



A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF  
**ANGELO DUNDEE**

# A BOXING TRAINER'S JOURNEY

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PROJECT

# Prologue

The morning of November 5, 1994, Angelo Dundee was lying back in the oversized king bed in his MGM Grand Hotel room. As he gazed at the plain yellow ceiling, which was a welcome contrast to the busy pattern of the two-tone brown wall-to-wall carpet, he let his mind drift. As one of the world's top professional boxing trainers, the road behind him was lengthy—he'd worked with fighters of every weight class and of several ethnicities. The road's surface was made of canvas and littered with boxing gloves, heavy bags, blood, and hand wraps. Not many chose to travel this route, but it was a path Angelo regarded with fondness.

With a slow turn of his head, he looked to the journey ahead, his future career path. The distance seemed much shorter. He was seventy-three. Would he know when it was time to turn his back to the ring ropes and descend the stairs for the last time? He'd seen far too many boxers, and trainers too for that matter,

chase “just one more fight” only to have it end badly. Angelo had no desire to join that statistic.

He sat up and let the thoughts roll off him like an outgoing tide. It was the morning of one of the biggest fights of his career and Angelo needed to be razor sharp. Not only were his days as a trainer numbered, but his fighter and good friend “Big George” Foreman would be stepping into the ring that very evening, perhaps for his final time.

After a ten-year layoff, George had been putting together an impressive comeback. What began as a means for him to raise money for his church led him to Angelo and ultimately a shot at the heavyweight title. Angelo not only respected George and his mission, but working with him had strengthened Angelo’s faith in God, men, and boxing.

Angelo did his usual morning light callisthenic stretches—something recently adopted at the gentle request of his doctor—then took a shower. He ate breakfast alone in his room and went over all possible scenarios of George’s upcoming fight with the hard-hitting Michael Moorer. It was a good matchup for George, but it would be no cakewalk.

After finishing his eggs, he took his coffee and sat in the room’s cozy seating area and thought about his time with George. He’d come to truly love the gentle giant. George had a smile for everyone he met and a wonderful self-deprecating humor. He’d completely changed and dispatched the angry man he’d been in his youth. As far as training, Angelo couldn’t have asked for a more symbiotic working relationship. George did things his way and his way was right for George. And Angelo, being a don’t-fix-what-ain’t-broke type of trainer, had the smoothest of rides training George.

The hours passed quickly and now it was fight night. Both

Big George, the forty-five-year-old fan-favorite, and Angelo, the aging trainer, were more than ready. If George beat Michael Moorer, he'd be the oldest heavyweight to hold the title.

The bell rang. Moorer seemed to have George's number from the get-go. He was ahead on the scorecards. Angelo instructed George to be patient and fight *his* fight, and that's exactly what George had been doing. But the rounds were adding up. An uneasy feeling came to Angelo's stomach. He didn't want his guy to lose, but more importantly, he didn't want George, his fighter and friend, to get hurt.

The bell sounded for the tenth round. By the middle of the round, George launched his big bear paw of a right hand straight down the pipe.

A loud pop sounded and was heard around the world . . . and then the planet stopped rotating on its axis.

# Chapter One

## BOXING, FAMILY, AND UNCLE SAM

Angelo Dundee was born Angelo Mirena on August 30, 1921. The Mirenas enjoyed a simple life in South Philadelphia in the early 1920s. It was a time when women wore dresses that flowed below the knee, and men wore hats: bowlers, fedoras, pork pies. The entire city seemed to be made of brick and concrete. Model Ts, Model As, and Chryslers could be seen rolling down South Philly's wide streets.

Ten-year-old Angelo was about to explode with excitement. No, it wasn't his birthday, or Christmas. It was Sunday, the day his mother laid out her famous feast. His mouth had been watering all day. He looked forward to this all week, every week, as did his siblings.

When Angelo's mother sent him on an errand before dinner, he did his best not to dawdle, as was his usual custom. The young boy was incredibly social and he was ready for conversation with just about anybody. But today he kept his pleasantries short and

was nearing home when he literally bumped into Freddie, the neighborhood bully. Any kid with sense avoided Freddie.

Some of Angelo's friends were there with him, but they wouldn't help. Fear had paralyzed them—nobody wanted to attract a bully's attention, especially one as cruel as Freddie. There was no reasoning with the brutish kid; Angelo had seen others try. Fighting was not Angelo's strongest suit—that was his brothers' forte. Now, he realized he was going to have to defend himself alone.

Angelo put his hands up like he'd seen his siblings do while play-boxing at home. Freddie moved in slowly with a huge grin of overconfidence spreading across his big block head. Angelo was forced to look up, since Freddie had nearly six inches on him, and easily weighed twenty-five pounds more than he did. Angelo was pudgy, but Freddie actually had muscles. The smaller boy tried hard not to stare at his big arms—too scary.

Freddie moved forward with his hands casually at his sides.

"Time to pay the price, fat boy."

Angelo hated being called that. The circle of friends closed around the two boys. Angelo decided to take the first swing. He might score one of those "lucky punches" he'd heard about so many times. He lunged forward with a big haymaker, wanting to take Freddie's block off. Freddie saw it coming as if he'd received a telegram last week. In an instant Angelo knew he'd overcommitted. He wondered if his friends were thinking *poor kid* as Freddie stepped aside and shoved him hard in the back.

Pain shot through Angelo's kneecap as he hit the ground. He tried to get to his feet but Freddie's full weight collapsed on top of him. It felt like a big lead anvil pushing into his chest. Angelo immediately covered his head with his plump arms as Freddie dropped a barrage of punches down on him.

Terrified, Angelo held his own—sort of. His knee hurt but he managed to take all of the blows to the arms. Surely a grownup would happen by soon. *Hang in there*, he told himself.

Then, a fist finally slipped through the defense right to Angelo's nose. It stung. His eyes watered but he forced himself not to cry. His brothers wouldn't respect that. Now more than ever, he wished he could fight like them.

"You want some more, fat boy?" Freddie laughed.

Mrs. Cosco, their neighbor, suddenly hustled up and swatted Freddie over the head with a newspaper.

*Swat!* "Stop this, Frederico." *Swat!* "I'm gonna tell your momma." *Swat!* "Now, go home!"

Freddie got off his victim and strolled down the street, laughing all the way.

Angelo looked up gratefully. "Thanks, Mrs. Cosco."

"It's okay. Why are you out here? Why aren't you at home? Go eat your momma's food. Be a good boy."

"Yes, Mrs. Cosco."

She turned to the friends standing by. "You boys, why didn't you stop Frederico?" She shook her paper at them, and they cringed away. "You have to stick up for each other. Now, go."

