

**THE  
TROJAN  
COLT**



AN ELI PAXTON MYSTERY

THE  
TROJAN  
COLT  
MIKE  
RESNICK



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*To Carol, as always,  
and to Dan Mayer,  
for encouragement and patience.*



# 1.

It was a hot June day. The air-conditioning wasn't working, the phone hadn't rung all day, and the office was starting to feel like the inside of an oven, so I got up, walked out the door, took the elevator down to the ground floor, and stepped outside.

The air-conditioning wasn't working any better on the outside. It must have been ninety degrees, and ninety in downtown Cincinnati, a couple of blocks from the Ohio River, is like a hundred and ten in the desert. In fact, the humidity can make you long for a hundred and ten degrees of what they call a dry heat.

When the Reds are at home most of my favorite eateries are jammed, but the team was busy being rained out in Philadelphia, so downtown was relatively deserted. I considered stopping for a little Skyline chili, which isn't chili at all but is the world's greatest junk food and is unique to Cincinnati, but it was too damned hot to eat—especially chili—so I caught a bus and got off a block from my apartment.

Marlowe was waiting for me. Marlowe's my dog. I don't like him much, and he's not real fond of me, but we're all either of us has, so we put up with each other. He looked as hot as everybody else. He also looked a little tense, or strained, or anxious, so I put his leash on him and we went out for a walk. He relieved himself on Mrs. Garibaldi's petunias, as usual, and she opened her window and cursed at us in Italian, as usual, and Marlowe looked exceptionally proud of himself, as usual, and then we decided only a crazy man and a crazy dog stayed outside in the sunlight on a day like this, so we went back into the apartment.

Marlowe glared at his food until it cringed into submission, but it was too damned hot to eat, and he finally jumped onto my octogenarian couch and began snoring. I sat down on an easy chair, consid-

ered turning on the television, but decided there was probably nothing much on that was worth watching, which meant it was a typical day on cable.

I picked up a Playboy—I'd long since admitted that I didn't buy it for the articles—and began thumbing through it, wondering if Miss August was as hot and uncomfortable under the photographer's lights as I was right where I was sitting, and concluded that she couldn't possibly be.

At some point I nodded off. It was dark when I opened my eyes, and after a minute I realized that the reason I'd awakened was because the phone was ringing. It took me a minute to get up and walk over to it, by which time it had stopped ringing.

I figured as long as I was up, I'd get a beer from the beat-up fridge. I wandered into the kitchen, pulled out a can of Bud, popped it open, and was about to take my first swallow of that beautiful cold fluid when the phone rang again.

I got to it on the third ring.

"Goddamnit, Eli, where the hell have you been?" said a familiar voice.

"Right here."

"I just rang a few minutes ago," said the voice. "There was no answer."

"I was sleeping. It took me awhile to walk over to it."

"Why don't you join the twenty-first century and buy a god-damned cell phone?"

"We owe a gazillion dollars and two-thirds of the world wants to kill us, and you enjoy this century?" I said. "I could have picked a better one out of a hat."

"Yeah, if there was ever any doubt about it, now I know I'm talking to the real Eli Paxton."

"And who the hell am I talking to?" I growled.

"Bill Striker, goddammit!"

That woke me up in a hurry. Bill Striker ran the biggest detective agency in Cincinnati. He had a staff of fifteen, plus a pair of secretaries and a receptionist. Of all the detectives in town, he made the most

money, had the classiest clients, wore the best suits, drove the most expensive cars, and had the prettiest wife and most accomplished kids. More to the point, every now and then he sent a job my way, and, as usual, I was in no position to turn down any acts of largesse, and given the pile of overdue bills on my desk, the largesser the better.

“Hi, Bill,” I said. “Sorry if I seemed groggy for a minute. I was up all night on a stakeout.”

“Is it done?”

“Is what done?”

“The stakeout!” he said in exasperated tones. “Have you been drinking?”

“Not today and not enough,” I said. “I’m just sleep-deprived.” And cash-deprived, I added silently. “Anyway, the stakeout’s over.”

“Good,” said Striker. “I’m in a position to throw you a little work. Pays pretty well for what it is.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Security,” he replied.

“Rock star or athlete?”

“A horse.”

