



# The Second Course

Book 16

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**\*PREVIEW\***

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## Chapter I

Wednesday, May 13, 1931

**G**uido Genovesi straightened the *FOR SALE* sign on his restaurant window. Singing drifted from the kitchen, where Marta and Rosa finished the dishes. A silly song they sang often, something they'd composed about their cleaning routine, their voices blending in cheerful harmony. Tonight, the music weighed him down. He flipped the *OPEN* sign to *CLOSED*.

Selling the restaurant ripped the heart out of his chest. After everything that he'd done to make buying it possible, barely a year ago, and then all the work he'd put into running it, parting with it now was unimaginable. But after the news he'd gotten on Monday night, he had no other choice.

It had been about this same time, two nights ago, when Drew Pratchett burst through the door after closing. The news he brought shattered Genovesi's carefully constructed world: "Franklin Wagner's dead, and the police are raiding the print shop!"

Drew himself wouldn't have understood the significance of the news. He'd been nothing more than Calloway's overweight and dim-witted errand runner. Genovesi didn't have any sympathy for Wagner, either. But the records that had been stored at the print shop left him in a state of panic.

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It had started with a little insurance fraud. A victimless crime, he'd thought. Easy money—enough to buy the restaurant he'd always dreamed of and secure his family's future. But Mercer's ambitions were never satisfied, and then Calloway killed an insurance investigator.

Like it or not, Genovesi was an accomplice to murder. It was far too late to back out.

"Are you finished out there?" Marta called from the kitchen.

"Almost." He moved from table to table, straightening chairs, blowing out the candles in each centerpiece, and checking the white linen tablecloths for stains. Marta had always stood by him, no matter what. Even when they changed their names. But some things, he couldn't explain to her. He didn't want her involved in this.

And now, after everything he'd already put them through, to upend their lives again—

The front door creaked open and slammed, and the bell above it gave an angry ring. Genovesi spun around, half expecting more bad news from Drew, and half expecting the police.

A thin, older man stood just inside the dining room, leaning on a cane. His gray suit looked European and slightly out of date, not quite threadbare, but like an aristocrat fallen on hard times. His face was dark, and his eyes shone with focused hatred.

"Sorry, we're closed," Genovesi said. "You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Guido Genovesi?" The visitor spat the words, emphasizing each syllable with a crackling hiss.

"Yes . . ." He hesitated, sure he'd never seen the man before. "What—"

The swinging cane struck him in the face. Stinging shock sent him reeling back. The visitor whirled the cane again, attacking a decorative wine rack. Empty bottles, since the real thing was illegal, interspersed with fake, leafy bunches of grapes. Glass exploded across the tile floor. The man shouted in Italian, his temper turning the melodic language harsh.

“Stop it!” Genovesi ducked to avoid the cane again. “I don’t understand.”

“Have you forgotten Naples?” He grabbed the wine rack and pulled it over, shattering the remaining bottles. “Did you think I could ever forget?”

“You’ve got the wrong guy.” He backed away, making diffusive motions. “I’ve never been to Italy.”

“Did Isobella mean so little to you?” He whirled the cane again, but slipped on broken glass. By now, he was running out of breath. “My sister died because of you!”

“I don’t know any Isobella. I’m not the Genovesi you’re looking for.” He glanced back. Marta stood in the kitchen doorway, with Rosa peeking from behind her.

“This man is a murderer.” The visitor pointed an accusing finger, raising his voice to carry across the room. “He killed my sister and my father—”

“That’s enough!” Genovesi grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm behind him. He snatched the cane out of his other hand, marched him to the door, shoved him out, and tossed the cane after him. “Don’t ever come back.”

“I swore on Isobella’s grave that I would kill you.” The stranger trembled with rage and bent down to collect his cane. “And I will.”



“**Y**ou play like you’ve got something else on your mind,” Frank said. He stared over a fan of cards held close to his chest, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. “Your bet?”

Orsino Oscuro snapped back to the present and squinted at his own cards. Wednesday night, he found himself involved in a poker game in the back room of a pool hall, not far from his hotel. The competition was friendly, the stakes relatively low, and he hadn’t won or lost any significant amount. He pushed the required number

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of chips to the center of the table. "Apologies, I have other important matters to think about."

"Your loss is my gain." Frank flipped his cards over, showing a full house. "But you've got bigger problems than this, huh?"

"Perhaps you know someone who could help me." Oscuro held nothing but a pair. Billiards clacked in the background, voices mumbled, players holding cues circled the pool table to survey the angles while others gawked. Tobacco smoke hung thick in the air, but the only beverages available were cheap gin and stale beer. Neither were drinkable.

"What kind of a problem?" Frank grinned as he pulled the chips toward himself. He sorted them into stacks.

"I need to kill a man."

Frank choked. An uncoordinated motion scattered his chips. "If you want to hire a killer, you'll have to go someplace a lot rougher than this."

"But this man deserves it." Oscuro surveyed the room. The patrons varied in age. Working men, husbands and fathers, enjoying a sociable evening away from home. The worst offenses here were alcohol, gambling, and the occasional use of strong language. None had the look of hardened criminals.

"Then report him to the police." Frank clanked his chips firmly into place, rebuilding the stacks.

"This was in Italy." Oscuro felt his heartrate increase just from thinking about it. His voice rose. "He killed my father and my sister, destroyed our business, ruined our family name." Genovesi's strange denial burned the worst. Had Isobella truly meant so little to him? "Thirty years, I have hunted for him, and now. . . He denies everything!"