"Yes, Mrs. Cosco." They responded as a chorus, their eyes downcast.

Angelo thanked the kind lady a second time, then checked his nose. Yup, it was bleeding. Darn it. He hobbled back home as fast as his aching knee would allow, stopping every few feet to rub it.

As he walked through the door at home, his mother ran to him.

"What happened? Have you been fighting?"

Held tightly in his mother's arms, he allowed the tears to come.

"There, there, Angie. Why you fighting? You a good boy."

He sobbed a little more before pulling away from his mother. Older brother Jimmy was standing with legs wide beside the kitchen sink. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"Who was it?"

"It was Fre-Freddie," Angelo stammered.

"De Luca?"

"Yeah, Jimmy."

"How long 'til dinner, Ma?" Jimmy asked.

"Jimmy, don't you go—"

"How long, Ma?"

"*Quindici minuti.*" Fifteen minutes.

Jimmy bolted out the door. Angelo looked at his mother, who shook her head, then sprinted out the door after Jimmy.

A few blocks away, parked outside Mr. Johnson's gray brick barbershop, was a black Chrysler B70. Freddie De Luca leaned against the car, bragging to his friends.

"I was pounding on that fat Mirena kid and—"

The other kids stopped laughing as they saw Jimmy approach from behind.

"Hey, Freddie, why don't ya pound on *this* Mirena kid?"

Freddie took flight but Jimmy was too quick. Rounding the corner, Angelo watched his big brother do to Freddie what Freddie had done to him. He felt conflicted—he was delighting in seeing the bully get his due but felt guilty that someone other than himself had to fight his battle. Shame washed over him. A wave of nausea followed as he heard Freddie beg for mercy. Angelo nearly vomited.

Finally, the beating was over. Freddie lay in a heap of tears. Jimmy put an arm around Angelo's shoulders and steered him toward home.

"You feel bad, don't you, Ang? I know you, you're a sensitive kid."

"I don't know how I feel, Jimmy."

"Look, he's older and bigger than you. I'm older and bigger than him. Sometimes it just works that way in life. There's always somebody bigger and tougher than somebody else. Remember that, Angelo."

"Okay, Jimmy."

"Now then, whaddya gonna do about it?"

"I want to learn to fight. Ya know, so nobody messes with me."

"That's the spirit. Me and your brother Frankie, we gonna take you down to the Mason Hall AC Gym and teach you how to box. But ya can't tell Pop, okay?"

Angelo nodded his agreement.

"Let's go eat. We gotta run because if we're late, Pop will beat us worse than anything you saw today. What's he always say?"

Angelo loved it when his brothers asked him to do his Pop impersonation.

"Boys, yo mamma, she work hard to make-a da meal. Show her some respect and be on time for it, will ya?"

Angelo nailed it, voice and mannerisms. Jimmy laughed and mussed his little brother's hair.

"Let's go. Hustle up now."

The entire run home, Angelo trailed behind Jimmy with a big grin on his face. Gosh, he loved his brothers almost as much as he loved the homemade pasta he was about to wolf down.



Angelo's brothers did exactly as promised and taught their little brother the basics of boxing. Angelo loved everything about the gym, especially the sounds of gloves striking bags and the skipping ropes whistling through the air as they barely grazed the gym floor. He even loved the sweaty smell of the joint. He observed everything, taking it in like a student in a master class.

The more he went to the place, the more he physically changed. He began to lose excess weight and develop muscles. By age fifteen, he was lean and toned. It was a shame that boxing didn't add height to a fellow, but in the parlance of South Philly, "them's the breaks."

One Saturday afternoon while leaving the gym, he bumped into Freddie. He knew he'd face down his former tormentor someday. South Philly was a small town after all, but he wasn't sure how it would play out.

They were the only two people in the alley between Morris and Main. Both stopped in their tracks. Angelo was nervous, but not like the old days. He noticed that Freddie didn't seem quite so ominous as he had years before. He'd developed a potbelly and he sort of dragged his feet when he walked. Angelo regarded Freddie's hands and realized he was sizing up his opponent the way a bona fide boxer would. As his body filled with confidence, he noticed Freddie becoming apprehensive.

"Hiya, Ang."

Freddie cast his eyes to the street and shuffled past, maintaining a wide berth. Angelo walked home with a grin on his face and a little puffiness to his chest. A foe had been vanquished.



It was Angelo's final year of high school. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the thirty-second president of the United States, Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow" topped the charts, and Joe Louis was boxing's heavyweight champion of the world.

Angelo began to think about the job market. Part-time jobs were expected in the Mirena family and all seven siblings (Joe, Chris, Mary, Frankie, Jimmy, Angelo, and Josephine) pitched in. At the time, Angelo was playing football and was a decent defensive lineman. His best buddy, Rick, also a D-lineman, gave him a tip on a job at Pat's Steak House.

Through his connections, Rick got Angelo an interview. Pat, the owner, loved the work ethic that the young man brought with him, which Pop Mirena had instilled in each of his children. When it came time to get his first paycheck, Angelo was proud to bring the earnings home to his mother and do his part. In return, if he needed anything, all he had to do was ask his mother and she would get it for him. But Angelo rarely wanted or needed anything.

The only thing he insisted on was his mother's cooking. If anyone thought that the perk of working at a steak house was gorging on a T-bone, Angelo knew nothing about it, nor cared to. On lunch breaks, he told Frankie to hop on his bike and bring his mother's pasta back to Pat's restaurant. He looked forward to it during the first half of his shift, and a full belly of delicious spaghetti carried him through the end of the work day. Nothing else came close to Mom's cooking.

The surname "Dundee" first caught on with Angelo's oldest

brother, Joe. The secret was revealed on the back steps of Pat's. One day on break, Angelo sat eating the pasta that his brother Frankie had brought by via bicycle.

“Angelo, you know why Joe changed his name to Dundee, right?”

“So Pop wouldn’t know he’s boxing?”

“But do you know why *Dundee*?”

“Jimmy told me that fighter Joey Corrara gave it to him.”

“Joey Corrara had nearly three hundred fights. But a big problem is, nobody outside of South Philly knows how to say his name, so he changed it to Johnny Dundee. Our brother Joe was always a big fan of Joey. He’s got a mean left hook and a sneaky one at that. Guys just don’t see it coming. Anyway, Joe took the name Dundee in honor of his hero, Johnny Dundee.”

“So that’s why . . . whaddya know?” Angelo said softly.

“How about it? Gonna change your name to Dundee?”

“I don’t know about that, Frankie, but I do know this—I’m gonna be in the fight game somehow. Don’t get me wrong, I like football well enough, but boxing does something to me. I can’t even explain it.”

