

57

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A NOVEL



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'57, Chicago

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Steve Monroe

*For my mother
Your love, talent and encouragement
stacked the deck*

“A man with a financial surplus can control circumstances ... but a man without a surplus is controlled by them.”

Quotation credited to Harvey Firestone, found on a scrap of paper in the coat pocket of slain banker Leon Marcus. The slaying made headlines on April Fools' Day, 1957.

March 21, 1957

“My old man leered at those dice like a child molester ogling a lollipop. Everything that happened over the next few minutes changed my life forever, and what do I remember the most? His eyes. The way he looked at those dice like he saw a future. That’s what I always remember, Gene. The guys that play through us see a future, and you know what? They ain’t got one, and neither did my father.”

“So this is inside a church?” asked Gene.

“Yeah. This old church is being renovated, and my old man and some other guys are using the sanctuary to hold their weekly crap game. So I’m hiding up in a tree, peeking in through a hole in a stained-glass window. Anyway, there I am looking through Christ’s outstretched arms, when my father hits a hard six. He doubles his bet and the fat guy to his left covers him. These guys are coated in sawdust. The place is a mess, and there they are, throwing dice against the altar; all of the pews stacked in the back, carpet rolled up. So everybody’s coupled up on bets except for one guy. He wipes down the shooter’s area like an umpire cleaning home plate. Now my father starts rolling, trying to hit the hard six. He and the fat guy are jawing back and forth, and my father just can’t hit the point, but he ain’t crapping out either. Finally, he looks up like he’s praying, shouts, ‘Lord, let’s teach brother Brand a lesson,’ and flings the dice against the altar. They carom off of the bottom step, dance back toward my father, and finally come to a stop inches from his face, cause he’s laying down now, coaching them—a pair of threes, six, the hard way.”

“No shit? Hey, it’s your play.”

“No shit,” said Al as he leaned forward and threw a five of spades on the discard pile that lay between the two stalls. “The last roll of his life and he hits his point. Six. The hard way. Anyway, the fat guy starts bitching and moaning about his wife and kids and how he needs the money, and my father says ‘Fuck you, I got a kid too,’ and pretty soon they’re going at it. My father kicks the living shit out of this bum and heads for the door when I see the gun. The fat guy pulls a pistol from his ..., oh shit I need that.”

Al picked up a queen of hearts from the discard pile, threw down the two of diamonds and pushed his pants a little farther down around his ankles. “So he pulls a gun from his jacket and yells at my father to turn around. My dad just laughs, and heads for the door. By now, all of the other yahoos have all scrambled out the back door and I’m beating on the window, yelling at my dad to turn around.”

Gene interrupted. “I can’t see your discard, Al. You’ve got to throw your card right in the middle or I can’t see it.”

Al pushed the card over with his foot. “The first shot tore off a piece of his scalp and I dropped straight to the ground. Screwed up my knee bad enough that I’ve still got a bum wheel. So, I run toward the front door just as the fat guy starts to open it, and I pick up a two by four with a bunch of nails sticking out the end. He steps out and I swing like Mickey Mantle and catch him right in the forehead. He’s so surprised that he was probably buried before he realized he was dead. Meantime, I run in and grab my old man. He’s gone, no last words, nothing, so I run back out and grab the money from the fat guy and run home to tell my mom. Gin.”

“Shit,” said Gene as he looked down at Al’s gin hand. “I was waiting on that seven.”

Al peeled off paper and shifted his weight. “Let’s get over to the bar. I think the book on these NCTwoA games is getting out of balance.”

“Hey,” said Gene as Al exited the stall and headed for the sink. “Was all that true?”

“You asked me why I became a bookie,” said Al, laughing as he zipped up his pants. “I thought you’d like a story.”

Gene blew a tommy gun that made his stall rattle.

Al washed his hands, smoothed his hair and stepped out of the bathroom muttering. “Thirty-six dollars. All over thirty-six dollars.”

“Robert J. Lipranski. Bobby Lipranski. The Lip. I like that! Well, Mr. Lipranski, I learned at a very young age that a smile can part doors, legs and men from their money, and I do like your smile,” said Lincoln Johnson, jowls shaking. “But I’m not quite sure why you are sitting here in front of me, smiling and asking me for money.”

The Lip leaned forward, used his thumbs to pop his knuckles. Despite fine tailoring, his suit coat clung to his biceps and the shoulders were stretched to their limit.

“I’ll tell you, Mr. Johnson,” he said, gazing at Lincoln Johnson and his associate, Reg Lewis. “I came to you because I believe that an association is mutually beneficial for both you and Junior Hamilton. Junior is going to be the next heavyweight champion of the world. He’s strong and quick, and, being a Chicago native, and a son of Bronzeville, it’s only fitting that you achieve a valid relationship with him. You are the Mayor of Bronzeville. Everyone knows that you run this area. Therefore, when Junior needs a bit of help, it’s obvious that he should look to the most important man in his world.”