"You found him here?"

Oscuro nodded. "The police in this country will do nothing, and a mere arrest is not the fate he deserves. After thirty years of searching, I would like nothing more than to watch him suffer as I did, to destroy everything he has built. Can you blame me?"

"I suppose not, but I still can't help you." He nudged his chips around, constructing little towers with them. After a pause, his eyes

took on a thoughtful gleam, and he choked on a laugh. “But I know a guy who might.”

“Who?” Oscuro leaned forward and reached to grab Frank’s arm.

“I don’t know him, really.” He jerked away. “I just know where he lives. One of my neighbors, and I never talk to the guy because he gives me the creeps. But whenever his phone rings in the middle of the night, you can bet there’ll be a report of murder in the morning paper.”

“A killer?”

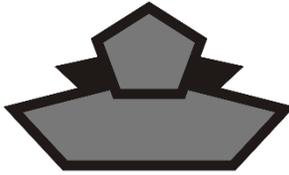
“You’d never guess it from looking at him. He’s short and thin like he never eats. Never says hi, won’t look straight at you, just hurries past and acts like he hates everybody. The quiet type, except he plays the piano sometimes. Not bad, actually.”

“The quiet ones can be the most dangerous.”

“You can say that again. He comes and goes at odd hours, so he can’t have a normal job. At least once a week, he shows up looking like he’s been through one hell of a fight. Since he’s not dead, I have to assume he won, and I’d hate to see what the other guy looks like. Like I said, there’s almost always a murder in the paper later.”

“What is his name?”

“I never asked, but I can give you his address.” Frank reached for a scrap of paper. “He lives in the apartment past mine.



## Chapter II

Lowan sank down against the cab's seat cushions, too exhausted to think straight. All of his muscles ached, several dozen bruises throbbed, and the ribs he'd broken a month ago still made breathing a challenge. After using his energy trying to heal Marx's knee, he had nothing left for his own injuries. A nauseous headache, the byproduct of overexertion, took his appetite away. Food would help his recovery, but he didn't want to think about eating.

The cab stopped in front of a restaurant he'd never visited before. Lowan gave the driver a generous tip, probably more than he had intended. Blurry vision made it difficult to count change. He stepped out and leaned against the cab, struggling to catch his bearings. The restaurant, brick with a large window and striped awning, shared the front of the building with several similar-looking shops.

Rita had invited him. The restaurant, recently up for sale, had caught the eye of a friend of hers who was in the market to buy one. They'd invited him along on an inspection tour. At the moment, all he cared about was not having to cook.

A handwritten *FOR SALE* sign was attached to the glass, just below the restaurant's name. He glanced up at the cursive letters, tracing the lines with his eyes until the name registered.

Genovesi's.

The cab moved away from his hand, leaving him unbalanced and panicky. *Genovesi*, the second name on the list of syndicate members. Large-scale insurance fraud, forged identities, murder. Marx planned to question Genovesi tomorrow, but needed a day off to recover from the previous case. Catching the first syndicate member had almost killed them both.

In the meantime, there should have been an officer keeping an eye on things. He glanced down the block, barely spotting a patrol car parked a few spaces ahead on the opposite side of the street.

Lowan stepped toward the building. Dark shadows moved across the glass. The door flew open, almost in his face. He stumbled back.

"Uncle Lowan!" Rita grabbed his arm and held him steady until his sense of balance returned. "Let me help you inside. This doesn't look like you just did too much walking yesterday. What happened?"

"There may have been . . . a small car accident." He found himself shoved gently into a booth near the front window. Morning sunlight glared. Across from him, a blonde woman with her hair arranged in a wave shared Rita's concerned expression.

"A car accident?" Rita's voice rose. "Again?"

He gritted his teeth. He'd avoided telling her because she would overreact, but she also wouldn't give up without an explanation. "It was not serious. I was trying to back down a hill, but the brakes were not in working order. I bumped into a tree."

One of her eyebrows arched higher. "Whose car?"

"I borrowed it from the parking lot near a greyhound track. It was an emergency at the time, and if the owner comes forward, I will pay for it. But since the car was worth very little, and the location itself was illegal, it is unlikely that anyone will claim it."

"Could it be repaired?"

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“Not after a truck ran into it. The remaining pieces would have fit into my pocket.”

Rita stared. Not being able to read her thoughts left him feeling blind. In this condition, he couldn't do much of anything.

“Well,” Rita said, changing the subject abruptly. “This is my friend, Nancy Carson. She wants to start a bakery, and when she saw this place up for sale . . .”

“I was looking at several other locations, also,” Nancy said. “But either they weren't as close to downtown, or they would need a lot of remodeling to get started. Then I saw this place, and it looked perfect. Just about the right size, a nice location off a main street downtown, and it already has commercial kitchen equipment. But now, I'm not so sure.” She leaned sideways to look past Rita.

Across the room, a man swept broken glass into a pile and sorted through the pieces. Chairs were askew and broken, potted plants tipped over, and dirt strewn across the floor. He glanced over at them, then stood up straight and set the broom aside. “Can I get you anything?”

“I saw the ‘for sale’ sign in the window,” Nancy said, “and I was interested in taking a look at the place, but now . . .” she motioned to the mess. “Is there a reason why you're selling?”

“That had nothing to do with this.” His voice rose, and he stepped toward their booth. “If you're interested in buying, you can't go wrong.”

