

CHAPTER ONE

Head ringing, Falken dodged left on wobbly legs. Another meaty fist smashed into his right cheek, sending spittle flying and further blurring his vision. Immediately, the other fist smacked into his ribcage, sending a stab of pain straight through him. A retreat back right was cutoff by another blow to the ribs and a short punch to his solar plexus. Wincing and gasping, vision narrowing, he lurched forward and threw his arms around his larger adversary's sweaty bare-skinned torso. Pinning the man's arms to his sides, Falken hung on, tried to blink the stars out of his eyes and struggled to breathe.

The crowd roared and howled, within the smoky dimly-lit warehouse. A cacophony of voices—excited, panicked, angry, lustful, disgusted—reverberated off stacks of shipping barrels and crates. One drunken voice called out, “This is a fight, not a dance! Get on with it!” Others rang out, “Fight! Take his head off! Kill him!”

The large man twisted and turned in an effort to break the clinch and free his massive arms. However, Falken was

not ready to let go; another flurry like the last would have finished him. He had to gather his wits and wait for the right moment.

As the catcalls and jeers continued, some rowdy spectators expressed their impatience by slinging beer at the fighters; others threw handfuls of dirt scooped up from the floor; a few, within range, spit tobacco juice and phlegm at the struggling pair.

Insult piled on insult caused the large man to growl, snort and thrash, like an enraged bull. He surged right, left, forward and back, while squirming and flexing in an attempt to break Falken's hold. With every passing second, his anger swelled. Finally, he roared, "LET GO OF ME!"

A man jumped up on a hogshead and yelled, "If you won't knock him out, I will!" Then, he threw an empty beer bottle.

Falken located the voice, saw the cocked arm moving forward and twisted sideways. When the bottle hit the back of the bull's head with a dull thunk, Falken knew his moment had arrived. He raised his head, exposing his face, and waited.

Red-faced and eyes boiling with hate, the large man craned his neck backward, then snapped his head forward and down.

At the last moment, Falken dropped his chin. He felt and heard the cartilage break, when the bull's nose smashed into the top of his head. He released his grip and looked up.

The bull stumbled backward howling in pain, as blood

poured from his twisted nose.

In that moment, Falken did not see the bull standing before him; his mind superimposed hellish images of his stepfather and Colonel Hawkins. Pitiless, he advanced and attacked, with hate-fueled rage. Two quick left jabs to the ruined nose were followed by a sharp right, left, right to the belly.

Disoriented and deflated, the bull dropped both arms to protect his middle and reeled backward.

Falken stepped in and, with every ounce of energy left in himself, planted a right uppercut on his opponent's chin. The massive head snapped up and back, and the large man collapsed.

The crowd exploded with a mix of exclamations, epithets, whistles, flailing arms and pointing fingers! Beer and whiskey sloshed out of bottles and tin cups. Jaws dropped and eyes were wide with disbelief.

After pausing several seconds to be sure the other man was finished, Falken turned away. He walked over to one of the barrels marking the perimeter of the ad hoc boxing ring, and reclaimed the coarse gray shirt and flat cap he had left there. Buttoning up, he ignored the hands patting him on the shoulder and nearby congratulatory voices. He did not fight for adulation; guilt, unrequited vengeance and the thrill of battle motivated him.

Dressed, he pulled a rag from his hip pocket, wiped blood off his face and knuckles, and pushed through the crowd. Working class men clustered in small groups, stink-

ing of sweat, stale beer and cheap whiskey. A few middle class gents, distinguished by their inexpensive suits and bowler hats, milled about singly and in pairs, drinking from flasks. Wagers were settled, while new ones were placed on the next fight.

After a few minutes of winding through the throng, Falken spotted a cluster of men under a green-shaded lantern, which hung from a roof support pole. He walked up to the man in the center and held out his hand, palm up.

Seamus O'Donnell—jacket off, vest half unbuttoned and shirtsleeves rolled up—removed his bowler and mopped sweat from his brow with a soiled handkerchief. His wrinkled face furrowed. “I’ll never understand it. Makes no sense at all. That beast should have broken you up for kindling.”