“You’re good, but it’s tough to be great. Ya know what I mean?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

Angelo finished off the remains of his dinner.

“Tell Mom it was delicious as usual. I gotta get back to work. Thanks for always doing this, brother. I know it’s a pain in the butt.”

“You were always a pain in the butt,” he laughed.

They hugged briefly before Angelo stepped back into the restaurant. Frankie jumped on his bike, balancing the plate with one hand, and rode away.



By this time, Angelo had joined the AC Rio Football team and started at the defensive end position. He was in great shape and had a dynamite tan. Those were the tools that he needed for the one thing more important than boxing—girls! He and a couple other fellows on the team adopted the name “Rio Boys.” They weren’t so much a gang as just a tight group of lads in hot pursuit of dames.

The Rio Boys had the perfect girl for Angelo. Her name was Becky Russo.

“She’s the same age as you and she’s a knockout,” Rick boasted. “I told her all about you, and guess what? She wants to meet you.”

“Come on, you’re pulling my leg.”

“Nah, it’s true, I swear.”

“I was there when Rick talked to her,” a voice butted in. It was Eddie, the quarterback.

Angelo thought that if this information came from Eddie, it had to be true. Eddie was a good quarterback and a promising leader.

“What happens next?” Angelo asked, surprised at how nervous he was.

“It’s all set for tomorrow night. We’ll take Eddie’s car because she lives about twenty minutes outside of town in a farmhouse. Her parents will be out at a dance so, basically, she’s all yours. Tell me you won’t chicken out.”

“Who, me? Who ya kidding? I’ve been waiting for something like this for goodness knows how long. What time do we roll?”

“We’ll pick you up at Pat’s after your shift.”

“Should I bring a nice shirt to change into?”

“Ha, I think he’s ready, boys,” Rick laughed.

Angelo hoped he’d hidden his nervousness from his friends. His legs were shaky as he walked home. The only experiences he had with girls so far were a few make-out sessions, and those he could count on one hand. He’d never had a setup so serious that a girl’s parents were out for the night. Man, was he scared! He’d never even met this girl.

He wondered if he should talk to his older brothers about it.

*Nah, just be a man, he told himself. You can do it.*

He didn’t sleep that night, but instead tossed and turned until the sun came up. His emotions vacillated between excitement and terror. During his shift at Pat’s, he did his work on automatic pilot. He barely had any words for Frankie as he wolfed down his pasta.

“Sorry, Frankie, I’m just kinda tired is all.”

“I know, it sounded like you were in a twelve-round bout in your bed last night. What’s eating you?”

“Nothing. I’ll be all right.”

Frankie scooped up the plate and rode away.

At the end of shift, Angelo took out the garbage, then walked over to Eddie’s ride.

“There he is, the man of the hour. Ready to change your life?” Rick teased. He let Angelo hop in the back seat. Rick, Eddie, and three other Rio Boys were already in the car.

“What’s with the party, fellas?” Angelo asked.

“We’re here for support,” Vinnie, the defensive tackle, said.

“And I’m here to take your place when you chicken out, Mirena,” Dave, the offensive guard, said with a laugh. They mussed Angelo’s hair and playfully roughed him up.

"Watch the hair, I got a date tonight," Angelo pleaded.

"It's not your hair she's interested in, Mirena," Vinnie teased.

"Knock it off, will ya, fellas," Angelo said feebly, before joining in on the laughter.

Twenty minutes later, as promised, they arrived at the end of a long driveway leading to a big dark farmhouse.

"Mirena, it's time to get out of the chariot and go take what's yours," Rick bantered. "We'll wait here for about five minutes just to make sure you're all squared away. After that you're on your own. You got cab fare, right?"

"Sure he does, Rick, he's a high roller. He works at Pat's," Vinnie said, causing laughs.

"I don't know, fellas, it looks awfully dark up there," Angelo said.

"Maybe she'll turn a night light on for ya," Eddie mocked.

Angelo climbed out of the car and headed up the driveway. He pulled his shoulders back and puffed his chest out as far as he could. The Rio Boys would see a confident man marching to his destiny. But in reality, his legs were trembling. He wanted to turn back so bad it hurt.

As he placed his foot on the bottom step of the porch, a light came on and the front door flew open. A large man with a shotgun leveled came barreling out to the edge of the porch.

*"I'm Becky's father and I know the whole thing, Mirena.* Becky told me everything. What kind of boy drives all the way out here to do who-knows-what with a girl he's never met before? *Answer me!"*

"N-n-no, sir, it's not like that. We, we were just going to talk and maybe have a soda or something." Angelo nearly wet his pants. He'd never had a gun pointed at him before.

*"You think I'm a fool, Mirena?"*

"No, no, sir, you seem smart . . . intelligent, even."

"I'm going to count to three and—"

Angelo didn't need to hear any more. He took off running down the driveway. After twenty yards, the shotgun blasted behind him. He ducked and kept pumping his legs. He was thanking God he played football when he reached the car in record time.

The guys were all outside the car, rolling with laughter. Angelo looked at them, stupefied. Slowly it dawned on him that the whole thing was a prank. He's been set up all the way.

"Too bad Coach wasn't here to see how fast you ran, Mirena. He might even make you wide receiver," Vinnie howled.

Becky and the large man came down the driveway, laughing as well. The guys told the truth in between gales of laughter. Becky's "father" was actually her older brother-in-law.

Becky walked up to Angelo.

"I'm sorry about this," she said sweetly. "If it's any consolation, you're not the first guy they've done this to."

She tipped on her toes and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Well," Angelo said, spreading his arms wide. "It wasn't a total bust. At least I got a kiss on the cheek from a beautiful dame." He took an exaggerated bow.

The laughter went all the way into the following week. When the Rio Boys set up their next victim, Angelo was one of the guys in the back of the car partaking in the laughs.

Two weeks after the prank, the Rio Boys played their rival team, the AC Yellow Jackets. The game was a seesaw battle, neither team holding the lead for long. Near the end of the game, Angelo did a crisscross with the tackle, came up the middle, and put a devastating hit on the quarterback. As Angelo received celebratory pats to the helmet and shoulders, he noticed the quarterback didn't get up.

Running over to investigate, he didn't need a doctor to tell him that he'd broken the boy's leg. Angelo felt horrible. Sure, he wanted to win, but bust a guy's leg? No thanks. The Rio Boys won the game, but it was bittersweet for Angelo.

He found out the name of the hospital where the boy was recovering and went to visit that same evening. He'd asked his mother to make a little extra pasta. When his mother heard the reason, she was only too happy to oblige.

"Hey, Hawkins, your first name is Phil, right?"