“Are you Mr. Genovesi?” Lowan asked.

“Yes . . .” Hesitation slid into his voice. “I've owned this restaurant for less than a year, and it just hasn't worked out. I like cooking, but I don't like running a business. This . . .” he motioned behind him, “I don't know. A man came in here last night and just went crazy. Blamed me for things I didn't do, things I never heard of. I don't think he'll be back again, and it's nothing you have to worry about.”

Rita pointed across the table. “He's a detective! He could help you find out what's going on.”

“A detective?” Genovesi stepped back. “I . . .”

“I was not planning on taking a case today.” Lowan gave Rita a sharp glare.

“I’d hire you,” Nancy said. “Just to make sure the restaurant itself isn’t in any trouble that I would end up with if I bought it.”



Detective Lieutenant Marx limped down the hallway of his apartment building, fogged with exhaustion. The details of the morning blurred together. The early meeting with Captain Kramer, Chief Benson, and Sheriff Baker, explaining what had transpired overnight at an illegal greyhound track in the countryside. Then, a short meeting with Lowan to relay the details to him. On a more positive note, Milo, an abused greyhound with no heart for running, found a new home with one of Lowan’s former clients.

Every step made his vision flash red. He could barely put any weight on his right knee, though it was vastly improved since Lowan had given him the magic touch. Earlier in the morning, the pain was severe enough that he wanted to curl up and die. Now, simply sitting with ice on his knee sounded like a more appealing option. Chief Benson had agreed to let him have the day off, and his next case could wait until tomorrow.

Lowan’s expression still haunted him. Worse than exhausted, as if whatever he had done to help Marx’s knee was at the expense of his own health. Predictably, he wouldn’t explain.

Marx turned the corner and stopped. Someone stood at the end of the hall, directly in front of his apartment. A thin man, dark, and probably well past sixty, wearing a modest suit that wasn’t quite threadbare, though it didn’t look new. He leaned on a cane. When he noticed Marx, he raised the cane slightly and waved.

Trying not to limp, Marx approached slowly. He stared, but avoided direct eye contact, and stopped out of reach. The man didn’t appear particularly dangerous. A stranger on his doormat, an unusual occurrence, automatically felt threatening. A door-to-door

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salesman would have carried a sample case of wares. An evangelist would have brought a Bible. This man waited empty-handed.

“Yeah?” Marx didn’t make any effort to be friendly. Anyone standing between him and a piece of ice was an enemy.

The man looked him over slowly, showing disgust around his eyes despite the satisfied smile. The American phrase didn’t match his Italian accent. “One hell of a fight.”

“Yeah.” Marx turned sideways, embarrassed by his appearance. His knee hurt the worst, but he’d also been kicked in the face a few times, as well as just about everywhere else. His coat was stained with graveyard dirt and blood, not all his own. Arriving home late last night, he lacked the energy to properly clean up. And he hadn’t been any more energetic before his morning meeting at police headquarters. He needed a shave, and his hair was matted with dried blood. “That’s my doormat you’re standing on, and I’d like to get through.”

“Of course.” The thin man stepped aside, but not completely out of the way. “I was hoping to hire you. One of your neighbors recommended you. I stopped by last night, but you were not home.”

“Hire me for what?” Marx glanced down the hallway. Most of his neighbors went out of their way to leave him alone. “I think you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“No, you fit his description exactly. He said that you keep odd hours and often return in this condition, and that he regularly reads about your work in the newspapers.”

“What work?” A throbbing headache developed behind Marx’s eyes. He never told any of his neighbors what he did for a living, and the police department was generally careful about how much was shared with the press. He made a lot of enemies, and having too much personal information available to the public could get him killed.

“You’re being modest. He said that you must be very good at what you do, to always survive and never get caught.”

“Get to the point.” Marx leaned against the door, exhausted from standing with all his weight on his left leg.

“I want to hire you to kill Guido Genovesi.”



## Chapter III

“I don’t need a detective.” Genovesi stepped back from the table and threw up his hands in a dismissive, almost panicked gesture.

“I did not want another case,” Lowan agreed. “All I wanted was a cup of tea.”

“Tea . . .” Genovesi glanced around at the others. After they all agreed on tea, he turned away and headed for the kitchen.

“It wouldn’t be much of a case,” Rita said. “Just spend some time at the restaurant and make sure the vandal doesn’t come back.”

“If he does return, what do you expect me to do?” Lowan closed his eyes and exhaled slowly while fighting a dizzy headache.

“Find out why.” Rita’s tone was flat, as if the answer was obvious and carrying it out would be simple. “You could have Uncle Sen watch overnight, and—”

“He wants an extravagant raise and has become increasingly difficult to work with. I would prefer not to call him.”

“Oh.” Rita paused, then turned to whisper with Nancy.

Lowan stopped listening. During the last case, Sen had abruptly demanded five hundred dollars to save Marx’s life, then

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refused to stop a killer without an additional payment. Bringing him into another case could lead to bankruptcy. He never expected to prefer working with Fritz Gallop, who—despite his unbearable arrogance—could usually be persuaded to do just about anything for a mere twenty dollars.

He still needed to pay Sen the five hundred. Tonight, he would deliver cash in an envelope to the worst part of town. Thinking about it turned his stomach bitter.

Two sets of footsteps approached, one softer than the other. Lowan watched. Genovesi carried a teapot across the room, accompanied by a dark-eyed girl just shy of her teenage years. She set the teacups on the table, glanced around, and went to the mess that Genovesi had been cleaning up earlier.

