down and faced him, barely able to see any movement in the distant darkness. Minutes later, Drew returned alone.

Marx waited until the kennel was quiet. He looked around the front corner again and watched Drew and Langford walk up the hill toward the track. After they were out of sight, he slipped into the shed. Rows of kennels lined either side of a main aisle, with another door at the back. Milo, presumably the new one, stood at his kennel door.

“Hey.” Marx stepped within reach and let the dog sniff his hand through the chain-link kennel door. He found a leash and collar hanging on a peg, slowly opened the door, and slipped the collar over the dog’s head. “Good boy.”

The dog followed him. Marx took him through the back exit and down the hill, moving carefully over the rough ground in the darkness in the same direction he’d seen Drew take earlier. Near the riverbank, nestled in an area hidden by a fallen tree, he found

another black dog lying on the ground and resting his head dejectedly on his paws.

“Milo?”

The tethered greyhound stood and wagged his tail.

“Alright, you two . . .” Marx brought the second dog closer. The greyhounds touched noses and formed a mirror image. Working quickly, he switched collars, leaving the replacement dog on the riverbank and bringing the original back to the shed.

Milo automatically went into his own kennel and sniffed around where the other dog had been. Marx slipped the collar off and hung it on the peg. He closed the kennel door, leaned against it, and let his breath out. His nerves wouldn’t settle.

The shed door creaked when he closed it. Outside, crickets chirped in disconcerting unison. Moonlight cast a strange glow across the path. The breeze, fresh and cool, picked up a little. Tall weeds rustled. Voices and laughter echoed from the track, like a distant party.

Marx preferred the solitude, the crickets, and the dogs. But by now, Lowan must be looking for him. He stepped onto the uphill path, looking down to avoid the rocks, holes, and encroaching weeds as he walked.

“I just gave it to you,” Langford scolded. “How could you lose it?”

“I’m sorry,” Drew whined. “I must have dropped it in the shed.”

Marx froze. He was already too far away from the shed to retreat behind it. Footsteps thudded toward him. Moonlight outlined two men. Their argument abruptly ended, and they stopped in the middle of the path. Marx moved to the side and kept walking, as if he had every right to be there.

“Hey!” Drew shouted. “He was at the butcher shop earlier because he wanted to find the track, and the butcher said he was no good.”

Thank you for reading this free

PREVIEW of *The First Chase!*

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The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

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After an attempted purse-snatching, a frightened woman goes to Lowan for help. Two men are following her, and she wants to know why. The strange emerald found in her purse might provide a clue—until it's appraised as fake. Why does everyone want it so badly?

Book 15: The First Chase

The three members of the insurance racket are still at large, and the last case ended with three new leads. Tracking down the first one brings Lowan and Marx to an illegal greyhound track outside of the city limits, race fixing, and murder.

Book 16: The Second Course

Lowan and Marx track down the second member of the insurance racket, and he's nothing like they expected. Caught between a case of mistaken identity and a prestigious banquet at his restaurant, he agrees to tell them everything he knows—if the killer doesn't get to him first.

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