"Yeah, you're Mirena. You laid the hit on me."

"Yes, sir. I'm here to apologize and tell you it wasn't intentional. I don't play dirty."

A tear rolled down Phil's face, which he quickly wiped away.

"I guess you know I'm out for the season."

Angelo nodded.

"What's that?" Phil's eyes swept the package in the visitor's hand.

"It's my mother's pasta. It's gonna be better than anything they make around here—double-wrapped in foil so it'll stay hot for a while. I'll put it here by the—"

"The hell you will. Homemade pasta by an Italian? Give it here, man, I'm going to eat that right now."

Angelo handed it over with a big smile. Phil Hawkins dug in. His freckled face grew with an ear-to-ear grin after the first bite. The two boys exchanged some awkward football talk, but when the subject moved to girls, both boys relaxed and even managed to enjoy each other's company.

"That's good. I haven't eaten since before the game. Tell your mom thanks, would ya?"

"Will do."

"You pressured me pretty good all game, Mirena."

Angelo didn't know what to say. He just nodded.

"You didn't have to come," he paused. "But I'm glad you did. Not a lot of guys would have. You're all right, Mirena. We're good, you and me."

"Thanks, Phil. You're one hell of a quarterback. Hard to get to."

Angelo got up to leave and stopped at the door.

"I'll say a prayer for your speedy recovery," he said.

"I'm not big on religion but I'll take whatever I can get at this point," he said, forcing a laugh.

"I'll be seein' ya, Phil."

Three weeks later, the Rio Boys were back on the field for the final game. It was no contest. The Rio Boys trounced the Badgers by twenty-two points. On the way to the locker room, Angelo saw Phil Hawkins in the stands with his parents. Angelo walked up the bleachers and met with Phil.

"Good game, Mirena."

"Thanks."

"These are my parents, Mindy and Dean."

They all shook hands.

"That was very nice what you did for our boy," Phil's dad said to Angelo.

"Yes, and I want your mother's pasta recipe. Phillip won't stop talking about it," Phil's mother added.

"She's right here. This is my mother, Philomena, and my father, also."

A pleasant introduction went on for a few minutes before Angelo excused himself. He needed to get to the locker room.

"That's right, you're stinking up the stands, pal," Phil teased.

Later that evening, Pop Mirena told him how proud he was of how he'd handled the situation with Phil Hawkins.

“What you did showed a strong character. You keep it up and you’ll make out all right in this world.”

The year was 1944 and Angelo, now twenty-three, had fallen in love with dancing, and also with his first dance partner, Rita Caralone. They were dance partners for a year, practicing as often as possible and entering as many contests as they could find. Outwardly, their focus was dancing, but Angelo secretly wanted to spend every waking minute with Rita. He could think of no more innocent excuse to hold on to a beautiful woman. He loved the perfume she wore, and the lemony scent of her thick auburn-colored hair.

Eventually, the couple got together for walks, lunch, or to buy ice cream. After eighteen months, they became engaged. Life was grand until the one thing Angelo feared happened.

“Why so blue?” Rita asked as they sat at their favorite park bench.

Without a word Angelo handed her a government document. Rita looked it over with knitted brows.

“Uncle Sam wants me, honey. I’m joining the fight. After basic training I’ll be stationed in London.”

Marriage would have to wait. Angelo didn’t want to go to war. He’d just gotten engaged, for heaven’s sake. He wanted to stay in Philly and build a life with his bride-to-be. But Angelo also believed in the honor of serving his country. Besides, he was no coward, far from it.

As the day of deployment neared, the family gathered for a big send-off dinner. His mother made gnocchi, seeing as they’d had pasta the previous Sunday. Rita and her parents came by. The conversation was surprisingly upbeat. Older brother Jimmy

had already joined the war effort and was doing fine—he swore there was nothing to worry about.

After the Carlones went home, Angelo sat down with his father.

“Are you nervous, son?”

“A little, Pop.”

“That’s okay, that’s normal. I’d be worried if you were excited to get over there. I’d think you were *pazzo*,” he laughed.

“No, Pop, I’m not crazy. I’m gonna miss you guys. Rita too.”

“You’ll be all right, son. You’re the kinda guy a gal waits for, don’t you worry.”

“Thanks, Pop.”

Because Uncle Sam had tapped him on the shoulder, Angelo answered and dove headlong into army life. Up to this point, he had been working in aircraft maintenance in town, which was how he could afford to take Rita around. But his clerical skills were what the army wanted from him. For the past year he’d taken typing and clerical courses. They were backup, just in case the aircraft maintenance job ever fell through. Angelo didn’t kid himself that he’d ever go to college—the family had no money for that. Now it seemed he’d be putting his clerical skills to work for the country.

After two weeks of basic training, he was sent to Leicestershire, England. The food was foreign and Mom’s home cooking seemed far away. It was also a long way from the dance halls of Philly. The weather was cold, wet, and misty. At times he wondered if he’d ever see the sun again.

Life on the base was not bad, and he got along with most of the guys. The locals were friendly to the Americans and seemed happy to have them. One problem at base camp, however, was

racism. Angelo had no time for racial bigotry. There seemed to be a natural segregation, which Angelo found odd, considering everybody was fighting on the same side. He felt the base commander should have encouraged some sort mingling or interaction to facilitate team spirit.

"How come you hang out with them coloreds?" a guy named Barrie asked Angelo.

"Why not? They're some good guys."

"Where you from, Mirena?"

"South Philly. Why?"

"I'm from South Carolina and y'all don't know coloreds like we do."

"Keep your voice down," Angelo said, getting off his bunk. "Look, Barrie, I don't care what color a guy is. I either take to a guy or I don't, depending on how he acts."

"I don't see why they need to be on this base. They should have their own base."

Angelo sighed heavily. "I see that you wear a cross around your neck along with your dog tags."

"Yeah, so?"

"As a Christian, you should know that we're all God's children, even black people. Now, would you mind moving aside? It's feeling kinda crowded in here."

Angelo knew the man stared at his back as he left. He was happy Barrie had sense enough not to throw out some kind of cheap line.

Weapons inventory was the next job he was tasked with and he took it seriously and thrived in the position. He completely reworked the filing system and logs. Sergeant Briggs commended him on a job well done, and promised that he'd earn sergeant stripes for the effort. But on the day the promotion list went up,

Angelo found he'd been passed over—he'd remain a Private First Class, or PFC.

The prospect was upsetting. He talked it over with some of the guys and was told "that's Air Corps life." Angelo took it in stride, and went about his business.