Genovesi's eyes followed her as she used the broom to clean under a table. His expression turned tense. He poured the tea. "About hiring a detective . . ." He set the teapot down. "I just want to know that my family is safe. If you could watch the restaurant until the sale, maybe that wouldn't be so bad. I have one more big catering job that I can't back out of. After that, we plan to leave town, whether or not the place is sold. My wife is already packing."

"Tell me about the man who threatened you," Lowan said.

Genovesi grabbed a chair from a nearby table and brought it to the end of their booth. "I don't know who he is or what he wants. He showed up last night when I was closing the place, yelled at me in Italian, and started breaking things."

"You don't speak Italian?" Rita asked.

"My grandparents did." He huffed and crossed his arms, keeping his posture stiff. "I'm from Milford Falls, and I never thought I'd leave. The most Italian word I know is *spaghetti*. The rest is just an act for the customers. Ha, maybe that's what set him off. My cooking isn't authentic enough."

"Can you describe him?" Lowan concentrated, hoping to catch an image of the suspect in Genovesi's memory. Fragments flashed past, but nothing came into focus.

"He looked Italian." Genovesi shrugged, as if that should have been enough. "Thin, maybe late sixties, and he carried a cane."

Focusing harder caused a twinge like being stabbed between the eyes. Lowan sucked in his breath and winced. He reached for the teacup, but couldn't hold it with his hands shaking. Voices blurred into the background.

"Uncle Lowan!" Rita squeezed his arm. "Are you alright?"

"I . . ." He sat rigidly, bracing his back against the booth while keeping his eyes closed. "I am listening."

"You don't look so well," Genovesi said.

"I was in a car accident last night, and I may have a slight concussion. I was not planning on working today." Lowan took several slow breaths before reaching for the tea again, just to wrap his hands around the warm cup. "Did this man say anything that you could understand?"

"He seemed to think I did something against his family, stole money, messed with his sister, or something like that. Isobella, he said her name a few times. But it sounded like this happened in Italy, and I've never been there. I think he's got the wrong guy."

"Then it's simple," Rita said. "If he comes back again, just tell him that you're not the one he's looking for."

"He didn't seem likely to listen." Genovesi slid his chair back. "Maybe he won't show up again. I've just got to get through tonight's event, and then I'm closing the place for good. If you want to buy it," he stood and motioned toward Nancy, "I'll show you around."

"I would recommend contacting the police," Lowan said to Genovesi. "If this man threatened you and caused significant damage to your business . . ."

"I don't want to complicate things." Genovesi pushed the chair back to the table where it belonged, letting it scrape across the floor. "I just need enough time to leave town."

Rita stood and let Nancy slide out of the booth. They both followed him into the kitchen.

Lowan sipped his tea and focused on breathing slowly. He knew why Genovesi couldn't go to the police. And he couldn't let him leave town.

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“**Y**ou want to hire me to do what?” Marx steadied himself against the door and stared at the stranger, trying to make sure that he’d heard correctly.

“I want you to kill Guido Genovesi.” The man said it plainly, like an ordinary thing. “I would prefer to do it myself, but I’m not as young as I used to be. After thirty years of hunting for him . . .”

Marx stared. “Why?”

“Is that important?” The man fidgeted. “Thirty years ago, in Naples, Guido Genovesi worked for my father and courted my sister. We trusted him and treated him like a member of our family. He robbed us blind and left my sister pregnant and unwed. My father died from shock the moment he heard the news, and my sister died in unbearable disgrace within two years. The child did not survive infancy. Do you see now . . .” he grabbed Marx’s arm, pleading, “why I must repay him for what he has done?”

“How do you know it’s the same guy?” Marx jerked away and brushed himself off. “That was a long time ago, and there could be more than one man with that name.”

“It has to be him. After so long, so many years of searching, it has to be him.”

Marx went through his pockets and took out his little spiral-bound notebook. “What’s your name?”

“Why do you need to know that?”

“Because I like to know who I’m working for.”

He stepped back while fidgeting with his cane. “How much do you charge?”

“That depends on how hard the job is. That’s why I need to know more about what’s going on before I can give you an estimate. Where do I find this guy? How do I get in touch with you?”

“He owns a restaurant—”

“Write the address.” Marx shoved the notebook and pencil at him. “And your phone number.”

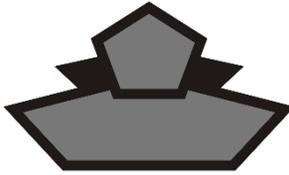
The man opened the notebook to a blank page and started writing. “How long will it take you to decide?”

“I’ll give you a call later tonight.” He took the notebook back and flipped it to another clean page, folding the cover and the man’s scribbling to the inside. Hopefully, the police laboratory could get some decent fingerprints off of it, along with a handwriting sample.

Talking about murder wasn’t a crime, and the Italian would deny everything. If he could get the man to pay him for it, he’d arrest him on the spot.

“You’ll take the job?” He sounded pathetically hopeful.

“I said I’d look into it,” Marx scolded. “For now, stay away from this guy Genovesi. If he sees you and gets spooked, that would make my job harder. And then I’d have to charge you more. I’ll call you tonight.”



## Chapter IV

“I think this would be a wonderful location,” Rita said. Her voice rose cheerfully. She and Nancy returned to the booth after a tour of the kitchen. Genovesi accompanied them and brought a basket of warm rolls, fresh from the oven.

