

# Laurie Healy



The quick sharp nip on his elbow from behind snapped him out of his daze. Startled, Rex involuntarily flexed his arm and swung his head around.

“Easy Rex. You’ll give yourself a heart attack,” crept a low mellow voice over his shoulder. Rex gradually recognized the voice and upon rotation a smiling familiar face came into view. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Yea. Maybe I have,” mused Rex thoughtfully. “Maybe I have.”

Before him stood Lou Houlligan, looking dapper, suave, as befits a man of the turf.

“Hello Lou,” said Rex brightly. “I didn’t see you come in. What brings you down this way?”

“I’ve come to see a man about a dog,” Lou replied easily.

Rex looked haunted.

“A greyhound,” Lou added absently, sizing up a bar stool. “You know, woof woof, dishlicker.”

Lou found an agreeable stool and climbed aboard. Rex, the aged publican of this establishment, moved behind the bar and prepared to take his order.

“What’ll you have?” quizzed Rex handily placed near the beer taps. “Beers fine,” answered Lou easily, looking at his watch while helping himself to a handful of complementary peanuts . Rex duly complied.

Lou idly crunched his peanuts and slowly cast his roving eye over the public bar.

Unconsciously old hat, boring really, nothing had changed since the last time he set foot in the place.

“Same old same old,” he mused.

Rex just smiled over his shoulder, delivered the beer, flipped the coins into the till and shuffled his way out, towards the backdoor.

Lou Houlligan was more of an acquaintance than a friend. A bit too well heeled and dressed to be a regular these days. He still dropped in on the odd occasion, just to wet his whistle and to catch up with Rex.

As a strapping lad from a poor background he had had a promising career as a jockey but it was cut short by weight problems, too fond of good food and times apparently.

With little other choice on the horizon and still wanting to keep his hand in he took to training, horses originally, his first love, and when that dried up he moved on to greyhounds. Success came slowly, in fits and starts, but eventually he found himself in a position to invest in a couple of promising up and coming dogs and things took off from there.

Now, many years down the track, he was a roaring success, the best and most respected greyhound breeder and trainer in the district. He cut a stylishly subdued trim grey figure at the track and spent plenty of cultivated time rubbing shoulders with those who like their shoulders rubbed. He was connected to the well connected and names fell from the corner his mouth with studied ease.

Still, he hadn't completely lost the common touch and every now and then slumped it, just to prove he could. It was handy if he could roll a little business into these trips down memory lane and, as chance would have it, this was one of those times.

He slid his cuff up and looked at his watch again, "Late," he thought mildly irritated. The home cooked smell from the kitchen in the backroom wafted by invitingly but he had more important matters to attend to.

The hotel door gently swung and in ambled Billy Wills leading a large and eager looking greyhound, the real reason behind Lou's visit.

"Billy," offered Lou, shaking his hand and steering him to a suitable stool. "How's business?"

"You know," Billy replied dryly getting comfortable. "Ups and downs."

Billy Wills was a small harried edgy man in his early forties. Never neat always dusty, he'd had his share of hardship and it showed. He was in the same trade as Lou but on a much smaller scale. He liked the idea of greyhound training and one day might even fashion a living out of it but where Lou was a mover and shaker Billy was more of a stand stiller and wait type. Consequently, success was sluggish at best but he didn't

mind, most things he had achieved in life were carried out at this pace. Really, he just wasn't business man material anyway, too honest, too naïve, too easily led.

Dishonest folks took easy advantage of him without batting an eyelid, luckily, his friends didn't.

Lou ordered a round of drinks and after it arrived, waded through the idle chit chat before deciding to get down to tin tacks.

"Nice dog Billy," understated Lou eyeing Billy's furry companion with precision.

"Good lines, fair muscle structure."

"She's a beaut, ain't she," Billy proudly replied rubbing the dogs head lovingly.

"Powerful, you should see her on the track, and graceful." Billy puffed up fit to burst.

"She's a champion in the making."

"Hmm," Lou replied noncommittally with finger rubbing his nose. "Lot of potential champions about."

"You've seen her times Lou, you know how well she's traveling."

"Yes, but that's out here Billy, stiffer competition in the big smoke." Lou waged.

"Tougher dogs."

"Oh she's tough all right," Billy confirmed happy to please. Running out of justifications, he leaned over and gave the dog a great big friendly squeeze.

Lou let Billy sweat awhile.

Billy waited uneasily. Sipped his beer.

Eventually, Lou leaned over and gave the dog another quick visual check. He sat back and folded his arms ready to strike a stiff bargain. He knew he had what Billy wanted, he held the cards.

“Ok, Billy. Spose I take it on. Here’s the deal.” Lou laid it out for him and with minor haggling back and forth the deal was soon solid.

“She’s a good dog that one, plenty of potential,” said Billy ruefully eyeing the dog.

“I’ll be sorry to let her go.” Lou played the game. “Tough times eh?” He was always on the sniff for a bargain and his little birds had told him that Billy Wills was fairly cash strapped at the moment. Research, it’s your best weapon.

“Just out of curiosity,” Lou probed innocently. “Why are you?”

“Things aren’t running for me at the moment, Lou,” Billy openly confided. “I got a lot of good dogs, showing a lot of potential, but they’re just not first past the post.”

“Ah,” Lou replied nodding his head in sympathy. “Too many also rans to feed.” Billy sighed tipping his head in agreement. “A word to the wise,” Lou advised tapping his nose. “Concentrate on the good uns and forget the others. Good for business, good for you.” “Course, the real trick is to know which is which.”

“I see where you’re coming from but it’s not for me,” Billy replied sadly. “After a while they become like pets. I can’t let them go.”

“You’re in the wrong business,” Lou said bluntly getting up to leave. “As you know, roughly only one in seven’s a winner.”

“Well, what do you do,” Billy inquired.

“What, with my slow greyhounds,” Billy nodded, waiting on the answer. “After a while if they don’t show promise and they’re not fit for breeding, they’re deadwood, I move them on.”

“Move them on?” Billy returned. “What. Into the labs for scientific experiments or some such.”

“No no no,” Lou laughed. I’m lucky. I give mine away.”

He finished up his beer and placed the empty glass on the bar. “Nice to catch up Billy,” he beamed offering his hand. “Look after yourself. I’ve got to go.”

Billy reluctantly handed over the leash and Lou looked the dog over. “Fine looking animal,” he offered Billy in consolation. “Well prepared. Fit as a fiddle and not an ounce of fat on it.”

Billy smiled weakly and agreed.

Lou made his way to the door and with a short wave he was through it. Soon he was whistling his way up the street leading his newly acquired potential winner.

Billy finished his beer and with a shouted goodbye to Rex out the back also went on his way.

Rex was loitering in the kitchen chatting to Mrs. Springer, relishing the wonderful smells of her home style cooking and passing time.

“Was that Lou Houlligans voice I heard earlier,” she asked checking her pies in the oven.

“Yea. He dropped in to see Billy Wills.”

“Lovely man Lou, generous,” she said happily, removing the golden pies, they were just perfect. “He donates the meat for my pies you know. Not an ounce of fat in it.”