“That was a splendid load of crap,” said Johnson, leaning back from behind his desk. “I enjoy a good blow job now and then, but certainly not from a man who is asking me for thirty thousand dollars. So, since I have a young woman from the neighborhood waiting in the lobby and I want to get to the heart of the matter quickly, and you obviously don’t, I’m going to ask my good friend Mr. Lewis here to give me his take on the matter.”

Reg Lewis strode forward and sat on the corner of Johnson’s desk. He, like Johnson, was dressed in a conservative three-piece business suit, with the jacket hung neatly behind the door to the office. He tugged at his vest as Johnson began to clean his glasses with a handkerchief, feigning disinterest.

“Lip,” said Lewis, “my man behind the log tells me that, by contract, you aren’t allowed to handle the money for the fight. It’s being held in an escrow account at the

Southmoor Bank and Trust and a third party divvies it up after the fight. You owe both camps money, and you've got bills to pay at the Tam O'Shanter and the Palmer House. You can't go to Sam Giancana because he hates your guts and your only real friend is a bookie, and he can't loan it to you because it makes him look very, very partial. My guess," he concluded, glancing back at Johnson, "is he figures if you loan him the money, you'll push our people to the gate to insure your investment."

The Lip hadn't moved during the monologue. The man wasn't too far off, except for the shit about Momo, and he figured that it was better to acknowledge the heat and hope for a fan.

"You've got me pretty well pegged, Mr. Lewis," he said. "My prison time didn't make me an ideal candidate to hold the money, so it's sitting in the bank. We've run up more debt than expected, but nothing that the gate won't cover, and I do believe that this is a great deal for both Mr. Johnson and Junior. Also, I hope that you'll push the Negroes to the gate to help a brother, not because it's some kind of collateral for my loan."

Johnson put on his glasses and nodded. "I agree that an association with Junior Hamilton will be advantageous, because I have been told that your assessment is astute. He will be the next heavyweight champion of the world. Shit, even I can see that he's an amazing fighter. But as we consider the terms for any loan, please don't take me for a fool. I may be a fat, old, colored man, but I'm still a good judge of character. Reg."

Reg Lewis threw the dagger. "Your prison record has nothing to do with the fact that you're not handling that money. You're a liar, a cheat, and a drunk, and nobody would trust you with their money. You did time for manslaughter because you beat another drunk to death when he didn't pay off a ten-dollar debt, and you have the audacity to beg a stranger for thirty thousand dollars."

Johnson piped up before the Lip could reply. "But I don't mind that, Mr. Lipranski. I'm a businessman at heart, and I do what's right for my people. I'll loan you the money on two conditions. One, I take fifteen percent of the gross on the gate and television rights and, two, Junior fights an exhibition during the Bud Billiken parade. Nothing serious, just a few jabs with another local and smiles for the crowd."

The Lip did the arithmetic. The coons were raping him; 15 percent equaled around \$60K, and the last Bud Billiken had a crowd of 30,000 in the park and 500,000 on the streets. Selling pop, food, booze, whatever, they'd make a fortune with only a little something to the sparrow cops to protect the pot.

One shot. "I didn't come here to get insulted or to sell a piece of my fight. I've got other avenues, but, I thought just once you would like to help one of your own. Junior Hamilton lived most of his life in a kitchenette with his mother and sister. They had a hot plate, a bed and an icebox. The first time I met his mother, she offered me their last piece of bread. I made that woman one promise, that I would help her son become the heavyweight champion of the world so that he could provide hope and inspiration for others in their community. Mr. Johnson, I'm damn near a pariah among my own people because of my position with colored people, so I don't have to listen to your friend insult me. I need thirty grand for two weeks, and I'll find someone who'll help because they believe in us."

The Lip stood up. "Good day, sir," he said.

Johnson smiled broadly and began to laugh. "I wish that I had a stethoscope on your heart right now. I'll bet that if I let you walk out that door, you'd be prancing back in here in less than a minute. And I must say, you earned your nickname with that last soliloquy, but I'm not so sure that you deserve your reputation with my people. I've heard conflicting stories."

Johnson let it hang in the air before concluding. "Now sit down and work out the details with Mr. Lewis. I've got to take that young lady back into one of the other offices to offer some counsel."

They settled at fifteen percent, with the Lip getting ten percent from the Billiken parade. He smirked at Lewis as they left, hearing the moans coming from a back office.

The Lip stepped out onto Michigan Avenue, hailed a cab. A colored man scooted out of a doorway, begged for money.

The Lip kicked him. "Beat it, nigger."

He stepped into a cab, thinking that he had better find out where Junior's mother lived.