Falken was not sure if O'Donnell was sweating freely because of the humid summer air, or the pile of cash he was paying out. Few had been willing to lay any wagers on Falken, until the odds had been raised to five to one. “It makes perfect sense. A sound strategy and the patience to execute it will always best brute force.”

The bookmaker snorted and spat. Then, brow furrowed even deeper, he reached into a carpetbag, at his feet, and withdrew a well-worn leather pouch. With another snort, he shook out five double eagles, one hundred dollars, and slapped the gold coins into Falken's waiting palm. “It was blind luck, nothing more. I’ll find a beast to put you under. And, it’ll be a glorious night when I do.”

Falken pocketed his winnings and turned away, with a smug grin.

With aching ribs, stinging face and sore hands, Herbert Falken pedaled his bicycle away from the Victor Street warehouse, on St Louis' south side. The cycle bumped and thumped over uneven paving bricks, jarring him from time to time. He could have ridden an electric trolley in from his Tower Grove home, in the sprawling city's western section, but preferred to cycle when he could. He did not own a carriage or horse. Though a skilled rider, he felt a horse was an expensive nuisance for a city dweller. The animals required constant care and a steady supply of fodder, from which an equally steady supply of manure was produced. Space for even a small stable would have required purchasing another lot, or sacrificing a sizable portion of his fledgling garden. Automobiles fascinated him, yet he remained unsure about the wisdom of buying one. The noisy machines seemed plagued by mechanical breakdowns and did not motor along much faster than he could pedal. So, he used the bicycle, time and weather permitting; otherwise, the trolley lines served his transportation needs.

Coasting to a stop at Carondelet Avenue, a tingle ran down Falken's spine. He twisted around, as much as his aching ribs allowed. He had a feeling he was being watched. He looked up and down the wide thoroughfare and peered into shadows. A carriage crossed Carondelet a few blocks north; dogs barked near and far; a gentle breeze stirred air

heavy with humidity and coal smoke; lightning flashed to the west. The city was asleep; yet, he felt eyes upon him.

A voice called out from his right, “What are you doing there?”

Falken tensed and turned toward the sound. An active criminal element preyed on the poor neighborhoods near the levee. He thought, *is someone looking for an easy mark leaving the fights? A smart gang may have put a lookout in the warehouse.*

A silhouette appeared out of the nearest alley. “I asked you a question.”

Falken relaxed and replied, “Shouldn’t you be out clubbing old men and robbing children?”

“Major Falken?”

“And, good evening to you, Captain Morrissey.”

The shadowy figure stepped into a pool of light under an electric streetlamp. He wore an English-style dark blue tunic with brass buttons, dark blue custodian helmet and gold six-point-star badge, of a St Louis police captain. “Didn’t recognize you in the dark, Major.” Head and eyes moving, taking in their immediate surroundings, the tall heavily-built Irishman grinned. “Been to the fights I see. Hard to tell from the damage if you won or lost.”

Falken felt his right cheek swelling and was certain he would have at least one black eye. There was also a stinging cut below his right eyebrow. “It was close for a bit, but the giant went down, as they all do. What brings you out on a Saturday night?”

“Doing my job, checking on the men. It’s important for them to know I’m watching. Keeps them on their toes.”

“Oh, I thought you might be going down to breakup the fights.”

“Why? Working men need entertainment. Besides, it’d be bad publicity to arrest a hero. They’d be screaming for my head from City Hall to Vandeventer Place.”

“What a shocking statement from a police captain. American Justice is blind. We are all equal in the eyes of the law.”

“Right, and I’ll make you a good deal on Merchants Bridge.” Captain Morrissey shook his head, though still grinning. “I don’t understand why you do it.”

“I need something to do at night.”

“There’s better ways to pass the time than slumming down here getting your face smashed in. A man with your brains and talents? You certainly don’t need the money.”

“Yours is not to reason why, Captain.”

