

FAKER



GORDON KORMAN

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CHAPTER ONE

The dog is enormous—a purebred Great Dane, every inch a champion. His coat is a silvery gray, thick and shiny. His name is Lord Gladstone, who Dad says was a British prime minister from way back in the day. That makes sense because the one word that describes this animal is *dignified*. His massive head is held high, reaching all the way to my shoulder and almost up to Dad's.

The sleek body is motionless, even though we're in the middle of an open field, with endless directions to explore and butterflies to chase. Lord Gladstone is above all that.

"Some training, huh, Trey?" Dad observes. He's holding a leash, but it's slack. The dog is the picture of self-control.

"He's awesome," I agree.

The helicopter appears as a dot in the sky, growing larger and more detailed as it approaches. The wind comes up as the craft hovers briefly overhead, then begins to descend. I raise my hands to my ears, but the roar doesn't bother Lord Gladstone. He doesn't move a millimeter, except for the slight rustling of his ears.

The chopper comes down on a flat section of grass about forty yards in front of us. We hang back as the motor dies and the rotor slows and stops. Mr. McAvoy unfolds himself

from the passenger seat of the bubble and starts toward us. I've met him a couple of times before. Rudy, my roommate at the Spealman School, is his son. The McAvoy's are pretty rich. That's not unusual for Spealman, which is a fancy boarding school. I've gone to a lot of schools like that. My family isn't rich, but Dad needs to be close to people who are. It's important for his line of work.

Mr. McAvoy walks over to meet us, but his eyes never leave Lord Gladstone. "Well, you weren't kidding about *him*. He's really something. I've never seen a dog who could keep his composure through a helicopter landing."

My father sticks out his hand. "Parker Whitfield—Junior to my friends."

Dad's full name is Parker Whitfield II, which makes me Parker Whitfield III. Those weren't our names four months ago, and they won't be our names four months from now. But it works, because no matter what we call ourselves, he's always Junior and I'm always Trey.

Mr. McAvoy shakes hands, first with Dad, then with me. He even shakes with Lord Gladstone, which seems to please the man to no end. "What a beautiful animal!" he exclaims.

Mr. McAvoy then inspects the Great Dane like a man who's used to being around dogs but isn't really an expert on them. That's exactly what we were hoping for. As Dad always says, the intersection of too much money and too little know-how is the sweet spot of our family business.

Dad hands over a thick file folder containing Lord Gladstone's pedigree papers and other documents about his history.

Mr. McAvoy skims through the papers. “I’ve had dogs my whole life, but I can’t say I’m familiar with the show circuit. Seems like a solid investment, though.”

Dad nods confidently. “There are prizes to be won, for sure. But the real money will come in breeding fees once he’s a champion.”

“Yeah? You really think he’s got what it takes?”

“We use only the best trainers and our handlers are top-notch,” my father assures him. “It will happen with this one. He’s special.”

At that moment, Lord Gladstone stands taller, as if proving Dad’s statement.

Mr. McAvoy stays with the dog a little longer, peering and occasionally poking. The Great Dane bears this with restraint, like a movie star who has to put up with the paparazzi every now and then. At last, McAvoy takes out a check and hands it over to Dad. “My investment in full.”

I’m amazed at how fast it disappears into the pocket of my father’s blazer.

Dad beams. “You won’t regret this. The next time we see each other, it will be in the winner’s circle at Westminster.”

We shake hands again and Mr. McAvoy asks me to give his best to Rudy.

“Yes, sir. Will do,” I assure him, keeping my grip firm and looking him directly in the eye. Dad actually made me practice that before the helicopter came.

“You have to convince them you *belong*,” he told me. “If they think you’re part of the club, the sky’s the limit.”

Mr. McAvoy gets back in the chopper and the three of us—me, Dad, and the Great Dane—watch it take off and disappear into the distance.

Dad pats his pocket. “Another satisfied customer.”

“Where to now?” I ask. “Back to Spealman?”

“Soon. First we have to get rid of the mutt.”

I stare. “He isn’t ours?”

“Are you kidding? What would we do with a dog?”

“But the dog show! The winner’s circle at Westminster!”

My father smiles—a warm, friendly smile. It’s honest and open and makes people like him and trust him. That’s usually a mistake.

“We don’t have to *own* a show dog. We just need marks like McAvoy to think we do. This dog’s a rental. We have to get him back to the agency before they charge us for an extra half day.”

I don’t know why I’m so surprised; I should know my father by now. “You *rented* Lord Gladstone,” I say.

He nods. “The dog’s an actor. I know a guy who rents out trained animals for TV commercials. That’s where I got him. And his name isn’t Lord Gladstone. It’s Ernie.”

My father is a genius, but not at science or art or inventing a new app that changes the world. His gift is in separating people from their money. Mr. McAvoy thinks he’s investing in a show dog. But since there *is* no show dog, what he’s really doing is handing money over to Dad.