“I do like it, but . . .” Nancy hesitated.

Lowan poured himself another cup of tea, letting the conversation flow around him without joining it. Simply taking a few quiet moments to breathe dulled the headache. The tea warmed his hands and his stomach. He reached for a roll, buttered it, and ate it slowly. Rita and Nancy imagined décor and menu possibilities, illustrating their chatter with sweeping motions and giggles.

“Just one more night.” Genovesi brought the chair from the table and sat at the end of the booth again. He nudged Lowan’s arm to get his attention. “I hate to back out on a commitment, and they paid in advance, so I can’t cancel it. As long as that nutcase doesn’t show up again, everything will be alright.”

“What kind of event?”

“The Old Ladies’ Embroidery Guild is having a banquet.” Genovesi stared through the window. “Planning and raising funds for some sewing project they’re putting together next month.”

“‘Old’ is not part of their title, and I think they would object to the suggestion.” Lowan helped himself to another roll.

“Well, they are old. Most of them, anyway. They’re also the wives of all the big businessmen and politicians, and their group does a lot of notable charity work, so if anything goes wrong, it’ll be all over the papers. You can bet on that.”

“If you are planning on closing the restaurant and leaving town tomorrow, a little bad publicity should make no difference.”

“I still don’t like it. And I don’t want anyone to get hurt. That’s the thing. I . . . I never wanted to hurt anybody.”

“Are you referring to the event tonight, or something in the past?” Lowan focused, sensing more. Not quite clear, but the headache didn’t return.

“Just tonight.” He spoke firmly and faced the window again. When his eyes settled on the police car farther down the block, his expression tensed. “Are you planning on staying?”

“If Rita and Nancy insist, I will. But in this condition, I cannot promise to help in any tangible way.”

“Fair enough. Let’s hope it’s the most boring meeting the old ladies ever put on.”



**M**arx shoved the notebook into his pocket and watched the old Italian shamle away, his cane tapping on the tile floor. He still didn’t look dangerous, but that kind of obsession could prompt a man to do anything. Marx almost felt a little sorry for him.

His aching knee forced him to shift his weight again. There wouldn’t be time for ice. Grumbling, he limped down the hallway to the next apartment and pounded on the door. The thudding echoed louder than he had intended. Shuffling sounds and hushed voices drifted from inside.

The door opened partway. A man peered out, dressed in shirtsleeves. Ordinary, average build, maybe less than thirty, with

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an honest kind of face that easily hid nefarious intentions. Recognition and panic showed simultaneously.

Without thinking, Marx stuck his foot in the door. It slammed against his knee.

“Ow!” The volume of his own yell startled him. He gripped the doorframe while his vision flashed. Breathing hissed between his teeth. “*Dammit*, that hurt.”

“Sorry.” The man inside backed away with his hands raised. The apartment had a similar layout to his own, with an inconveniently narrow entryway.

Marx trembled from the shock. Keeping his balance was far harder than he expected. He finally caught his breath, gripping the doorframe with white knuckles. “I only wanted to ask you a question.”

“A . . . question?” The man sounded on the verge of nervous laughter. His wife peeked from the kitchen doorway behind him, a cute blonde with a little nose like a rabbit’s. Marx guessed that they were newly married.

“Just a question.” Marx shifted his stance to face the man and stepped through the doorway, keeping close enough to the wall to lean on it if he needed to. As badly as his knee hurt, he could barely hobble again. Pain made his voice hoarse. “Did you send me a customer? An old Italian guy?”

“He showed up?” The man studied him, moving his eyes across Marx’s bruised face, stained coat, and obviously injured knee. “It was just a joke. I didn’t think he was serious. You’re not mad, are you?”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. I called him Orsi, and he called me Frank, and that was it—”

“You’re Frank, huh?” Marx hopped farther inside. “Where’d you meet him?”

“The back room of The White Eagle, 26<sup>th</sup> Street, downtown.”

“Never been there, but I’ve heard of it.” Marx paused to think. He doubted that Frank knew any more, but that was enough of a start.

“Are you going to take the job?”

“I haven’t decided yet. He wouldn’t give me enough information.” Another round of dizziness forced Marx against the wall. His heartbeat pounded in his knee. He swallowed hard and put weight on it anyway. “And for future reference, I don’t usually do freelance work.”

Frank edged forward. “Rough night last night? Another job? We heard you get home late.”

“Yeah.” Marx tried to step back, but stumbled again. The wall wouldn’t hold him, and he didn’t like how close Frank was getting. Even with the door open behind him, the narrow entryway felt like a trap.

A blurry motion in the kitchen doorway made him flinch. His knee folded. A sudden shock jolted through his nerves, and he found himself sitting on the floor. Frank’s wife stood over him, holding a plate. She made little squeaky sounds and fidgeted.

The smell of chocolate cake ignited something maddening in his brain. He’d barely eaten anything for three days, except for a hot dog that hadn’t stayed down. Willpower wouldn’t keep him from passing out.

More motions whirled around him. Frank brought a chair from the kitchen and lifted Marx into it, including a not-so-surreptitious pat-down that located his shoulder holster. Marx shoved Frank’s hand away.

“Do you want a piece of cake?” Frank’s wife leaned over him and held out the plate. The bare light bulb above her made her hair glow angelic golden. “I baked it yesterday.”