A few days later, a care package arrived from his mother. It went a long way to brighten his day. She'd sent salami, capocollo, and pepperoni, as well as pecorino and sharp cheddar cheese. A visit to the base kitchen yielded a few other basic ingredients and he was able to put together a small version of the tastes of home. He gave two soldiers a bite of his food, and they were hooked.

Before Angelo could say "dinner is served," he'd become the barrack chef. His barrack mates couldn't get enough of that South Philly Italian food. In no time, a few of the men converted a potbelly heater into a stove for Angelo's use. Now, letters sent back home always included profuse thanks and ended with a polite, "Ma, please send more."

"Gather 'round, boys," Angelo announced.

The men shuffled around him as if they were parishioners.

"Fellas, I've got an idea to take our cuisine to the next level."

"We're all ears, Mirena. What do you need?" asked Billings, a lanky kid from Arkansas.

"No doubt you've all seen our little rabbit friends running around the camp?"

He got a dozen nods.

"Get me a half dozen rabbits, and I'll cook you a meal like you've never had before."

"Rabbits? I don't know, Mirena. I ain't had no rabbit before." Casey, the big Oregonian, looked skeptical.

"It's 'cause you city slickers don't know good cooking, ain't that right, Curtis?" Scuggs, the red-headed Oklahoman, smiled.

"You better believe it, Mirena. We'll get you them rabbits. Come on, fellas," Curtis said, leading the group outside.

Angelo and six other men stood side by side and watched an area crawling with rabbits.

"On my mark, fellas," Angelo said, adopting a wide firing stance. "Fire!"

All the weaponry exploded at once. Rabbits ran serpentine, zig-zagged, and sprinted in circles. A hail of bullets tore up the gravel and dirt. It sounded like the whole camp was blowing up. Angelo covered an ear with one hand and continued firing his Browning Hi-Power. Each man fired until the weapon clicked empty. Dust and gunpowder swirled around them. As the men lowered weapons, silence fell over the base.

Then a roar of laughter erupted from a group of onlookers.

"Nice job, fellas. You morons didn't hit a single rabbit!"

The shredded ground was empty except for a few torn-up plants. The laughter carried on for minutes. Finally, Angelo moved toward a building on his left.

"Where you off to, Mirena?"

"I gotta go inventory all these darned bullets we wasted," he chuckled. He took an exaggerated bow for the group.

Curtis turned to Casey and said, "Now what are we gonna eat?"

The laughter kept up during Angelo's entire walk to the weapons building.

A few weeks later, Angelo was summoned by his CO to the office. To his surprise, brother Jimmy was standing beside the officer. They hugged so hard that Jimmy begged for air. The two brothers were dismissed and granted an hour to catch up before reporting to a Sergeant Higgins for their next assignment.

"Let's go grab a quick beer," Jimmy said.

“You got it, but I’m paying.”

“Like heck you are, you’re still a PFC.”

“I won’t argue that.”

Jimmy and Angelo sat down at a quiet table away from the busy section of the bar.

“So what do you think the assignment is?”

“I don’t think, I know.”

“So give it up, what is it?”

“Some officer is a big fan of Chris.”

“Our brother Chris?” Angelo asked incredulously.

“Yup. They know that we’re here and that we have a boxing background.”

“Boxing background? What the—”

“Didn’t you have a boxing match on the ship on the way over here?”

“It was just—”

“And you won, if the rumors is true. Anyway, you popped up on the officer’s radar and, as I said, they love Chris and the boxing promotion he’s doing.”

“Okay, so what’s the assignment? Where are you going with this?”

“We’re going to be official cornermen for the European Operations Theater—ETO. They think we’re experts, all thanks to Chris Dundee, our brother. Cheers.”

They clinked glasses.

“By the way, if anyone refers to you as Angelo Dundee, just go with it.”

“Holy mackerel, what the heck do we know about cornering, Jimmy?”

“First of all, they call them ‘seconds’ over here, and we’re

about to find out.” Jimmy raised his beer mug and said, “Angelo Dundee.”

“Ya gotta love this man’s Air Corps, Jimmy . . . Dundee.”

They laughed and ordered another round of beer.

The first couple of fights were a rough beginning, but nobody seemed to notice. If they did, no negativity got passed around. As the fights went on, the boys drew from their experience at the A.C. boxing gym back home and became half decent at “seconding.”

The fights continued for months. The Dundee brothers’ reputation grew and fighters actually requested them. The boys loved their assignment. A few weeks later, Jimmy was sent off on a new assignment. Angelo found another partner and continued seconding. One morning, as he was about to warm up his fighter, a tough welterweight named Tony Stockton, the CO’s office issued a summons.

“At ease. Please sit, Private.”

Angelo took a seat, uneasily.

“There’s no easy way to say this. I’m sorry, your mother passed away.”

Angelo put his face in his hands. “But she was in good health—what happened?”

“Apparently, she was shopping and was struck by an automobile. She was rushed to the hospital but, ah, didn’t make it. I’m sorry, Angelo. You’ll be given a five-day leave and I’ve ordered Jimmy back so you two can grieve together. Again, I’m sorry.”

Back at what the boys called “the hut,” Angelo lay on his bunk. Johnny, his black friend from Atlanta, sat on the opposite bunk and consoled him. “Lost my mother too. Before I deployed. Lung cancer. It’s gonna hurt forever but ya learn to live with it . . . sorta.”

"I know it sounds screwy but I feel responsible. I coulda put in for assignment at the base near my home—it wasn't mandatory that I join the Air Corps. If I'd been shopping with her I could have seen the car coming."

"That's bull crap. They wouldn't have granted it to you. You white, but you Italian, which means you here with us other minorities."

"You're probably right."

"When's Jimmy coming back?"

"Tomorrow."

From across the barrack, Barrie approached slowly. Johnny saw him and tensed up. Angelo sat upright. If Barrie said anything ignorant, he was about to get his block knocked off. Barrie stopped in front of them, nodded a greeting to Johnny, and then spoke so both of them could hear.

"Hey, Angelo, I ain't looking for trouble. I just wanted to say sorry. I heard about yer mamma. Ah, my condolences."

"Thanks, Barrie. I appreciate that."

Barrie nodded awkwardly and shuffled away.

Jimmy showed up the next morning. The two boys spent the next days of their leave drinking beer, and laughing and crying over stories of their beloved mother. At the end of the five days, they hugged goodbye and Jimmy returned to his base.

Over time, Angelo found a way to live with the pain. But after the tragedy, he felt a need to do more with his life. He decided that in order to truly help his country he needed to be closer to the front. Organizing artillery was not enough, and seconding fights was playtime. He wanted to show his manhood and pay his dues.

