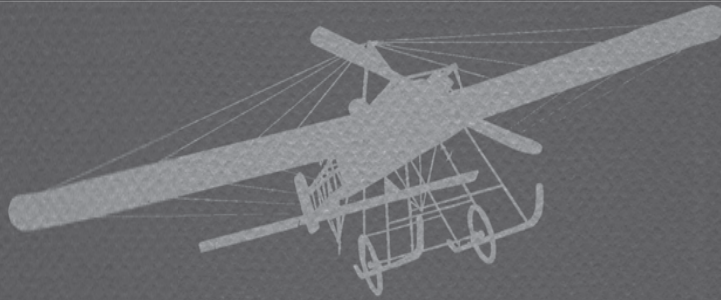


PROLOGUE



“the moon
is on fire”



Chicago

1899

A TALL DRUNK DANCED ALONE IN THE GUTTER, singing a Stephen Foster song loved by the Anti-Saloon League. The melody was mournful, reminiscent of Scottish pipes, the tempo a slow waltz. His voice, a warm baritone, rang with heartfelt regret for promises broken.

“Oh! comrades, fill no glass for me

“To drown my soul in liquid flame . . .”

He had a golden head of hair, and a fine, strong profile. His extreme youth—he could not have been more than twenty—made his condition even sadder. His clothes looked slept in, matted with straw, and short in the arms and legs, like handouts from a church basement or lifted from a clothesline. His linen collar was askew, his shirt was missing a cuff, and he had no hat despite the cold. Of gentleman’s treasures to sell for drink, made-to-order calfskin boots were all he had left.

He bumped into a lamppost and lost the thread of the lyric. Still humming the poignant tune, still trying to waltz, he dodged a potter’s field morgue wagon pulling up at the curb. The driver tied his horses and bounded through the swinging doors of the

nearest of the many saloons spilling yellow light on the cobblestones.

The drunken youth reeled against the somber black wagon and held on tight.

He studied the saloon. Was it one where he would be welcomed? Or had he already been thrown out? He patted empty pockets. He shrugged sadly. His eyes roved the storefronts: five-cent lodging houses, brothels, pawnbrokers. He considered his boots. Then he lifted his gaze to the newspaper dealer's depot on the corner, where press wagons were delivering Chicago's early editions.

Could he beg a few pennies' work unloading the bundled newspapers? He squared his shoulders and commenced a slow waltz toward the depot.

"When I was young I felt the tide

"Of aspiration undefiled.

"But manhood's years have wronged the pride

"My parents centered in their child."

The newsboys lining up to buy their papers were street-toughened twelve-year-olds. They made fun of the drunk as he approached until one of them locked gazes with his strangely soft violet-blue eyes. "Leave him alone!" he told his friends, and the tall young man whispered, "Thanks, shonny. Whuss yer name?"

"Wally Laughlin."

"You've a kind soul, Wally Laughlin. Don't end up like me."

"I TOLD YOU TO GET RID OF THE DRUNK," said Harry Frost, a giant of a man with a heavy jaw and merciless eyes. He straddled a crate of Vulcan dynamite inside the morgue wagon. Two ex-prizefighters from his West Side gang crouched at his feet. They were watching

the newspaper depot through peepholes drilled in the side, waiting for the owner to return from his supper.

“I chased him off. He came back.”

“Run him in that alley. I don’t want to see him again, except carried on a shutter.”

“He’s just a drunk, Mr. Frost.”

“Yeah? What if that newspaper dealer hired detectives to protect his depot?”

“Are you crazy? That’s no detective.”

Harry Frost’s fist shot fifteen inches with the concentrated power of a forge hammer. The man he hit fell over, clutching his side in pain and disbelief. One second he’d been crouched beside the boss, the next he was on the floor, trying to breathe as splintered bone pierced his lung. “You busted my ribs,” he gasped.

Frost’s face was red. His own breath raced with anger. “I am not crazy.”

“You don’t know your own strength, Mr. Frost,” protested the other boxer. “You could have killed him.”

“If I meant to kill him, I would have hit him harder. *Get rid of that drunk!*”

The boxer scrambled out of the back of the wagon, closed the door behind him, and shoved through the sleepy newsboys lined up to buy their papers.

“Hey, you!” he yelled after the drunk, who didn’t hear him but did him the favor of stepping into the alley under his own steam, saving him the trouble of dragging him, kicking and screaming. He plunged in after him, tugging a lead sap from his coat. It was a narrow alley, with blank walls on either side, barely wide enough for a wheelbarrow. The drunk was stumbling toward a doorway at the far end, lit by a hanging lantern.

“Hey, you!”

The drunk turned around. His golden hair shone in kerosene light. A tentative smile crossed his handsome face.

“Have we met, sir?” he asked, as if suddenly hopeful of arranging a loan.

“We’re gonna meet.”

The boxer swung his sap underhanded. It was a brutal weapon, a leather bag filled with buckshot. The buckshot made it pliable so that it would mold to its target, pulverize flesh and bone, and pound the young man’s fine, strong profile flat as beefsteak. To the boxer’s surprise, the drunk moved quickly. He stepped inside the arc of the sap and knocked the boxer off his feet with a right cross as expert as it was powerful.

The door sprang open.

“Nice going, kid.”

Two middle-aged Van Dorn private detectives—ice-eyed Mack Fulton and Walter Kisley in a checkerboard drummer’s suit—grabbed the fallen man’s arms and dragged him inside. “Is Harry Frost hiding in that morgue wagon?”

But the boxer could not answer.

“Down for the count,” said Fulton, slapping him hard and getting no response. “Young Isaac, you don’t know your own strength.”

“So much for our fledgling investigator’s first lesson in interrogating criminals,” said Kisley.

“And what is that first lesson?” Fulton echoed. They were nicknamed Weber and Fields at the Van Dorn Detective Agency, for the vaudeville comics.

“Permit your suspect to remain conscious,” answered Kisley.

“So,” they chorused, “he may *answer* your questions.”

Apprentice detective Isaac Bell hung his head.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kisley. Mr. Fulton. I didn’t mean to hit him so hard.”

“Live and learn, kid. That’s why Mr. Van Dorn teamed a college man like you with such wise old ignoramuses as we.”

“By our grizzled example, the boss hopes, even a rich kid from the right side of the tracks might flourish into brilliant detectivehood.”

“Meantime, what do you say we go knock on that morgue wagon and see if Harry Frost is home?”

The partners drew heavy revolvers as they headed up the alley.

“Stay back, Isaac. You do not want to brace Harry Frost without a gun in your hand.”

“Which, being an apprentice, you are not allowed to carry.”

“I bought a derringer,” Bell said.

“Enterprising of you. Don’t let the boss get wind of it.”

“Stay back anyway, a derringer won’t stop Harry Frost.”

They rounded the corner into the street. A knife glittered in the lamplight, slicing through the reins that tied the morgue wagon’s horses, and a heavyset figure lashed their rumps with the driver’s whip. The animals bolted, stampeding past the wagons lined up at the depot. The newsboys scattered from flying hooves and spinning wheels. Just as the runaway reached the depot, it exploded with a thunderous roar and a brilliant flash. The shock wave slammed into the detectives and threw them through the swinging doors and front windows of the nearest saloon.

Isaac Bell picked himself up and stormed back into the street. Flames were leaping from the newspaper depot. The wagons had

been tumbled on their sides, their horses staggering on shattered legs. The street was filled with broken glass and burning paper. Bell looked for the newsboys. Three were huddled in a doorway, their faces white with shock. Three more were sprawled lifeless on the sidewalk. The first he knelt by was Wally Laughlin.