“I suppose not. But, maybe I should order a raid. At least I could keep you from getting yourself killed.”

Lightning flashes were becoming brighter and more frequent. Dogs yipped and barked in response. The air was noticeably heavier.

“I better get going. Looks like a bad one is coming our way,” Falken said.

“You do have a ways to go on that thing. And, I have business to see to.”

Falken pushed off and began pedaling. He said over

his shoulder, “Collections for the Widows and Orphans Charity?”

“No, my bookmaker. When my spies reported you were at the warehouse, I put an eagle down on you.”

Falken chuckled and winced, as a deep bass roll of thunder reached his ears.

CHAPTER TWO

Screams! Shri!ll, tormented, agonizing screams!

Falken's eyes snapped open, and he sat bolt upright. A sharp jolt of pain sliced through his ribcage, while his head pounded. Breathing heavily, bathed in sweat, every muscle drawn taut, he dared not move and braced for the next blow; a cry caught in his throat; eyes darted around, searching.

After several tense moments, he recognized his bedroom and relaxed from head to foot. He wanted to collapse back onto his pillow, but the possibility of going back to sleep was worse than the alternative.

As nightmare images faded from his mind's eye, his senses began awakening. Morning brightness seeped around the edges of heavy draperies; the sheet under his legs felt wet and clammy; a shiver radiated through him, although the house was already warm; someone was moving around downstairs; coffee was brewing.

With grim determination, Falken swung his legs over the side of the canopy bed and parted the filmy silk curtain. He stood and tested his legs. *At least some part of me is*

functioning normally. Slowly, he stretched and flexed individual muscle groups, taking inventory of the previous night's damage. The pain was bearable, familiar, perhaps even comforting. He had endured far worse and recovered without permanent disability, despite the *opinion* of an army medical board.

His pocket watch, on the bedside table, read seven-ten.

At seven-thirty, Falken descended the main staircase, of his spacious home, and turned left into the dining room. He was dressed for a leisurely August Sunday—crisp white shirt buttoned to the neck, brown twill trousers with braces, matching socks with garters and brown low quarter shoes; each article was creased or polished in military fashion. He took his chair at the head of the white-cloth-covered table, set for two.

The dining room, like the rest of the house, was new and modern; construction had been completed the previous Autumn. A fine Persian rug covered mahogany floorboards; alabaster walls rose ten feet, with rich oak baseboards, crown moldings and door trim; an electric crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling; furnishings were sturdy and functional; a copy of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* hung on the wall behind him.

Owen entered from the kitchen, carrying a coffee service, and stopped in mid-stride, eyes wide. His abrupt halt nearly caused everything to slide off the silver tray.

Swaying his arms, he jerked backward and managed to keep his load balanced, though just barely. The twenty-two-year-old former infantryman had only been with Falken for two months, but knew better than to comment on his employer's appearance. "Mister Westfall," he said loud enough to be heard in the next room, then continued with his task. Two bone china cups were placed on the table and filled with steaming coffee, from a silver pot. Then, he arranged the pot, sugar bowl and creamer within reach of both place settings.

Westfall limped out of the parlor and crossed the hallway into the dining room. Focused on a copy of the *Post-Dispatch*, he rounded the table and pulled out his customary chair, on Falken's right, before looking up. After a moment, he said, "Major, not again."

Falken had permitted himself to skip shaving, but had seen his face in the mirror. His right cheek was red and swollen, as was the eye above. His left jawline, temple and neck also bore deep red marks. A bushy, brown, handlebar mustache concealed his puffy upper lip.

Falken turned to Owen, who stood at his left waiting. "I will have four hard fried eggs, four strips of crisp bacon, a slice of fried ham and two lightly buttered biscuits. Westfall?"

"The same with fried potatoes," huffed Westfall.

Falken added, "Owen, try to not blacken the eggs this time. You must learn breakfast, as I will not ask Misses Howard to work on Sunday."

Owen replied, “I’ll do my best, Major,” and returned to the kitchen.

After a sip of coffee, Falken said, “Anything interesting in the news?”