Basically, my father is a con man, a swindler, a flimflam artist. I know that sounds bad, but he’s never tried to keep it a

secret from my sister or me. That's why our names change and we move so often. What he does is against the law. If he gets arrested, he'll go to jail and Arianna and I will probably wind up with Child Protective Services. That's a scary possibility, but believe it or not, I don't think about it too much. Dad is good at what he does, and that includes being good at not getting caught. When a scheme is over, we move on. Arianna and I don't question it because it's the only life we've ever known.

It's not for everybody. Our mother couldn't hack it, and that's why she went her own way shortly after Arianna was born. I barely remember her, and Arianna never knew her at all. Dad is all the family we've ever needed. He looks after us when we're sick and puts Band-Aids on scraped knees. Maybe he doesn't bake our birthday cakes, but he always remembers to order them. We haven't been neglected. We've always been happy kids.

There are other words for *con man*: *crook*, *thief*, *criminal*. But I never think of Dad that way. If you win on *Jeopardy!*, nobody thinks you're being sleazy because you used your brain to make money. Besides, Dad only takes money from people who have tons of it—guys like Mr. McAvoy, who ride helicopters because they consider themselves too important to waste time in traffic. That's why I'm always sent to fancy private schools like Spealman. It's to meet rich kids with rich parents and introduce them to my dad. *Marks*, he calls them. It sounds better than *victims*. And anyway, they can afford it.

Dad opens the door and Lord Gladstone obediently crams himself into the back seat of the car. Even though I know the

truth, I can't bring myself to think of him as Ernie. Most dogs hang their heads out the window and drool into the breeze, but not him. He sits up straight on the floor, his huge head reaching almost as high as the dome light.

"He sure looks like a real champion," I comment.

My father laughs. "Of course he does. Attention to detail—that's everything in this business."

These are the moments I love the most—when it's just the two of us, and Dad's telling me some of the tricks of his trade. It's unspoken, but I'm definitely going to be his partner one day, so it's important for me to learn how he thinks. Plus we don't get to spend a lot of one-on-one time together, since I'm always away at boarding school.

On the way back to Spealman, we veer into an outer suburb of Boston and drop Lord Gladstone off at a small building with a sign reading CRITTERSTARS—FURRY AND FEATHERED TALENT. Dad takes the Great Dane in and settles up with the guy he knows. That's another thing about my father: He always "knows a guy" who can provide exactly what we need at exactly the right time. It's kind of Dad's superpower.

The Spealman School is less than an hour away, but it might as well be in another world. Picture Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother's place, only instead of a house, somebody built a whole campus of stately redbrick buildings with lead-paned windows. Dad always pauses at the wrought iron gates to drink in the panorama of old New England prep school charm. To the outside world, he looks like a parent who is puffed up with pride that he can send his son to this storied place of learning.

In reality, he's breaking his arm patting himself on the back that he has an "in" with a place where practically everybody is rolling in money. As a Spealman parent, my father is like a fox with an all-access backstage pass to the henhouse. And that access is me.

We pull up to the Ralph Waldo Emerson Dormitory, where I share a room with Rudy.

"Home sweet home," Dad announces cheerily.

I'm not so happy. The only downside of boarding school is I don't get to spend that much time with my family. I miss Dad, and it's never a bad idea to keep an eye on my kid sister. She has kind of a wild streak.

"I guess I won't be seeing you for a while," I say ruefully.

He seems surprised. "What are you talking about? I'm picking you up at three o'clock tomorrow. Stuart Attwell's father wants to buy in. I've got him on the hook for sixty percent of Lord Gladstone."

"Didn't you just sell fifty percent to Mr. McAvoy?" I ask.

He grins at me. "If I play my cards right, I'm pretty sure I can sell about five hundred percent of the mutt."

"But isn't one hundred percent—you know—the whole dog?"

He shakes his head. "There's what the marks believe and then there's what's really happening. You have to keep those things separate in your mind. The marks think they're buying a piece of a show dog, but what they're really buying is a piece of nothing. And the beauty of nothing is you can sell as much of it as you want. Five hundred percent of nothing is still nothing."

“But is that—” I almost say *legal*, but I catch myself. That’s not a word we use in my family. Obviously, none of this is legal. “Fair?” I finish.

“Of course it’s fair. The investors want to make money. *I* want to make money. We’re all in this for the same thing. What could be fairer than that? But to make it happen, you have to be *smart*.”

I regard him in admiration. He *is* smart. That’s how he puts food on the table for his family and can pay for expensive schools like Spealman. In my opinion, the life lessons I’ve learned from Dad are a more important education than anything I’ve learned in even the fanciest academies.

I get out of the car and shut the passenger door behind me. “Got it. Thanks, Dad.”

He does offer one piece of advice before he drives off. “If any of your friends start talking about a certain Great Dane around the dorm, do me a favor and change the subject. The last thing we need is these rich kids comparing notes about Daddy’s latest plaything.”