He took the plate and fumbled with the fork, barely aware that reaching exposed his wrists—both scraped raw from jerking against handcuffs. The woman standing over him stared with big eyes.

Starvation made him forget his table manners. Marx never paused to taste the cake. The instant sugar rush steadied his hands and cleared his head. He hadn’t realized he’d been suffering from a low-grade headache until it disappeared.

## THE SECOND COURSE

Frank offered him a mug of coffee in exchange for the empty plate. “Don’t you eat when you’re working?”

“Sometimes when I’m busy, I forget. Or I’m too tired to cook.” Marx drank the coffee in gulps, enjoying the warm, settled feeling in his stomach. “Thanks. That was good.”

Frank and his wife exchanged relieved glances. The refreshments were undoubtedly a *please don’t kill us* peace offering.

“So, uh, what can I call you?” Frank sounded like he was trying to make a casual conversation, but his voice squeaked higher than it should have.

“Joe.” He didn’t usually give out his first name, but it was common enough to practically be anonymous, and Frank wouldn’t be able to look up anything more about him. It was also simpler than remembering an alias.

“Alright, Joe. Your job last night, anything I’ll see in the papers?”

“This one was out in the country.” He finished the rest of the coffee and handed back the empty mug, then touched his knee gently. It still felt hot and swollen. “You know where the greyhound track is, in an old mill west of here?”

“Sure.” Frank inched closer, his expression lighting up over a point of common interest. “I’ve been out there a few times. Got any tips?”

“Don’t go there tonight.” Marx stood and tested his weight on his knee, surprised by how dramatically a few bites of food had improved his condition. “The sheriff is getting ready to raid the place.”

“Thanks, I’ll pass the word around.” He moved back to give Marx room to leave. “You’re not mad about me slamming the door, are you?”

“Just don’t do that again.” Marx pulled his hat brim down and stepped out.

The door banged shut behind him. Excited voices mumbled beyond it, likely Frank and his wife congratulating each other for their quick thinking in the face of deadly danger



## Chapter V

The police car down the block hadn't moved. Lowan watched through the window. The street received a decent amount of traffic, both cars and pedestrians. Rita and Nancy almost had a color scheme worked out and began to discuss menu options as seriously as if the fate of the world rested on their choices.

"The embroidery guild will be here to start setting up soon." Genovesi checked his watch. "I don't know how much they'll be bringing, but they rented the whole restaurant for their event. I should start getting things ready in the kitchen."

"If the restaurant is closed for a private party, then . . ." Rita looked confused for a moment. "Do we have to leave?"

"If your offer to buy the restaurant is serious, you can stay as my guests." He glanced toward Nancy. "This group thought the location was convenient. If everything goes okay, they might hold their next event here, too. This might be your restaurant by then."

"In that case, I'd love to stay." Nancy settled back in the booth. By now, they had eaten all the rolls. "Could we order lunch while we're waiting?"

"Sure." He brought the menus. "Anything you want, on the house."

## THE SECOND COURSE

Lowan took the menu, but didn't spend much time studying it. At the moment, he wasn't feeling very particular.

"You're sure you don't want to call Uncle Sen to help watch the place?" Rita asked.

"Absolutely certain." Bringing Sen to mind upset his stomach again. He still needed to visit the bank to withdraw the five hundred dollars. Later in the evening, he would have to deliver it to the disreputable speakeasy where Sen spent his evenings. "I have an errand to run shortly, but it will only take a few minutes."

"Is it something I can do?" Rita set her menu aside.

"It is a small matter at the bank. I would prefer to handle it personally." He didn't want to explain the full details to her, even though she usually handled his money.

"Alright. Is there anyone else you want to call to help watch the restaurant? Joe, maybe?"

"He has the day off, and I would not impose." He slid out of the booth and stood, pleased to find that sitting for several hours had recharged some of his energy. But that didn't improve how he felt about the errand. Going to the bank now would ensure that he returned before the event setup began. "I will not be gone for very long."

He stepped outside and glanced down the street. A taxi stopped in front of him, and he counted it as a lucky coincidence. The cab's current customer paid the driver and climbed out. Lowan stepped closer, intending to take the cab the moment it was vacated.

Recognition hit them at the same moment. Tom Nanning, Rita's brother.

"What are you doing here?" Tom's tone wasn't friendly. They had a long and complicated history, and although Lowan had recently cleared him of a murder charge, even that couldn't make up for Tom's other grievances.

"I originally intended it to be only an early lunch, but it may turn into a case." Lowan stepped back, trying to not frighten Tom by standing too close. "And you?"

“The Old Ladies’ Embroidery Guild is having a meeting, and as usual, I got stuck covering it for the paper.” He grumbled under his breath and turned away. “I’ll be here the whole evening.”

“Rita is inside,” Lowan said, but Tom stalked away without saying anything more. The restaurant door slammed. Lowan climbed into the vacant cab and asked for the bank.



In his own apartment, Marx called a cab. In the few minutes before it arrived, he drank the last of a pint of almost sour milk, shaved, and washed his hair in the kitchen sink. He didn’t have time to ice his knee or wash the stains out of his coat, but what he had accomplished still improved his mood.

The cab dropped him off at the back of the police station, closer to his own office and with fewer steps to climb. Entering through the rear hallway, he collided with Detective Schneider.

“Hey, Lieutenant.” Schneider stepped back, his expressive face betraying confusion. “We were told you wouldn’t be in today.”