She came to him like she always did, piercing the darkness. The film room was full. Wee Willie ran the projector, talking incessantly about Jack Johnson while the fighters watched him toy with Jess Willard on the screen. Jack Albano, the former football player turned sparring partner, tried to maneuver his ass on the metal chair, prayed for it to stop itching. Howie the Hat, over 6'5" tall and 265 pounds, straddled a stool, chewing sunflower seeds, spitting the shells into one of his old felt hats. Three other fighters, legs stretched out in front, arms folded across their chests, feigned interest, and Spider Gomez, the lightweight who couldn't speak a lick of English, sat at rapt attention. But Junior, he saw her.

Her visits were always a shock, but never unexpected. She could come to him in the film room, during a jog, in the midst of a conversation, or, God forbid, during a fight. And of course, she came to him when he slept.

He hugged himself tight. Her dark face and eyes tried to penetrate his grip and he shut his eyes as tightly as he could, but it was Wee Willie's deep voice that drove her back into the shadows.

"Hammer, look at Johnson move. He's playing with him. That footwork. The jabs. Damn it, if this don't show 'em he threw it nothing will. His old lady waits for the rest of the money until the twenty-sixth round and then Jack, he goes down."

"You know," said Howie the Hat as he spit out a mouthful of sunflower seeds and turned to Junior, "you do look a lot like him."

Junior nodded and looked up at Wee Willie.

"I don't think he go down on his own," he stammered.

"Watch!" yelled Willie.

The screen: Johnson, tiring but leading the fight, suddenly goes down, and while he's counted out, appears to shield his eyes from the Cuban sun.

"Get up, you mothafucker," yelled Willie.

"Get up," yelled a couple of the other fighters.

"Get the fuck up," yelled Howie the Hat.

Johnson stays down. Silence. A sob. Everyone turned to see Junior, hugging

himself, shaking, eyes shut tight. His lips fluttered as he sucked for air.

Spider Gomez said it first. "Un grand fuckiiiiing problema."

Stevie was watching the door and nodded as Al and Gene bounded up the steps. Once inside the building, they climbed the inside staircase until they found Unit B on the third floor.

Seven men looked up as they entered, but returned to their telephones without missing a beat. Pete Barnes shuffled in front of the folding tables, removing the slips of paper that each man had piled up, replacing them with blank sheets.

"We're getting all sorts of action on Kansas," said Pete.

Al nodded. "The house limit's thirty K for both games. Bump 'em a half point every fifteen grand. How's the action in the N.C.-Michigan State game?"

"Everybody's on North Carolina right now, but we'll bump it to three pretty soon."

Al turned to Gene as Pete sat down. Pete's girth seemed to bump with the spread, and he was sweating profusely, despite the cool temperature of the room.

"I thought you figured all of the Michigan Staters would play early?" said Al.

Gene nodded as he glanced down at Pete's tote sheet.

"I figured they'd take anything. They think that this is their dream season and that Jumping Johnny Green's gonna take 'em all the way."

"All right, Pete, I wanna take North Carolina up a half point to three," said Al, "and I want you to keep an eye on Kansas. They started at eight, but I don't want 'em to go past nine and a half. I'll start laying off tomorrow afternoon, but I don't want to have to dump too much. If you start to get too out of balance, call me. I'll either be at home or at my uncle's."

Pete stood and turned to the other tables that were lined up, classroom style, across from his table. The seat of his pants was damp and he pitted out near his belt line. He strode over near the windows and plucked off a large salami that hung in front of the blinds. He hacked off a piece with a pocket knife and popped it into his mouth. "Okay, fellas, move Carolina to three." He was about to repeat it when Tommy Spector began gesturing rapidly for him to shut up.

"You're in," said Tommy as he hung up the phone. He finished writing and looked up at Pete. "That was Poochie. He put two large on Michigan State at two and a hook."

The room burst into laughter and Al put his hand on Pete's shoulder. "In that case, move 'em to three and a half. Shut down in an hour and I'll be back here tomorrow afternoon. Gene's gonna open up and we'll shut down at game time. Any action on the NIT?"

"Not much. Can you believe that CBS is showing the NIT final on Saturday and not the NCAA?"

"I know, it's ridiculous. Things are changing. Hey, we're listening to the Michigan State game at my uncle's. Why don't you come by?"

"Thanks," said Pete, wiping his brow.

Al and Gene left the building, Gene slipping Stevie a ten spot at the door. They jumped into Al's big Buick and Al told the driver, Sandy, to head to his uncle's tavern.

"Al, I think you oughta take a position in both games," said Gene as he turned to face him.

Both men sat in the back and Al sighed as he looked out the window. He could see

shades of his reflection in the glass, his dark hair thinning on top, crow's-feet next to his eyes, deep circles beneath them. He was only a few years older than Gene, but he looked his age—near fifty, while Gene, despite his thick glasses, barely looked thirty.

