

## **Route 66 Dreamer**

### **Chapter One: Fists**

In his retirement, Oscar Lindbloom came to know a trained master of martial arts. Sergeant Major Willie Smith (Ret.) and his wife moved in next door to the Lindblooms after the Jensons--like a lot of the friends they'd made over the years in Fairfield--moved to Arizona.

“There are two ways to defeat an opponent,” Willie explained one afternoon, raising his right hand like a hatchet, sharp edge down. Oscar had crossed backyards to admire his neighbor's vegetables. (He never saw the value of home gardening himself, but liked to hear Willie's stories.)

Once a pretty good welterweight, Oscar took up a defensive pose. “We’re just demonstrating here, right?” He was well aware of his friend’s thick fingers, the scarred knuckles. He also knew Willie had seen combat in his native country and in World War II.

Willie ignored him. “You can make a direct cut, which will end the encounter.” He slashed his hand at Oscar’s arm, suggesting it would be broken or rendered useless. Of course, he stopped just short of contact. Oscar had not flinched.

“Alternatively, you can execute a glancing blow.” He angled a mock swing in a slant across Oscar’s elbow. “Your opponent will continue fighting, unaware of the internal damage that has been done.”

“And he’ll do more harm to himself?”

As usual, his friend only stared at him.

Willie was Chinese. Escaping from the Japanese at Nanking as a boy, he had made his way to Shanghai, Honolulu, Toronto, and then Oakland. He enlisted after Pearl Harbor and retired

from the Army after thirty-five years. Oscar had learned that what physical skills Willie possessed were exceeded by his mental gifts of control and concentration.

"I guess, then," Oscar conceded, "I'll try to take the direct blow in our next encounter."

Willie's lesson in martial arts training lingered in Oscar's mind. Reminiscing in his study that evening, he recalled his fistfight with "Tank" Thompson many years earlier, when he was growing up Salinas Kansas. He'd always viewed that encounter as pivotal in his history. Now he wondered if he'd misunderstood its significance.

Oscar had been escorting the girl many agreed was the prettiest in town to the Saline County Fair. He knew that Diana Light would never be his ideal mate--that woman had to be closer in transcendent beauty to Hollywood stars like Greta Garbo or Claudette Colbert. But, new to this town and ready for a fresh start, she was an attractive enough prospect.

She'd asked Oscar for help in the biology class they were both taking. He suspected he was just one more boy she wanted in her circle of admirers, an unknown who seemed confident and assertive. So, he tested her interest with the suggestion she learn more about living creatures--and perhaps reproductive systems--at the fair.

"Where you going with my girl, Squarehead?" Tank asked, stepping directly into their path outside one the tents. Mark Thompson, whose father ran a farm equipment store, anchored the high school football team's front line with a vengeance. Someone had connected his powerful body with the British Mark tank from World War I, and Mark was "Tank" from that time onward. He was also a champion heavyweight wrestler, but much more feared in vacant lot brawling.

"Well, hello, Quasimodo. Aren't you getting ready to appear on stage . . . somewhere."

Oscar waved his hand down the row that included sword swallows, fire eaters, giants and

midgets. He guessed Tank wouldn't know who Quasimodo was, but assumed--correctly--that he would feel the insult.

Tank didn't especially dislike Oscar, though he had a habit of making fun of children whose parents had accents. And he had become irritated that fall with Diana's repeated rejection of his requests for her company.

Tank was also frustrated after paying to see the "Tattooed Dancing Lady" ("Tattooed" was code, he believed, to say that she would appear nude). She had danced around Tank, but kept all her clothes on. So, when he burst through the tent's doors, he was ready to take out his anger on the closest target. Oscar's smiling face, with smiling Diana's arm in his, would do just fine.

Oscar had always felt he had to equal his father in skill (the rifle demonstration) and endurance (Carl worked from dawn to dusk). So, looking at the angry man in front of him, he asked himself one more time if he was his father's son.

His mother, of course, always told him he was not to get into fights. His hands were to be preserved for playing the piano, drawing with fine ink pens, turning the pages of rare and valuable books. He would grow up to be the scholar, musician, or author that she, raised on a remote Missouri farm, could never have become herself. He was also his mother's child.

An only child cannot be what two parents want unless they agree. Carl and Sallie did not.

Like his father, Oscar had a slender built, and one might think he would duck punches or duck out of sight if threatened. But he was quick with his feet and his fists. Moving from little town to little town over the last half dozen years, he'd learned that taking on the first boy to challenge him was the way to acceptance, even if he lost that scrap.

Oscar called Tank "Quasimodo" because he believed Diana, who loved to read romantic tales about misfits and outlaws, would understand the reference. But to himself he thought "Terkoz."

Terkoz was the chief enemy of the young Tarzan in Edgar Rice Burroughs' classic adventure tale. Oscar had devoured all the books he could find by that prolific author after discovering *Tarzan of the Apes*, *Return of Tarzan*, and *Son of Tarzan* in the Lincoln Center public library several years earlier. He often fantasized about being that bizarre combination of civilized European white man and primordial beast of the jungle.

"Humph," grunted Tank and swung a huge fist at Oscar.

What happened next had been played out in Oscar's mind many times, though the opponent varied as it had in Tarzan's case. The twelve-year-old in Africa, who'd been raised by apes, battled a gorilla in the cabin his dead father built, discovering by accident the function of a hunting knife. A few years older, Tarzan broke the neck of a lioness using a full nelson he'd learned wrestling with males in his tribe. And in hand-to-hand combat, he vanquished, Terkoz, who was carrying off Jane, the white woman who would become Tarzan's wife.

Oscar had imagined winning the favor of a beautiful girl, defending her and her honor with an act of heroism. In such cases his hand speed and a strength surprising in someone so slender would be his advantage.

Tank was bigger and stronger than Oscar, and nearly as quick. But he was a wrestler, not a boxer. He won fights by closing with his opponent and quickly or slowly overpowering them. Oscar knew he would likely lose this fight if his rival got a hold on him. And, terribly nearsighted, he couldn't afford to lose his glasses in a scuffle.

So, he slipped the roundhouse right (though it grazed his shoulder), stepped off on his left foot, and threw a vicious left hook into the left side of Tanks' midsection. The big man grunted and leaned forward. Then, in a move he'd been successful with against boys his own size, Oscar completed the combination with a right uppercut to the jaw.

Meanwhile, Diana did what a desirable, self-centered girl should do in such circumstances: covered her mouth with the extended fingers of one hand and stepped back to see who would win her attentions as a prize. She expected it to be Tank.

Oscar understood Diana but couldn't waste time measuring her character right now. He was hoping he could dodge Tank long enough for others to intervene.

The fight, however, was already over. For all the mass and strength of his body, Tank, it turned out, had a glass jaw. No one had ever had the courage to test it until now, but the one solid cross toppled him into the fairground dust.

Surprised but satisfied, Oscar offered Diana his arm and continued her lessons in biology. At the same time, he wondered if his father would be disappointed that he'd been in a fight or proud that he'd won. In either case, he knew there was much to fear from his mother because he was pretty sure he had broken his wrist . . . again.

He'd always thought this fight--and the rematch they would have before Christmas--were key factors in his decision to be a scientist and to his long, successful career as an academic. Fifty years later, however, weighing Willie Smith's ideas about how to defeat a martial arts opponent, he wondered if Tank's first blow to his shoulder was in the end more significant.

Even later, nearing the end of his life, he would come to think it was Edgar Rice Burroughs who had delivered the most destructive punch of all.

. . . to be continued.