He became friendly with a few of the pilots and convinced

them to let him accompany them on drops to their guys near the front. Angelo welcomed the change from everyday base life. He became accustomed to the routine and the C-47 cargo planes' flight path. They'd circle a designated area one time, and Angelo would lean out and wave to the men below. Once they waved back, that was the signal to push out the para-packs. Angelo loved it. The work made him feel like a bigger part of the team.

On Angelo's fourth mission, something seemed odd. He waved at the ground forces but they didn't wave back. Edging forward in the hold for a closer look, the ground troops opened fire. A hail of bullets ripped into the aircraft. Angelo dove backward and fell hard on his tailbone. The pilot banked the plane and turned back toward base. Angelo scrambled back to the hatch. Immediately, he recognized the ground troop uniforms as German. He hauled the hatch closed with all the force he could muster. Catching his breath, he noticed a bullet hole mere inches from where his head had been.

Because of this near-death experience, Angelo received extra points on his record, which would help speed up his discharge. But as it turned out, he didn't need the points. Eight weeks after his last flight, the Third Reich surrendered—the war in Europe was over. Angelo was sent to Erlangen, Germany, to ride out his time, getting some R and R, and enjoying wonderful beer.

In early 1946, Angelo Mirena, also known as Angelo Dundee, landed back on US soil.

Back in South Philly, Angelo's family and friends made a big deal of his return, as they did with every soldier's homecoming. Gas was now fifteen cents a gallon. The average wage was \$2,500 a year. It was great to be back with family and friends, yet it was

bittersweet. The house seemed so much quieter without their mother in it—as if the very light of the house had been dimmed.

This was not the only sadness to blemish Angelo's return. His fiancée, Rita Carbone, no longer held the title. She'd broken off the engagement and married another man. He'd received the "dear John" letter while stationed in Germany, but it hadn't mentioned her recent marriage, just that she had moved on.

One afternoon, Angelo wandered into the bedroom where Frankie was relaxing and decided to get to the bottom of things. "When did this happen, Frankie?"

"A couple weeks back. We don't know much about the fella, just that they'd been seen around together the last six months or so."

"Ain't that a kick in the gut," Angelo mumbled.

"Any dame that don't wait for a guy in the fight, especially a guy like you, ain't worth two nickels. Try not to let it get you down," Frankie said, putting an arm around his shoulder. "I know it's easy for me to say but—" Frankie let his words drift.

The two men sat in silence until Frankie asked if Angelo would go to see Rita.

"I don't see the point, Frankie. She made her choice, why not let her live her life?" He paused. "Her new life."

The brothers sat another moment until their father came into the bedroom to check on the boys. After adding a condolence of his own, Angelo Sr. asked the boys to return downstairs to the dinner they'd put together in Angelo's honor. It turned out that Angelo's sisters, Mary and Josephine, were darned good cooks. They'd obviously learned a thing or two from their mother. As Angelo's belly warmed with all of his favorite foods, his heart warmed at being reunited with family.



Life in South Philly resumed; some routines old, some new. Angelo reconnected with the Rio Boys. It turned out Angelo wasn't the only one in the group to join the fight. Meeting and greeting and getting to know others again, Angelo also reconnected with his previous dance life. This time, he didn't fall for the first dance partner he twirled on the dance floor. Instead, he flirted with a handful of pretty girls.

Now that he was also out of a job, he dug into the search for a career.

By this time, the second-oldest brother of the family, Chris, had made a big name for himself as a boxing promoter. Chris was well aware of his little brother's corner work in England, as well as his clerical skills.

"Well, little brother, are you married to that dance floor or do you want to make an honest buck?" Chris asked during one phone call.

"I've never shied away from hard work, you know me."

"Life is different here; it's a lot faster. Same goes with the fight game. The money's nothing to write home about—not yet, anyway."

"That's okay. Count me in, and thank you for the opportunity."

"Pack a bag and get yourself a bus ticket. You're moving to the Big Apple."

Although Angelo hadn't noticed, he was actually dancing and spinning with excitement while talking with his brother. He hung up the phone, picked up his sister Josephine, and spun her around in the air.

"I'm going to the Big Apple! New York City, here I come!"

"Put me down," his sister protested, laughing along. Angelo

ran to his father, hugged him, and gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

“I’m gonna be working the fight game, Pop! The fight game! Look out, Madison Square Garden.”

His father’s eyes teared up. Angelo’s followed suit. His sister was already crying through her laughter.

Everyone in America had heard fantastic stories about New York. Angelo had also seen a handful of movies. But nothing beat the real thing. If New York and her fight scene was a candy store, then Angelo was a kid knee-deep in it. He could walk for hours on Friday nights, staring at the vast marquee signs lit with thousands of flashing bulbs that advertised movies, plays, and the latest goods America had to offer.

He didn’t have the money to venture into these tempting places, but still felt as though he was in proximity to the big leagues. Soon, Chris offered him a job as assistant. Even though the job was more accurately a “go-fer” job—go for this, go for that—Angelo didn’t mind.

Chris was on his phone constantly, setting up fights. He had a good reputation for being reliable and making good matchups. Angelo soaked up the information like a sponge. He learned early on that when Chris’s voice took on a certain level tone and he repeated himself, then *that* specific fight was going to happen. Angelo would immediately jot down the information and begin whatever it took to bring the event to fruition.

Chris would hop off the phone just long enough to call out, “Did you get that, Ang?”

“Got it.”

“Good. Make it happen and—”

“Make sure we don’t double-book anything. Got it.”

Seconds later, Angelo would hear his brother dialing the phone to put that fight in motion. Then he would double back and resume setting up two or three other fights. It was a glorious time. The workdays flew by. Most often they worked through lunch without realizing it.

Much as Angelo loved his New York life, the high cost of living was beginning to pinch. Chris had a habit of putting off payday. It wasn’t out of malice—Chris was a guy whose right hand often didn’t know what the left hand was doing. Angelo would drop subtle hints about how many days had gone by since he’d been paid, but Chris would blow him off.

The day came when Angelo had finally had enough. He was going to give Chris a piece of his mind. He’d walked away from a decent clerical job offer in Philly, darn it, so he wasn’t about to work for free. Not for anybody! He wrote the speech in his head and went over it a dozen times before Chris showed up for work. Chris usually barreled in around ten a.m., but this morning he was late. It was enough to make Angelo think twice about the confrontation. Maybe laying into his brother wasn’t such a good idea. Sure, he paid late, but he’d given Angelo a break in a city most would only dream about. Growing up, Pop had said, “You love your brothers and your sisters, *capisci*? You love your family. You always show respect to your elders, you always show respect to your family. *Mi capisci*?”