“I didn’t think so either, but something came up.” Marx took his notebook out of his pocket, held it carefully by the edges, flipped through it until he found the page with the restaurant’s address, and memorized it. The location wasn’t far away and wouldn’t be hard to find. He copied the telephone number onto a different page and tore it out, then handed the notebook to Schneider, still keeping the cover folded to the inside. “Could you run this down to Malone? There’s some fingerprints on the cover that aren’t mine. They belong to a guy named Orsi, and I’d like to know what that’s short for. He left some handwriting in there, too. I’d take it downstairs myself, but my knee is killing me.”

“Sure.” He accepted the notebook carefully, as if it might bite him, then resumed staring at Marx. “What happened last night? It sounded like a huge bust, and you got all the credit.”

“I’ll tell you later.” He touched Schneider’s arm and stepped past him. “Is the captain in?”

“Last time I checked, and he wasn’t in a good mood.”

## THE SECOND COURSE

“He never is.” Marx turned away and braced himself. His neck and shoulders automatically became sore. He always needed an extra moment to get a grip on his nerves before talking to Captain Kramer.

Schneider’s footsteps echoed down the hallway. Marx limped in the opposite direction, past his own office, past Chief Benson’s, and stopped. Kramer’s door had a window, and it showed Kramer sitting at his desk, leaning over some papers with a serious expression. He still wore a splint on his right wrist. A week ago, a criminal wielding a harpoon had struck him, resulting in a small fracture that made Kramer even more irritable than usual. Marx could hardly believe that it had only been a week. A lot had happened since then.

Kramer glanced up suddenly, glared through the window, and made an impatient motion with his brick-sized left hand. Marx stepped inside, but didn’t sit. He kept all his weight on his good leg, edged closer to the desk, and looked down.

“Well?” Kramer’s voice barked louder than necessary. He was a square-faced Germanic blond, broad shouldered, and a foot taller than Marx when standing. Even seated, he still seemed to be looking down at him. He never smiled. “What are you doing here?”

“I . . .” Whatever preparation Marx took to steady his nerves never worked in an actual confrontation with Kramer. Everything he did always turned out to be wrong somehow. Stuttering would get him yelled at again. “I know I wasn’t planning to talk to Guido Genovesi until tomorrow, but something came up. Somebody’s trying to kill him.”

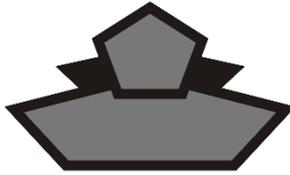
“Sit.” Kramer pointed at the chair, speaking sternly as if giving orders to a stubborn dog. “You were supposed to go home and take care of your knee. How could anything come up?”

Marx dropped into the chair and stretched his leg out. “I did go home, but I guess my neighbors noticed there’s a murder every time my phone rings, and they sort of came to the wrong conclusion. And then an Italian guy named Orsi showed up . . .” He explained the situation as briefly as he could, minimizing his own involvement and what he’d done to reinforce his neighbors’

misconception. “I think I should talk to Genovesi today instead of tomorrow. Orsi might not be dangerous, but he could still spook Genovesi into running. Maybe, if . . .” He trailed off and looked down, waiting for the verdict.

Kramer glared. His large moustache hid most of his expression, and his eyes never showed anything but ice. Marx held his breath while the strain tore at his nerves.

“You’re in no condition to handle this alone.” Kramer’s pronouncement was firm and final. “Take Schneider with you. And no matter what else comes up, you’re off tomorrow.”



## Chapter VI

“Tom!” Rita shouted and waved, inviting him to their table. “What are you doing here?”

He slid into the booth across from her, where Lowan had sat earlier. His shoulders slouched, and his expression looked somewhat resentful. “A story for the paper.”

“About the crazy man who broke the wine rack last night?” She glanced across the room. By now, Genovesi and his daughter had the mess almost removed, but the rack looked oddly barren without any bottles. Rosa tried to rearrange enough of the fake grape bunches and leaves to hide the emptiness.

“No.” He followed her glance, also turning to stare at the empty rack. “I didn’t hear anything about that. I was here about the . . .” he lowered his voice and coughed a little, as if he was embarrassed to admit it, “the embroidery meeting.”

“That’s a story?” Nancy asked. Rita introduced them, and Tom reached across the table to shake her hand.

“Yeah,” Tom said, “and I don’t know why I’m the one who always gets stuck writing about it, but I end up covering this event at least once a month. It’s usually hard to come up with more than two sentences. ‘The old ladies met at the library or some local

restaurant. They talked about embroidery.’ How am I supposed to make that sound exciting enough to read?”

“Then why does the newspaper always send a reporter to write about it?”

“Because of who’s involved.” Tom grumbled and rubbed his face. The teapot in front of them caught his attention. He touched it, but by now, it was empty and cold. “One of the most influential members is Mayor Lamb’s mother. Another is Mrs. Brannigan, Tully Brannigan’s wife. Of course, they want to see their names in print as often as possible, and Editor Wilson is only too obliging.”

“Oh.” Rita sat up straighter. Tully Brannigan was one of the top businessmen in town, and he took part in a colossal amount of charity work to bolster his name and popularity. Two months ago, he had sponsored and organized the St. Patrick’s Day parade and related charity events.

“Can I get some coffee?” Tom waved for Genovesi before turning his attention back to Rita. “What’s this about a crazy vandal?”

“A man showed up last night and attacked Mr. Genovesi with a cane. He smashed the wine rack all to pieces.” Rita relayed the details to Tom, making them sound as extraordinary as possible.