Westfall stared for another long moment, frowned, shook his head, then replied, “Mister Bryan is making speeches, sounding like he intends to run for president again; Colonel, excuse me, *Governor* Roosevelt is also trumpeting the populist progressive agenda. I suspect he would also like to sit in the White House.”

“I applaud what he did to modernize the navy and deeply respect his service in Cuba, but that man’s ego will be his downfall.”

“Downfall?” Westfall snorted. “Sitting there looking like a horse kicked you in the face, *you* forecast another man’s downfall? Talk about the pot and kettle.”

“Looks far worse than it is. Nothing to worry about.”

“I most respectfully disagree, Major. And, I’ll not sit here pretending nothing’s happened. I’m calling Doctor Evans.” The twenty-five-year-old former cavalry lieutenant dropped the newspaper on the table and stumped out of the room.

“Westfall, come back here and sit down. Doctor Evans does not need to be called out on Sunday morning. Westfall, do you hear me? Westfall?”

Falken heard his aide-de-camp’s voice from the hall, “Operator, connect me with Doctor Rupert Evans, please.” Half a minute later, “Doctor, James Westfall. I’m sorry to

trouble you at this hour on Sunday, but—“ A short pause, “Yes, Doctor, it appears he has.” Another short pause, “Thank you, Doctor.”

Westfall re-entered the dining room, looked at Falken again, cringed and took his chair. “Doctor Evans will be here within the hour.”

Falken sipped his coffee, carefully, as it stung his cut upper lip. He was angry ... no, annoyed. Yes, annoyed by Westfall summoning Evans. He wanted to soundly scold the younger man, but knew he would not. Westfall was certainly naive and, at times, downright dense. However, he meant well. He had been at Falken’s side, playing mother hen, since they had met in the Ft Riley Officer’s Infirmary, two and a half years earlier. Both had been facing an unwelcome early end to their military careers, and shared frustrations grew into a bond of friendship and trust.

After several moments of silence, Falken thought perhaps a light reprimand was in order, after all. “Disobeying an order is a serious breach of discipline. I would have thought you learned that at West Point.”

Westfall replied without contrition, “Major, I was taught an officer’s first duty is to the general welfare of his command, superiors as well as subordinates. I’m simply doing my job.”

Falken raised a finger and opened his mouth, but stopped short when Owen pushed through the door, with a dish of blackberry jam. Instead of prolonging the debate, he reached for his cup and put the matter out of his mind. He

was incapable of being cross with Westfall for long. The man was like a dutiful younger brother, headstrong yet loyal.

“Breakfast will be ready shortly,” said Owen.

At eight o’clock, Westfall limped back into the dining room ahead of Doctor Evans.

Evans made and held eye contact with his patient for a long moment, then turned to Westfall and said, “Last night’s rain bothering your leg?”

The doctor’s scorching gaze, left Falken feeling like an errant schoolboy, but he refused to let it show.

Westfall replied, “Yes, Doctor. It’s stiff as a board this morning, but nothing new about that.”

Evans placed his bag on the table, opened it and said, “Well, that may lessen over time, but it will always be there in some fashion.” Still speaking to Westfall, he locked eyes with Falken again. “Would you finish your breakfast in the kitchen, please.” The white-haired physician carried himself like a man accustomed to having his instructions obeyed.

With a respectful nod to Evans and a you-are-going-to-get-yours glance at Falken, the younger man picked up his plate and hobbled from the room.

While arranging the tools of his trade, Evans snapped, “Herbert, why do you do this to yourself? Pawing the ground, beating your chest and brawling like a mindless ape. My god you look awful. I do not know why I waste my time treating you. Give me your hands.”

Evans pressed, pulled and wiggled fingers, then

dabbed disinfectant on swollen scraped knuckles. “Men have died down there, literally beaten to death. And, for what? Sport? Glory? A few dollars? It is simply insane to risk your life so carelessly for so little. Yet, you do it time and again. Are you seeking an early death? Raise your arms and put your hands on top of your head.”

