

CHIMERA

1

Long Odds

With one voice, a giant roar burst from the crowd. The red bay colt Likker swung wide coming out of the far turn and opened his stride, powering out of last place. In a fifth of a second, he was alongside sixth place Monsoon. Two strides more put him neck and neck with Plunder in fourth place. The three-sixteenth home stretch loomed ahead.

Pumping hard, her racing whip upright, jockey Beth Gehenna screamed incoherent encouragement, urging Likker into third, then second place. A hundred yards to go, Likker and Hotshot battled for the lead, first one nose then the other plunging ahead. Fifty yards, forty, thirty, Gehenna shrieking at the top of her lungs, the crowd thunderous. Then victory.

Her heart pounding in her ears, her breath rasping, Gehenna raised her whip high and stood up in the stirrups, basking in the glory of the win. Also-rans loped by, pony riders grabbing slack reins and easing the hot-blooded young Thoroughbreds from gallops to canters and then to ragged trots.

Railbirds holding winning tickets on the long shot colt applauded Likker as he galloped by, his eyes wide and nostrils flared, easing off the pace as Gehenna let him run himself out.

Likker's guide-pony cantered up alongside, the rider signalling his congratulations to Gehenna with a bright smile and a thumbs-up. Even though track employees were prohibited on betting at the pari-mutuel windows, his joy in Gehenna's win was bolstered by the prospect of collecting two-hundred dollars from the backfield bookie that had booked his wager at forty-to-one odds.

“You go, girl!” he shouted, leaning over and snatching the slack right rein, then slowing his own mount to rein in Likker.

Relieved of control over the horse, Gehenna let go her hold on the reins and leaned her knees on the pommel of the saddle for balance. She faced the crowd, both arms raised, beaming at the cheers and applause. Among the throng of spectators, one person caught her eye and held it. Then, as if in slow motion, the spectator’s hand withdrew a gun from under the loose-fitting jacket and aimed it at her.

Horrified, Gehenna gripped the colt’s mane, screaming, “Go! Go!” as the pistol’s report was drowned out by the tumult of cheers.

Restrained by the pony rider, the three-year-old lurched, tossing his head in resentment at the conflicting commands, then bucked and bucked again. On the third buck, the elastic of the saddle’s girth popped, launching Gehenna with the saddle. Her feet flew free of the stirrups. She lost her hold on the colt’s short-cropped mane. Twisting in mid-air, she landed a boot heel squarely on the pony rider’s jaw and knocked him into the path of an oncoming Thoroughbred. Stumbling, the horse pitched his jockey headlong and broke free of the pony rider’s hold on the reins. Free of constraint, the racehorse ran amok among his colleagues, outmaneuvering pony riders who galloped after him.

Gehenna crashed crosswise onto the guide-pony’s saddle, frantically trying for a handhold. Disoriented, she slid to the ground feet first and facing forward, only to be knocked immediately to the ground and trampled by a rowdy Thoroughbred scarcely in the tenuous charge of his jockey.

Hearing the wail of an ambulance siren over the screams of spectators, Gehenna silently prayed it wasn’t coming for Likker, then her world went black.

2

Jimmy Olsen II

Bylined Associated Press, the headline in the *Catskill Daily Sentinel* sports section read, *Likker Spills Gehenna at Big A*. Beneath that, the article lead was *NYPD Hunts Phantom Gunman*.

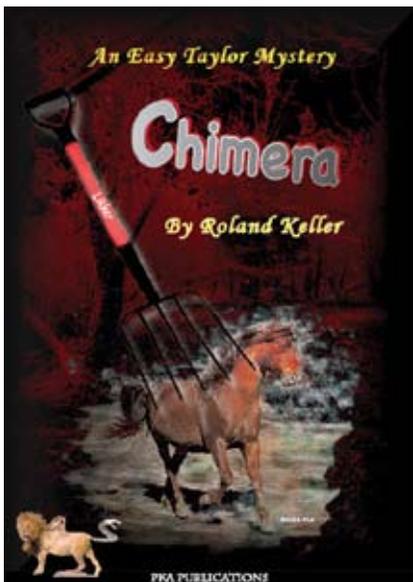
Easy put down the two-day-old paper and looked up at the wall clock. He would have double checked the time against his watch, but that was still vacationing at the pawn broker's shop at the bottom of West Bridge Street. His interview with the *Sentinel's* publisher Anna Gramh was supposed to have been at eleven o'clock, but here it was nearly half-past, and he was still waiting. The waiting was like doing surveillance on an empty apartment. Mind-numbingly boring, even with a stack of *Sentinel* back-issues free for the reading. He peered over at Lucinda Lane hoping to catch her attention and maybe chat with her, but she was totally engrossed in writing whatever potential Pulitzer Prize winning story had her attention.

As if feeling his eyes on her, Lucinda stopped working her keyboard, glanced up, smiled, then back at her screen. A few keystrokes later, she got up and walked over to Easy. "Don't take it personal, sugar," she said, her lingering down-home Georgia lilt sounding soft and gentle. "Y'all just gotta be patient. Anna's always runnin' late. Interruptions. Goes with the territory. It doesn't mean she's forgotten about y'all."

"Thanks, Lois," Easy said. "But I'm not so sure I even want this job. Not that I don't appreciate you telling me, or going out on a limb with your boss giving her my resumé and getting me this interview, but honestly, cub reporter? Me? The heck do I know about reporting?"

Lucinda patted Easy's cheek. "Cub reporter? Isn't that just the sweetest little thing?" She sat down in the plastic chair next to Easy. "Y'all been rereadin' those *Superman* comics

...to continue reading...



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The fourth in

Roland Keller's Easy Taylor Mystery series,

Chimera

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Facing a drastic lull in his private investigative work, inveterate gambler Easy Taylor tries to land a job as a reporter. His probationary assignment is to interview local Thoroughbred jockey Beth Gehenna about the accident at Aqueduct Racetrack she says was caused by someone shooting at her. Easy is hired to investigate the shooting, but not by the jockey. His client: the racehorse she was riding.

Roland Keller is the longtime editor of the literary tabloid, *PKA's Advocate*, and author of *Straw Man* and the three other 'Easy Taylor' mysteries, *Pardee Holler*, *Nature of the Beast*, and *Denial*. He and his wife Patricia live in the Catskill Mountains of New York.

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