"I never take a position," said Al, running a thumb and forefinger over his brow. "I do just fine taking the juice."

"You could make a bundle in this game. Shit, you could probably make a ton on Kansas. Chamberlain can outscore Frisco by himself. They ain't got Russell or K. C. Jones anymore, and a lot of people are betting they'll repeat. But Al, I tell you, North Carolina's the play. They're undefeated and they play in a hell of a better conference. Michigan State ain't got shit."

"Geno, we've been through this. I don't gamble. I pay everybody. I pay the boys. I pay the winners. I pay Sandy here for driving and I pay you. And I gotta tell you. I'm getting tired of you ragging on me to take a position."

"Come on Al, it's just a suggestion. I seen too many easy games and I just wish you'd listen to me now and then."

"I listen. I listen when you tell me that everybody's gonna play Michigan State at two and a half and what happens? Everybody's playing North Carolina. I'm a layoff bookie, Gene. I'm a businessman in a service industry. I'm a fucking bank. I don't have five-dollar players calling me. I've got bookies calling me with ten grand to lay off. Shit, here it is the day before the games, and Poochie's laying off two grand."

Gene took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. "That's a great example, Al. Fucking Poochie never wins. You've got two grand of his to play with. Throw it on North Carolina."

"And then I'd be Poochie. You're busting my balls here, Gene. I pay you a good salary and I trust you, but I do not want to hear another word about this. I don't take a position. I clear four, four and a half percent and that's fine with me. You want to become Poochie, you go work for somebody else."

"No, no, no," said Gene, putting on his glasses. "I'm happy working for you. I just think that you could make a little more."

"Yeah, I could make more all right. I could make more for Momo and the boys. There's the racket, Gene. They take fifty percent of my cut and all they do is pay off the cops and 'protect' us. And what do I do? I pay the sheet writers. I pay the lookouts. I pay Old Bones to rent our offices. I pay Tom and Jerry to take care of the phones and I pay you. You want to make more money, next time Angelo comes by, you tell him that you want to replace Momo. Then say your prayers."

Gene smiled.

Al looked back out the window, unconsciously rubbing his bad knee.

Sandy looked back in the rearview mirror. "Hey Al, you wanna go see *Twelve Angry Men* at the State Lake? I love that Henry Fonda."

Al shook his head.

Gene continued to look at him, smiling.

The bar reeked mahogany and crimson. Small tables were scattered throughout the room; a candle served each as a centerpiece. A colored man sat playing the piano in a corner, and a waitress scampered between the tables and bar, where a solitary bartender poured drinks and rang the register.

The Lip sat with three men, smoking cigars, finishing another late round of drinks. His suit coat hung on the back of his chair but his tie wasn't loosened. He motioned for the waitress, knocked a bit of ash into the ashtray and blew a stream of smoke into the air.

"This fight'll outclear Robinson—Fullmer, easy. They're middles and no matter how good, people want to see the big fellows."

"Sure they do," said Dally Richardson, his glasses slipping down his nose, fraying tie loosened, shirt sleeves a full inch from tasteful. "But your guys are up-and-comers. Nobody really knows them yet."

"Yeah," said Mike Lantz. Lantz was Richardson's competition from the other daily newspaper. "And it's gonna be tough with the Robinson-Fullmer fight scheduled for May first. That's only four weeks after your fight. People only have so much money."

The Lip ran numbers through his head. 15,000 was his breakeven with paying the coons and everyone else, but it wouldn't help him with that other matter. He needed at least 16,500 paid tickets and another \$200,000 for the radio and television rights. A sellout was a dream at this point.

"There are plenty of fight dollars out there. I need you guys to help me drum up business. If people get an eyeful of these fighters they'll pay."

Herb Bradley, the fight publicist, finished off his drink. "Last year, the Patterson—Moore fight drew sixteen thousand two hundred forty-eight people to the Chicago Stadium. The fight was blacked out for a hundred fifty miles surrounding Chicago and WMAQ ran the radio broadcast, and you know what? It wasn't enough. You guys ran three-inch headlines when Patterson won, covering everything from the size of the purse to Patterson's wife popping their kid right before the fight. This town's a fight town and we've got to fill that stadium to make sure that Chicago keeps drawing the big fights."

"Isn't it going to be blacked out again?" asked Dally Richardson.

"Yeah, but that helps all of us," said the Lip. "If it was on local television, fewer people would go to the fight and fewer people would have to read about it the next day."

"People will always read the newspaper," said Mike Lantz as the waitress stepped to their table. "It's part of their daily routine, like shaving, shitting, and brushing their teeth."