Angelo thought hard on the words. Chris was fifteen years his senior, which meant he really didn’t know Chris all that well. He’d left the house by the time Angelo was three. But Chris was his brother, family, so he loved him. Conflicting thoughts spun around and around in his mind. Finally, the clock hit 10:45 a.m. and Chris rolled in. He said a brief hello, then asked

for messages. Angelo handed him the slips, then strolled back to his desk, deciding to sit on the money issue for now. During his time of reflection he remembered an old quote: “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” It wasn’t actually from the Bible, but Angelo liked the sentiment.

He barely slept that night. The next morning he was going to the world-famous Stillman’s Gym. Many people said Madison Square Garden was a fighter’s dream. That was true to a point, but the fight community also maintained that to train at Stillman’s Gym was Christmas and New Year’s times ten! Greats like Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, and Rocky Marciano trained there. It was the place to be.

Angelo sprang out of bed and met Chris for breakfast at a tiny joint called Art’s Diner. By rights, Chris should pay. But just in case, Angelo brought enough cash to go Dutch.

After a waitress with a big smile took their order, Chris turned serious.

“When we get to Stillman’s, I need you to observe. I want you to listen and learn. There’s a lot of hard guys over there, so keep your head down like you always do.”

“Got it.”

“And whatever you do, don’t take what Lou Stillman, the owner, says as personal. He’s mean to everybody.”

Angelo nodded with nervous excitement. He couldn’t wait to step foot in the gym.

“You ever hear about the time Lou went hiking in the woods?”

“No.” Angelo leaned forward in the booth.

“He got bit by a rattlesnake—bit him with enough venom to kill a horse.”

“Whoa, and he survived?”

“Survived? Ha! After the snake bit him, it slithered away for about ten feet then just up and died. Stillman’s blood is that mean!”

Chris sipped his coffee with a stern look on his face. Then he placed his cup on the saucer and burst out laughing.

“Brother, you should see your face,” he said. “If only Pop could see you right now.”

“So, it’s not true. It’s an old wives’ tale?”

“Yes. Keep in mind that if guys are making up stories like this about a guy, it’s not far from reality. So keep that bean of yours down low.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice. I can’t wait to get over there.”

“You know another thing about Lou Stillman?”

“On the level this time?” Angelo leaned back and folded his arms.

“Yes, on the level,” Chris chuckled. “Lou ain’t a Stillman any more than you or I are Dundees.”

“No kidding?”

“Lou Ingber is his real name. There was the Marshall Stillman Movement and the Marshall Stillman Athletic Club. When they went their separate ways, the A.C. became Stillman’s.”

“So why Ingber to Stillman?”

“Since the beginning of time, everyone called him Mr. Stillman and he got tired of correcting everybody. So, the name sorta stuck. No need to bring any of this up, by the way. I’m just trying to educate ya, is all.”

“Sure,” Angelo said. “I wanna thank you again for all of this, big brother.”

“Okay, knock it off. Let’s pay this check and make tracks.”

They made their way to the gym. Angelo was overwhelmed from the moment he spotted the huge crowd out front.

“What the heck’s going on, Chris?” he asked as they crossed the street to the fifty-person-strong crowd.

“They’re probably hyping a guy up before a sparring match.”

*For a sparring match? thought Angeleo. What do they do before a real fight?*

The crowd was full of smash-nosed, eyebrow-scarred, tough-looking men. They shouted and jostled around a middle-weight-sized man in hand wraps. Chris was correct: they were pumping the guy up. They had to elbow their way through until they reached a large steel door.

“Welcome to Stillman’s,” Chris said, hauling the door open.

As it clanged shut behind them, Angelo saw they were at the bottom of a steep staircase. The outside noises were dulled and soon replaced by a different sound: the din of fighters. The sounds of skipping ropes, bags being struck, and the shouts of men resounded down the stairs. They started up. With each step, the temperature rose by degrees, as did the smell of a crowded working gym. A bell clanged. It sounded like the beginning of a new chapter to both of their lives.

Reaching the top step, Angelo placed the smell as a blend of sweat, liniment oil, and cheap cigar smoke. He immediately felt at home. They stepped into the hallowed space.

“Hiya, Chris. Who’s the kid?”

“Hiya, Jack. This is my kid brother.”

“Nice to meet ya, Jack,” Angelo said, reaching out a hand. His greeting was cut short by a loud bellow.

“Quit the chit-chat and pay up, ya bums! A half dollar each.”

The utterance came from a large man with a cigar stogie in his mouth sitting in a big chair under a giant clock. The three-minute bell sounded again. Angelo quickly dug out fifty cents and paid.

“That Lou Stillman?” Angelo whispered, placing the coins in Jack’s big palm.

“The one and only,” Jack said.

“Come on,” Chris said. “I want you to meet some people.”

It was fate, destiny. Everybody seemed to know and like Chris. Some fighters approached to ask about fight representation. It was clear from the get-go that Angelo was being grandfathered into the club, thanks to his big brother. Taking his eyes off of the fighters whose famous faces he recognized, Angelo scanned the fight posters adorning the walls. In between some of the posters were large, empty squares on the walls. For a moment he wondered if some fighters had fallen out of favor and their posters had been removed, but upon closer inspection, he discovered that the squares were windows, covered in thick grime from top to bottom.

Chris caught Angelo staring. “Those have never been opened, little brother.”

The bell sounded again. Lou Stillman got up from his seat and shouted at two men sparring in the middle ring.

“Get outta my gym, you bums! My grandmother’s got better hooks than you losers. Toss ’em out, Jack, and don’t refund their money!” And with that he spat on the floor.

A few fighters turned their heads, but for the most part people carried on, business as usual. Angelo made a mental note never to cross the ornery Lou Stillman. Chris tapped him on the shoulder and led the way up to the bleachers. After a quick introduction to a sportswriter, they sat down. As Chris and the writer chatted, Angelo took in every sight and sound.

There were three rings in total. The main ring, ring number one, held the middleweight fighter who had been hyped outside, sparring with another fellow. They were going at it hard and both

were highly skilled. The man from outside delivered a hard body shot. Instinctively, Angelo moved with the blow and said, "Did you see that shot?" A sharp-dressed black man nearby heard the comment.

"Yup, nearly caught the liver," the man said.

Angelo turned to the gentleman. "I'm Angelo Dundee." He held out his hand.

"I'm Joe. Nice to meet you."

Angelo's mouth fell open.

"Joe Louis? You're Joe Lou—the champ! I'm your biggest fan. You're actually here, sitting right here. Holy mackerel!"

Angelo shook his hand again. Joe Louis smiled and thanked him for the compliment.

"Are you going to be a promoter like your brother?"

"You know Chris?"