“Okay, it’s my turn to ask you,” I said. “Have you been drinking—or has this horse maybe swallowed some diamonds?”

“He’s worth more than diamonds—potentially, anyway,” said Striker. “I know you live and die with the Reds and the Bengals . . .”

“Hell, everyone dies with the Bengals,” I said.

“But I also know you go out to the track every now and then.”

“Yeah, I do,” I said. “But there’s nothing running at River Downs that’s worth a bodyguard, and besides, your agency’s got a starting lineup that could spot the Bengals two touchdowns and still beat them.”

“And most of them are going to be doing exactly what you’re doing, Eli,” said Striker.

“Okay, I’m wide awake and still mystified,” I said. “Explain, please.”

“You’re right about River Downs,” he said. “But we’re not talking about River Downs.”

“What are we talking about?”

“Try ninety miles south of here,” said Striker. “The Keeneland Summer Sale starts next week. The Striker Agency has been hired to provide security for some of the well-bred yearlings, a few of which will sell for well over a million dollars.”

I’d heard of the sales, of course, even read about them, but ninety miles was as close as someone of my social and financial stature ever got to them. These were the high rollers of the thoroughbred industry, guys who would risk a couple of million to buy a well-bred or good-looking yearling that had never raced, maybe even never been saddled.

“Don’t they have round-the-clock grooms for these babies?” I asked, hoping he’d say no. “I mean, I figure the groom probably sleeps in the stall with the horse.”

“They know how to care for horses,” replied Striker. “They don’t know shit about providing security.”

“Have there been any threats?”

“No one’s going to kill one of these yearlings, Eli,” said Striker, as if speaking to a child. “What they may do, if they can get away with it, is steal one. Then they have two options: put a look-alike ringer in the stall, keep the yearling themselves, and hope he runs true to his pedigree. But in truth that’s awfully far-fetched. What’s far more likely is that they’ll just disable or bribe the groom, take the horse away, and hold him for ransom.”

“I suppose that figures. What breeder wouldn’t pay a quick couple of hundred grand and agree to drop all charges to get his million-dollar yearling back?”

“You got it,” said Striker. “So, you want to bodyguard a colt and his groom for a week? Double your usual fee, room and board comped, reimbursement for gas.”

“Yeah, I’m in. Any idea who I’m guarding?”

“Remember Trojan?”

“Remember him?” I shot back. “Hell, I damned near went broke trying to find a horse to beat him.”

“He was really something,” agreed Striker. “Unbeaten at two, won the Derby at three, Horse of the Year at four, retired with earnings of

almost eight million dollars. He was syndicated for about forty-five million." There was a pause. "Damn! I still remember that Preakness. Stumbled at the start, blocked at the head of the stretch, he didn't get loose until the last hundred yards, and he still came within length of winning it. I hate to tell you how much I lost on that race."

"He was some horse," I agreed. "But surely he's not up for sale."

"No, this is a yearling sale," said Striker. "Besides, Trojan has been syndicated, split into forty-five shares. They can't sell him, just parts of him."

"So who *am* I guarding?"

"The first Trojan colt ever to make it to the auction ring," answered Striker. "I think there'll be two more sold at Saratoga in a couple of months, and there are three fillies up for sale at Keeneland, but most people are hanging on to their Trojans."

"That sounds one step away from being a dirty joke," I said. "When I was a young man, Trojans were—"

"I think they still are," said Striker. "Try to leave your bad taste in Cincinnati."

"When do I leave?"

"Day after tomorrow. I don't suppose you have an e-mail address?"

"Not if you need a computer to have one," I said.

"Figures," he said. "All right, I'll have a messenger drop off the pertinent details at your office tomorrow: where you go, where you stay, who you report to, the usual."

"I'll be looking for it," I said. "And thanks, Bill."

"Happy to do it, Eli. Our personalities may not exactly mesh, but you're a damned good detective. That thing you uncovered when you were looking for the show dog, that was just grade-A work."

"And now I'm bodyguarding a horse," I said sardonically.

"I think you may have found your *métier*," said Striker with a chuckle and hung up.

Marlowe gave me a look that said: So you think guarding a horse is a no-brainer? You just don't know us animals, pal.

In retrospect I should have listened to him.