"Looking at your teeth, I'd guess that you don't read the paper or shit either," chortled Richardson.

"Kiss my ass," replied Lantz.

"Drop your shoulders," said Richardson.

The waitress arrived, bent over to pick up their empty glasses and asked if anyone else wanted a drink. The Lip ordered for all of them.

"Four Moscow Mules."

The Lip's early buzz was fading. The beer and vodka would help.

"Say, Mr. Lipranski," asked Richardson, "why don't you tell us about the prison yard. Isn't that how you got involved with Junior Hamilton?"

The Lip glanced at Herb Bradley. Bradley cleared his throat and set the ground rules. "This is definitely off the record then?"

Both men nodded.

“There’s no secret,” the Lip assured them. “It’s just that the focus of any publicity should be the fight. The winner’s assured a shot at Patterson and the heavyweight championship of the world, and that should be enough to draw interest.”

The drinks arrived and the Lip swallowed half of his in one gulp. He pulled a fresh cigar from his pocket, clipped one end, and lit the other, drawing on it and twirling it to get an even light. He had only told this version a couple of times, and he puffed on the cigar while he pieced it together.

“It was the last month of my last year at Statesville. I’d spent most of my time reading and working out, but I’d become friends with a colored man named Henry Hamilton. Now, you’ve got to understand that prison attitudes aren’t much different from those on the outside, but prisoners are much more bold in their interpretations. In this case, neither the white nor the colored population appreciated the fact that we had become friends. But word had filtered in that I couldn’t be touched, and when Henry and I hung out, that applied to him. Mostly we talked about books, because, believe it or not, he was a reader, but we also talked about his nephew, Junior. Junior’s mother was Henry’s sister, and he loved that boy like a son. Junior’s father had left home years before, and Junior was slinging hammers for the railroad. That’s where he got his nickname. He was a gandy dancer. Anyway, I had determined that I was going to get into the fight game. I knew a few of the faces and I also knew that the I.B.C. was bound for trouble. It was obvious that they were monopolizing the championship fights and that the opportunity was ripe for someone else to start promoting. He’d have to pay Norris and Wirtz to use the Stadium, but they’d have to start listening to other promoters, or face government charges.”

Richardson interrupted. “I heard that they’re going to trial in May.”

“Right. Anyway, Henry convinced me his nephew had real potential as a fighter, and I promised to look him up when I got out. So, one day we’re in the yard and I notice that the warden’s walking through with a group of people. It turns out that they’re part of a magazine crew. He’s showing off some new angle of rehabilitation or something, and every guard in the place is zeroed in on him and his group. Well, I wasn’t the only one that noticed, because as Henry and I walked toward the back of the yard, three guys rushed us. They were carrying shivs, and one of them had an iron bar, and the next thing I know, he’s swinging it at me while the other two guys start chasing Henry. I duck his swing and he falls forward, so I trip him. He rolls over as he hits the ground and I send my right elbow into his throat. That paralyzes him, so I grab the iron bar and whack him across the skull. He’s done, so I turn around to help Henry. This all happens so fast that nobody sees what’s going on until I bash that bar across the next goon’s head. Just then, the guards look up, and it must’ve looked like Henry and I are going to kill this other guy, because the guards start sending shots at us. I hit the ground, but the other guy sinks his shiv into Henry before he falls to the ground. Now, I can see that Henry’s hurt bad, so I crawl over to him as the guards start rushing us.

“When I get there, he’s nearly gone, but he looks up at me and says, ‘Take care of my boy,’ and then he goes. By now, I’m bawling because I really loved this guy, and I’m not afraid of anything, so I pick up his body and hold it over my head, showing everybody what they’ve done. I start walking around in a circle, holding Henry’s body up in the air. That’s when the photographer snaps that picture that ended up on the

cover of *Life*.”

“Shit,” muttered Richardson and Lantz.

“The real bitch of it is that the warden called me in to give my story and didn’t believe a word that I said. He threw me in solitary until that picture came out and there was a public outcry. Some more reporters showed up and talked to a few of the guards who told them that I was the only white guy that ever sat and ate with the Negroes and that Henry and I were buddies. Then the warden didn’t really have a choice. He dropped the charges and threw me back into population for my last couple of weeks. And when I got out, the first thing that I did was look up Junior Hamilton and his mother. We’ve been like a family ever since.”

“Well, it’s worked out all right for you,” said Richardson, a bemused look on his face. “I understand that Arthur Wirtz and James Norris will both be forced to stop promoting fights at any spot in which they have a financial interest, such as the Stadium.”

“Pure luck,” said the Lip.

The waitress came back.

“One more round?”

“Sure,” answered the Lip.

“Not me,” said Richardson. “I’ve got an early morning.”

“Me too,” said Lantz, pulling on his suit coat.

Herb Bradley made his pitch.