"Our paths have crossed."

"I wanted to be a fighter as a kid, but didn't have the stuff. Now I'd like to be a trainer."

"Well, you've come to the right place. They call this place the Mecca of Mayhem and it's always served me well."

"I'll say it has. You're the best there ever was," Angelo beamed.

"I don't know about that, but thank you. My advice is to jump in there with both feet. Hang around, get to know the guys, do some bucket work, and go from there."

"Thanks, champ, that was kinda my plan. Good to know I'm on the right track."

"Best of luck to you, Angelo."

They shook hands one last time. When Chris finished his conversation with the sportswriter, he tipped his hat to Joe Louis, who in turn tipped his.

That first day at Stillman's Gym, the center of the boxing

universe, changed Angelo's life. He began training when he could, hanging out, and offering up his services as cornerman or even bucket boy to a handful of fighters. Over time, a few fighters took Angelo up on his offer and paid him ten dollars per fight to corner. Every little bit helped.

Soon, Chris gave Angelo a shot at working Madison Square Garden. Sure, it was as bucket boy, but he rejoiced at the opportunity to "bucket" at the world-famous garden. Angelo was so nervous, he nearly upchucked into his own bucket. He'd never seen nor heard such a rowdy crowd.

At one point he rushed in too quickly to get the bucket down and spilled some of the water. This could be treacherous for a fighter. No way did Angelo want to be responsible for a slip. He frantically wiped up the spill with one hand while steadying the bucket with the other. Other than a quick glare from the trainer, there were no other consequences and no more slip-ups after that. Angelo made it to the end of the fight and was paid fifteen dollars. The five-dollar bump was because the fight was at the Garden.

Between the employment Chris provided and pick-up corner-and-bucket jobs, Angelo was getting by. A few weeks later, as he was shutting off the office lights off after a long day of assisting Chris with a big heavyweight bout between Jack Cranford and Gino Buonvino, the phone rang. He wasn't going to answer—he was beat—but his conscience prodded him. He flicked the lights back on and hustled to his desk.

"Chris Dundee's office. We're closing up, so ya gotta make it fast."

The voice on the other end was female, alluring, and breathy.

"My name is Helen Bolton. I'm Jack Cranford's cousin and I'd like three ringside seats, please."

There had been calls from four supposed Cranford cousins, two brothers, four uncles, and a pastor—and that was just in the past hour!

“Yes, and I’m Jack’s grandfather,” Angelo sighed. “Look, lady, it’s been a long day, the fight is tomorrow night, and I’ve heard from just about twenty of Jack’s so-called relatives. Can you give me break here?”

“But I’m telling the truth, we’re cousins. He told me to call this number and it would be no problem.”

“I’m about to close. Was there anything else, lady?”

“Are you always this rude to your customers?”

Suddenly he felt bad. He didn’t believe this woman but maybe he had been a little snippy with her.

“Three tickets, you say?”

“Yes, ringside, please.”

“They’ll be at will call, Miss Bolton.”

“Thank you and good evening.”

Chuckles, he made a note to give this fake cousin three seats way up in the nosebleed section.

The fight was decent. Cranford got taken out by Buonvino in the sixth. Oddsmakers covered their bets. After the bout, Chris, Angelo, and a few others went over to Jack Dempsey’s bar, one of the usual hangouts after a big fight. Jack launched into one of his many great stories from times gone by.

Angelo could have listened all night, even to the tales he’d heard before. That was until the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on walked in with Cranford. The champ had a real looker on his right arm but the one on the left made Angelo catch his breath. Also, her arm was not locked with the champ.

Cranford moved slowly through the throng and thanked

all condolence-givers on his loss. Jack Dempsey's story faded into the background as the mystery lady drew closer. Angelo was standing spellbound beside Chris, Chickie Ferrara, and Jack Dempsey as Cranford and the two ladies stepped up. Introductions went around the group.

"And this fine lady is my cousin, Helen. Helen, this is Angelo Dundee. He's the guy who booked your seats."

"Did you say he was the little brother 'cause he's short? Or just younger?" Helen shot from the lip with her eyes veiled. Those were the most deadly bedroom eyes that Angelo had ever seen and wanted to know better. He cleared his throat.

"Miss Bolton, I'm so sorry about the mix-up—with your seats, I mean."

"I heard about the conversation," Cranford said. "Not your warmest customer service."

Chris threw Angelo a hard look but said nothing. He directed his attention to the champ. "Mr. Cranford, Miss Bolton, please. The first round is on me. I'm so sorry."

Helen accepted, and moved to the table they had reserved. Angelo practically sprinted to the bar, then realized he hadn't asked what Helen wanted to drink. He spun on his heel and returned to the table. The tension seemed to have passed. Cranford was surprisingly cheery. Chris and Chickie were into a deep conversation while the ladies chatted casually.

"Sorry to interrupt everyone. What can I get everybody? I'm buying for the table."

The round would tap him out for the night but he didn't care. He didn't need a drink to stare at Helen Bolton. Memorizing everyone's drink, he was turning to go when Chickie called him back to change his drink order. He leaned in and whispered in Angelo's ear.

“It’s a loan, pal,” he said, as he discreetly slipped Angelo money for the round. He’d probably worn bucket-boy shoes before and knew the cash was not exactly flush.

“Thanks, Chickie, you’re a vitamin shot.”

The night went on and Angelo did his best to repair his blunder. He conversed with both ladies, slightly slanting his attention to Helen. It wasn’t the least surprising to discover her occupation was fashion model. Here he was, the formerly fat kid from South Philly, sharing drinks and gabbing with a bona fide model in New York. *Who’da thought?*

An hour or so into the evening, a newspaper reporter attempted to shoehorn his way into the action. Seeing that Helen was uncomfortable, Angelo politely asked the man to move on. When he didn’t, Angelo grabbed his hand in what looked like a handshake between friends, but actually he was bending the reporter’s thumb. The move looked peaceful, but Angelo knew it would hurt the reporter.

When the reporter winced, the rest of the table clued into what was happening.

Angelo whispered into the man’s ear, “Take it on the heel and toe, pal. We’re closed for business.”

The reporter moved on with a curse. The champ winked at Angelo as Helen gave a slight smile. Their reactions made Angelo’s night—heck, his whole year!

It was only natural that the two began dating. Helen’s statuesque frame, standing five-foot-ten, next to Angelo’s short stature made quite the sight. Finances could have been an issue since, as a successful model, Helen made money to spare. But Angelo had to work like a dog to make ends meet. As their dates increased over the next months, they came to an agreement that

Helen would pay for most of their outings. Their love grew, and within a year, Helen Bolton agreed to marry Angelo Dundee.