“Rita’s uncle, the detective, was here earlier,” Nancy added. “I’d like to hire him to investigate, just to make sure the restaurant itself isn’t in any trouble that I would end up with if I bought it.”

“He is a good detective,” Tom admitted, though he sounded somewhat reluctant. He asked more questions about the restaurant, the attack, and Nancy’s plans for a café and bakery, while scribbling his thoughts in his notebook. Genovesi brought Tom’s coffee and refilled the teapot.

The front door squeaked open. A distinctive elderly woman strolled through with the regal posture of a queen, wearing an ivory dress with lace gloves and a pearl brooch. A wide-brimmed hat shaded her face, matching ivory accented with violet feathers.

Genovesi hurried to greet her. “Mrs. Lamb, how wonderful to see you again.”

## THE SECOND COURSE

“You do have such a charming little restaurant,” she said with a gracious smile. A man in a chauffer’s cap stepped in behind her, loaded down with boxes. She directed him with a wave. “You may set those over there.”

A second woman pushed through the door, leading her own team of luggage handlers. She was considerably younger, perhaps early thirties, sporting a plum-colored suit dress with sharp tailoring and gold accents. She surveyed the room with fierce eyes and motioned briskly, giving orders in a loud voice. The front half of the dining room quickly resembled the baggage area of the train station.

Tom leaned over the table and whispered, “That’s Mrs. Brannigan.”

Rita watched the unloading, surprised by the sudden storm of activity. Floral arrangements and centerpieces, ornately embroidered tablecloths and napkins, banners, even a podium. “I didn’t know the event would be this big.”

“This is a bit bigger than usual,” Tom said. “Most of the time, they meet to talk about embroidery. But I think this one is partly a fundraiser for some charity event next month.”

“That will give you more to write about.” She turned to glance through the window again, wondering how much more still needed to be unloaded.

A man in a gray suit stared through the glass.

Genovesi stopped at their booth again. “Need any more coffee?” He started to reach for Tom’s mug, but the man in the window caught his attention. He choked on a gasp and froze. “That’s him!”



“P ark here,” Marx said. Schneider drove, since it would have been awkward for Marx to manage the pedals with the wrong foot.

Because he hadn’t originally been on the schedule today, Sergeant Sanducci had beaten him to the black unmarked Model A

he normally used. That left him with no other option but a very clearly marked patrol car.

“Are you sure you want to walk that far?” Schneider pulled into a spot at the curb almost two blocks before the restaurant. A cluster of vehicles ahead prevented them from parking any closer.

“It’s better than having this car scare our guy away.” Marx climbed out, slammed the door, and limped a few steps. After a little movement, walking became easier. He couldn’t read the address numbers of the businesses in the block ahead from this angle, but women in fancy dresses and hats streamed in and out of one in the middle, followed by chauffeurs and servants loaded down with boxes.

Schneider motioned. “Is that the place?”

“Probably.” Marx paused, using his knee as an excuse. He didn’t like crowds. The obviously higher social ranking of this particular group made him even less inclined to approach. Finding a back way into the restaurant would have been preferable, but he didn’t want to look like an idiot in front of Schneider. As another blond German, Schneider was one of Kramer’s favorites. And probably his spy, eager to tattle on any breach of procedure.

Marx narrowed his shoulders, sucked in his breath, and stepped through the streaming crowd, acting at first as if he wanted to pass. A closer look confirmed that this was Genovesi’s restaurant. He grumbled and gritted his teeth, wondering how he would even get in to talk to Genovesi. Schneider kept close behind him.

He sidestepped around another sweating chauffeur with a heavy box. On the opposite side of the crowd, he almost stumbled over the Italian man who had tried to hire him earlier—Orsi.

Thank you for reading this free

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# Other Books by S. E. Grosskopf

## **Book 1: Lowan's Checkmate**

Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

## **Book 2: Shamrock Hunt**

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

## **Book 3: Murder on Harrisonville Road**

After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

## **Book 4: Orchid Hunter**

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

## **Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery**

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

**Book 6: The Unicorn Staff**

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

**Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks**

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a traveling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

**Book 8: The Starmaster**

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

**Book 9: Murder in the Script**

A movie is being filmed in Milford Falls. The script might solve an old crime for which an innocent man was framed, if the real murderer doesn't stop the production first.

**Book 10: Murder at Woodward Retreat**

Lowan and Marx take a vacation at a cabin in the woods. But their plans are disrupted when the woman in the next cabin claims that she saw her husband kill a man.

**Book 11: The Pigeon Wing Murders**

A wounded carrier pigeon with a coded message, a train robbery, and a stolen racehorse add up to one of Lowan's strangest cases yet.

**Book 12: The Mattison Matter**

When Tom Nanning is framed for murder, Lowan must work quickly to clear his name. He finds himself enmeshed in a case of corporate espionage involving the radio company he works for, and misused city funds linked to the mayor's office.

### **Book 13: The Unicorn Curse**

When a madman starts killing the remaining members of the *Bearance* crew with a harpoon, Lowan and Marx begin to suspect that Teddy Bear hadn't been aboard the ship when it sank. To find the truth, Lowan goes undercover at a secret million-dollar auction aboard the killer's luxury yacht.

### **Book 14: Emerald Deception**

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.

### **Book 17: The Third Conspirator**

The third and final member of the insurance racket proves to be the most elusive and dangerous of them all.

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