“Fellows, if there’s anything at all that you need, please feel free to call me at any time. We need a bit of help now, and we won’t forget it when we’re promoting a championship bout.”

Dally Richardson dangled it. “Any cheap tickets left?” he asked, as he pulled his fedora onto his head.

“I’m glad that you asked,” replied the Lip, standing. “We’ve got four great seats for both of you, in case you have family or friends that want to see the fight.”

He gave each man tickets, shook their hands and watched them walk out into the lobby, headed for their cars. Neither of them had questioned the story or asked him about the other men. His theory hung true: always mix fiction with a strong dose of fact.

Herb pulled his coat over his lap and finished his drink.

“They’ll be fine,” he said. “The booze and tickets helps, but their readers eat up fight stories. We still need something else. We’ve sold about seventy-five hundred tickets so far, so we’re lagging a little behind.”

“Just what I was thinking,” said the Lip, softly. “That’s a nice little behind.”

The waitress strode up to their table. “Mr. Lipranski, could you spend a minute with Ramon at the bar?” He nodded and told Herb to head home.

The Latino slid him a fresh beer as he sat down at the bar. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem, sir,” said Ramon as he handed the Lip an envelope. “This was sent over for you earlier this evening. I didn’t think that you would want me to trouble you in front of your guests.”

The Lip looked inside. A check made payable to Robert Lipranski. A bit short.

“Mr. Lewis also asked me to tell you that he took the liberty of paying your hotel bill out of the proceeds. He said that Mr. Johnson has an interest and that he

appreciates your consideration.”

Ramon started wiping down glasses.

The Lip chugged his beer and set his glass on the bar. He also pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket and set it next to the empty glass.

“That won’t be necessary, sir,” said Ramon, filling the glass.

“That isn’t for the tab,” replied the Lip. “I like my business to remain that way. Anything that I want to share with Mr. Lewis or Mr. Johnson will be shared in person.”

Ramon pocketed the bill and nodded.

The Lip went back to his table and polished off the beer.

The waitress returned. Black hair, dark eyes, nice rack.

“Anything else?”

“A shot of bourbon and a schooner.”

“Taking our drinking seriously tonight, are we?”

“Taking everything seriously tonight.”

She went to the bar and brought back a shot and a beer. “We’re closing. This is it.”

“Care to join me?” he asked.

Her eyes sparkled. “I don’t drink with the customers.”

“If you’re closed, then I’m not a customer.”

“If we were in the middle of Marshall Field’s you wouldn’t be a customer.”

“Attitude, I like that. Does Miss Attitude have a name?”

“None that will do you any good.”

“Try me. A few drinks and I get a lot better looking.”

“After a quart of tequila, Olive Oyl thinks that Bluto’s good-looking.”

“I love your taste in the arts. So you think that I look like Bluto?”

“Same build, less hair, not quite as smart.”

“You heard it too young.”

“What?”

“That you’re beautiful.”

“You heard it too old.”

“What?”

“That you’re ugly.”

“Only a quart of tequila. I can afford that.”

“You couldn’t afford your bar tab. Somebody bailed you out with an envelope of cash.”

“I’m a few weeks from rich.”

“They all say that.”

“You’re a few years from law school.”

“We all say that.”

“You bring the tequila and some beer. Fucking room service is raping me.”

“Better you than me.”

His head swam. The shot clarified everything for just a moment. Her name tag read GILDA.

“This ain’t funny, Mr. Hansen,” said Wee Willie. “This boy is breaking down. He ain’t just tired.”

“Aah, he’ll be fine,” replied Hansen. “We all go a little bonkers when we don’t get any sleep. Hell, I got married after working a double shift!”

Wee Willie shook his head. He kept his voice quiet, so it wouldn’t echo in the corridor. Even their breathing echoed.

“I’m not joking around here. Junior’s got a problem. He’s always been jumpy, but lately he’s gotten worse. Bawling in the film room is only the start of it.”

“Well, what do you want us to do?” asked Hansen.

“Postpone the fight until he gets some help.”

“Not going to happen.”

“Mr. Hansen, me and Junior need the money as bad as anybody, but he isn’t prepared to get into that ring. Albano and the Hat are both knocking him around the ring.”

Don Hansen ran a hand through his thick white hair. He stared down at his loafers, pretended to be lost in thought, but they both knew that, despite the honorary title of manager, he had no control over Junior Hamilton or the fight. He was just the Lip’s mouthpiece.

“Let him lay off for a couple of days and then we’ll talk. But I can tell you this. This fight is going to come off. This is the big shot for you and Junior and if he blows it, he’ll end up pounding spikes for the railroad again.”

“Then at least close the workouts to the press. They get him all nervous.”