Falken did so slowly, while choosing his words carefully. He had only known Evans for a couple years; however, the good doctor was the closest he had ever come to having a genuine father figure in his life. He, like Westfall, had offered Falken friendship at the lowest point of his life, when he had needed it most. Both knew about his parents, Anna and the real story of Colonel Hawkins. He had always given them the unvarnished truth.

Wincing, he said, “Many men seek solace from spirits. Others choose opium. Some look to money. I am not one of these. For better or worse, I am a soldier. Fighting is what I do best. It is what I am supposed to do, what I have to do.”

“Oh rubbish. This is eighteen hundred and ninety-nine. You are a thirty-six-year-old *former* soldier, with the whole world laying at your feet. You have the intellect of a scholar, instincts of a hunter and an iron will. You could succeed at anything.”

“I am.”

“Again, rubbish.” Evans applied liniment to the right cheek and eye. “Has your work taught you nothing? Look what you did to Kingman. You destroyed that monster with

this,” he tapped a finger to his temple, “not your fists. Take your shirt off.” Waiting, he continued, “Did bare knuckle brawling pay for this house? Your staff? Has it gained you the respect and admiration of this city? Does Harper’s pay you for boxing tales?”

Falken replied with defiant silence.

Evans sighed, while examining bruised ribs, and changed tack. “I have known a few soldiers in my time and endured my share of battlefields. Do you think Grant won the war by shouldering a rifle and standing on the firing line? Of course not. He won it by outmaneuvering Johnston, Pemberton, Bragg and Lee at every turn. On the other hand, Custer charged into battle consumed by maniacal visions of glory and bloodlust. Where is he now?” Rubbing more liniment onto bruised ribs, he concluded the lecture. “It takes the brainpower of a turnip to stand toe to toe and slug it out. However, genius is required to lay a man low without lifting a finger. You have that ability; I have seen it. And, you can go on fighting with your mind a lot longer than with your body. You can also do yourself and the world more good that way.

“Put your shirt back on. I did not feel any broken bones. But, you are going to hurt for a few days. This time, I can only pray the pain teaches you something.”

While redressing himself, Falken said, “To answer your question, I am not afraid of death. I often think it would be a relief. But, it is not in my nature to give up. So, I will not let myself be beaten to death.”

“But, if it happens, so be it? Herbert, think of what you risk throwing away. Life is a most precious gift.”

Falken did not respond.

With visible effort, Evans calmed himself. He pulled out a chair and sat, making eye contact. “Still not sleeping?”

Falken shook his head.

“The body heals faster than the soul. I do not have a prescription for laying the past to rest. You have to find that within yourself. Although, a little whiskey before bed might help you sleep more peacefully.”

“You know better.”

“Well then, find something constructive to occupy your mind. Take on more cases by advertising your investigative services. Write more articles for publication. Design another home. Just stay away from the fighting pits. Anger and despair breed more of the same.”

As Falken opened his mouth to reply, the gate buzzer sounded, faintly from the kitchen. “Who could that be?”

Westfall rushed down the hall, as fast as his game leg allowed, and opened the door, just after the bell rang. A moment later, he escorted a police sergeant into the dining room.

The sergeant removed his custodian helmet and nodded, “Major Falken, Doctor Evans. Major, Captain Morrissey asks that you come with me, official business.”

“What kind of official business, Sergeant?”

The sergeant looked around the room, as if the answer was obvious, and said, “There’s been a murder, Major.”

Falken felt an immediate sense of anticipation, a call to action. Sadness and fatigue cleared from his mind, as he stood and said, “Owen!”

The young orderly appeared from the kitchen. “Sir?”

“Have you brushed my gray suit and polished the new black boots?”

“Yes, Major.”

“Good man. Come along, I need a shave and possibly some help dressing.

“Westfall, prepare yourself and find my satchel. You know the one, red leather. It should have everything we need, but take inventory to be sure.

“Doctor, will you join us?”

“My wife will give me hell for missing church, but yes, I think I will,” Evans replied with a wise satisfied smirk.