Hansen laughed. “Are you a junk hog? We’re struggling to sell tickets and you want to keep the press away. Jesus, I’ll bet that you’d tell the Good Humor man to stop ringing his bell. The press stays. Junior stays. All he needs is some zzz’s and he’ll be ready to go.”

“That ain’t all,” said Wee Willie. “We need some money. Lipranski promised that he’d pay us last week and we still ain’t seen no money.”

“I’ll say something,” said Hansen. “But I wouldn’t hold your breath. He’s paying a fortune for all of the training and the food. Hell, these sparring partners don’t come cheap, either. You’ll get paid right after the fight.”

“Better,” grumbled Wee Willie.

Junior heard their conversation trail off down the hallway as he rolled over onto his stomach. Mama always said that you can keep nightmares away by sleeping on your stomach.

Mama. She’d slaved for him for nearly all of his twenty-two years and he wouldn’t let her down now. His father had left when he was barely four years old, and his sister had turned into a jabber, but Mama was always there. She worked for Mr. Daniels, cooking and cleaning and she was a fine Christian woman and she always led her Junior right. So she could never know. That didn’t even need to be said. He’d die before he told her.

Thinking about Mama made him homesick. He fell back to his standby. His mind wandered and suddenly he was back working for the railroad, hammer in his hand, pounding spikes.

He had loved working for the railroad. As Johnny, the old Indian foreman, always said, it offered constant visible progress. The back-hoe would work in the morning, tearing out the old track. Then Junior and his crew would plant their tongs into the railroad ties and carry them over and line them up before the rail would be set over

them. Finally, they would drive spikes into the ties, their tips anchoring the rail to the tie.

His crew loved him, of that he was sure. They respected his work habits, and were awed by his physical ability, but loved him for his gentle nature and honesty. Old Johnny would always have a smile for him; Paco, some of his home-made burritos; and Alvin, a crude joke. The pay was good, and for that he could thank Mr. Daniels, who had gotten him the job. He would have stayed there forever if he hadn't loved driving lag screws.

One hot summer afternoon, his crew had been assigned to put in a new road crossing. The backhoe had performed its job in the morning and they had filled the crossing during the early part of the afternoon. The only thing that had remained was to secure it with lag screws. The lag screws were nearly a foot long, and most of the men hated to pound them, because it required using a heavy sledgehammer, rather than the long, thin spike hammer. Being screws, they were harder to insert than spikes, but that was why Junior loved banging on them. He challenged himself to see how few swings he could use to pound in a screw, and he loved how he felt when the crossing was secure. His energy was drained, his back and shoulders fatigued, but his muscles were flooded with blood and he was filled with the thrill of accomplishment.

That afternoon, he and Johnny had remained at the crossing, while the others had moved on down the line to lay more track. He'd been pounding in the last lag screw when he'd seen Johnny arguing with a man in the street. The man had pulled his car over to the side of the road and was screaming. He'd told Johnny that the reason traffic was so screwed up, and that he was being forced to make a detour, was because the track was being laid by one "shiftless nigger." They exchanged words, and then the man, who was a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier than Johnny, suddenly backhanded the old foreman, sending him to the ground. Junior hadn't thought, only reacted. He dropped his sledge and leaped over the track. The man had faced him and squared up, but Junior had slung both hands like hammers in wide overhead arcs. The man had managed to nearly slip the first two, catching them on his shoulders, but the third one had crushed the top of his skull. Only Johnny scampering to his feet and tackling Junior had stopped him from killing the man.

Despite Johnny's testimony and the reluctance of the man to file charges, the railroad held its own hearing two days later and he was fired. Once again, Mama went to Mr. Daniels, and the publisher, upon hearing the story, made his own inquiries, and then sent Junior to see Wee Willie.

His first few days in the gym showed his inexperience, but also offered proof of his physical skills. He was strong and quick and had surprising balance, no doubt, surmised Wee Willie, because of his time bent over the tracks, swinging hammers. Junior fell in love with the discipline that the sport required: the long runs, hours spent in front of the speed, heavy and double-end bags, the art of shadowboxing, grueling exercises, endless rope jumping and sparring. But above all, he loved the other boxers. His friends and peers. His crew.

Junior rolled over onto his back, unable to sleep. Secrets, he knew, kept a man awake at night, so he confessed again in his prayers. Once more, he told God what had happened and begged his forgiveness.

He rolled back onto his stomach, his breathing slowed and his eyelids grew heavy.

His last waking thought was of Jack Johnson, lying in the Cuban sun, shading his eyes.
Why was he smiling?

Friday, March 22

Al sat down at the patio table, spread open his newspaper, took a swig of orange juice and began to read. His high-rise apartment overlooked Lake Michigan, and despite the fact that it was only a small one-bedroom unit, was his only indulgence. Janet had helped him decorate it, choosing white leather, ivory trim, tasteful paintings and money green in the bedroom.

The morning was warm by Chicago standards, where March could offer snow, and he sat out on the deck, wearing only his white terry-cloth robe and a pair of slippers. It was the time of year when he began to crave warm weather.

He'd slept like shit again the night before, waking to sopping sheets and the morning shivers. The morning papers were piled on the chair next to him, including his stepfather's Chicago daily. It was his morning ritual to read each, digest the news and sports along with his bacon and eggs and black coffee.

Gene had been way off with his assessment of the North Carolina-Michigan State game. He had North Carolina favored by three and a half, and the action on Michigan State was minimal. He'd have to lay off, unless popping it up another point brought on some Michigan State action. That's what would probably happen, and he was glad, since the bookies down in Charlotte couldn't handle all of his action, and his peers on each coast were probably running into the same problem. The Kansas game was definitely a layoff, since nobody was going with San Francisco. He'd call Goldie Rubenstein early afternoon to warn him of the bet. It was a professional courtesy for Goldie to accept his bet and he owed the advance notice.

Gene. Something was up with him. He'd known Gene all of his life and all of a sudden he'd started hounding him to take a position. Ninety-nine percent of all bookies took a position, and ninety-nine percent lost when they did. It was a cardinal sin, one that layoff bookies like him and Goldie avoided. Lay low and lay off. That was the credo. Avoid publicity, the limelight, the IRS, and Momo. That was it. Avoid attention.

Tom and Jerry, the exterminators. It was time to change apartments and he'd need the phones hooked up. Crazy bastards, but the best.

Uncle Pat. Call him and tell him to set up a couple of tables in the back room. They'd listen to the game there tonight.

He lit a cigar and leaned back into the chair. Clouds pooled, the temperature started to drop, and the breeze froze his nuts. His back and knee hurt and his eyes burned. Stress was killing him. His body testified. It was time to get out.

The Lip smoked an aspirin-laced cigarette. His head was pounding and he could feel the sugar gush through his system. He stepped across the carpet into the bathroom and brushed his teeth. Damn, that was a little bit better. He ran the water for a shower, stripped off his underwear and stepped under the hot stream.

Bills paid, a slight pad. Only 7,500 tickets sold. 9,000 short with two weeks to go. There had to be a way.

Fights at the Marigold Garden tonight. A quick pitch over the PA. Check out the ring girls.

Now, Lincoln Johnson was in for 15 percent. Twenty percent for Junior, 25 for Gordon, 30 percent for the Stadium and expenses. Shit, he'd only get 10 percent and that wouldn't cut it; he was in for more than that. Attendance of 15,000 averaging \$14.77 per ticket and \$150,000 for radio and television equaled \$371,550. Pumping the attendance to 16,500 and the RTV rights to \$200,000 added another \$70,000 or so, or \$7,000 to him. Forty-four grand. Still not quite enough, but closer. Maybe he could screw with the expenses, but that would take some doing. Only a sellout and guarantee of a rematch would convince radio and TV to add \$50,000. A sellout. 19,000. He'd be covered, but how could he get there? Sell love or sell hate. Take your pick.

He closed his eyes and let his head slump forward; water blasted the back of his neck. His skin started to tingle as the water got hotter, and when he shampooed the short, dark hair on the sides of his head and let the water rinse it off, the headache started to ease.

He stepped out and began drying himself with a towel. A trip over to the Tam O'Shanter to watch Junior train and then a late lunch at Fritzel's with Abe Rosen, Tomcat's manager. The fights this evening and maybe pop into the Chez Paree or check Carol Channing at the Empire Room. Fuck Carol Channing. No tits.

He stepped back into the bedroom. The lights were still off and she was sleeping. He walked over to the bed, pulled back the sheets and stared at her naked body as she mumbled awake.

"Ugh, give me back the covers."

She tugged at the sheets, lying on her side. She pulled them up over her shoulder, but he reached forward and jerked them back. She yelled into the pillow as she rolled onto her stomach; her breasts popped out underneath.

He slipped in behind her, spread her legs and pulled her toward him. She buried her head in the pillow, put her hands on the cheeks of her ass and spread them. Puckering.

She yelped as he entered her.

Screw Junior's workout.

Gilda. He felt like he was making it with a frigging movie star.

The bell rang and Junior stopped to catch his breath. The room was basement gray, and smelled of musty sweat. A ring had been set up in the far corner, and five canvas-covered heavy bags, varying in size, hung in the back. Mats were laid out near the entrance and two double-end bags and several speed bags lined the perimeter. It was a fighters' training camp, and fighters stood at each bag, slung each medicine ball, performed exercises on the mats, shadowboxed near the ring and sparred within it.

Kid Spinelli stepped by Junior, wearing a plastic coat and pants.