

THE COMING OF AGE OF ROBERT WALKER (*Published in print edition of Empyrean
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PART I

“Go ahead!” She shouted. “*It was the last round; you could have won.* Blow your brains out, like your old man did, do it, *now!*”

He’d been that way for twenty minutes, barrel to temple, sweaty forehead and upper lip, fish eyed, grip quivering before the gun slipped from his hand. His upper body heaved forward and crashed onto the table, then out came a long woeful moan to try and get her to stop.

“You coward! She yelled.

The next day at noon, they sat there the three of them, in the lounge atop the gymnasium having drinks. “He did it again, last night, Reese,” said Gabrielle, who was a stunning young woman with long black hair, brown eyes, and dark skin.

Reese Wilkins, much older, a smallish man with sharp eyes in a weathered rugged face knew what she meant. He turned away from Gabrielle to look at Robert Walker, and thought how the courage Walker needed to fight great was the same courage he’d not yet found to destroy himself. “You need to start training,” he said.

Robert Walker, tall, a well-built heavyweight, around twenty-eight with built up scars around both eyes had said nothing.

Wilkins held aloft his glass, “We’ve got to get back to the business of making a living. We’re going south to the Catskills in the morning...”

“I’m coming this time,” declared Gabrielle.

“You can’t,” said Reese.

“Can I, Robert?” Asked Gabrielle, looking at Walker.

Walker said nothing.

“You see?” she said, turning back to look shrewdly at Reese. “Boxing camp, I want to know what it’s like.”

The waitress came up and they ordered beef on weck sandwiches and three more drinks.

Seeing it useless to continue with her, Reese finished his announcement. “We’ll have a party tonight,” said Reese, “then head for the mountains and get ready to take on the Russian.”

Reese Wilkins, the son of a long-time boxing commissioner known for driving corruption from the sport of prizefighting, was successful in his own right, well known as a trainer who’d taken on big challenges, made champions of fighters not considered to have the most talent, and former army boxer Robert ‘Colt’ Walker was his current experiment. Reese thought Walker had talent he could extract and cultivate, but as the process wore on Walker had achieved only an even record against mediocre opposition.

Russian boxer Sergey Volkov had lost his title on the scorecards to the Mexican Gael Diaz. Due a rematch hoping to reclaim his title Volkov wanted to test an injury before getting back in the ring with the Mexican fighter. Not expecting a serious challenge Volkov had contracted with

Reese Wilkin's Promotions for a tune-up bout with Walker. So, it was only by chance Reese's fighter 'Colt' Walker was facing the biggest professional fight of his life now, against a former world champion still in his prime, a fight certain to catapult Walker into the rankings and earn him a heavyweight title shot if it went well or a fight certain to end his career if it didn't. Either way Reese Wilkins would soon know how his gamble on Robert Walker turned out.

Somewhere along the line Walker had met Gabrielle Moscone, with his punch-cut face and Gabrielle's beauty Walker felt lucky to have her but as Wilkins observed it was not in Walker's best interest the way she took charge, savaging his fighter's manhood, manipulating and demeaning Walker's self-worth, exploiting his weakness of heart through which she'd staked her right of claim. And Reese saw too, how she'd become arrogant enough over time to think Walker could never leave her, how she always put herself and her interests above his, how she deflected it or ignored Walker when occasionally he'd call her out on it. Reese learned Gabrielle had come back east from Los Angeles where she'd done modeling, but mostly porn, made money and lost it, suffered abuse, was still fighting addiction, and unlike her mother who controlled a major tech firm Gabrielle had never controlled anything in her life until life made perfect, she'd met Robert Walker.

Reese had become convinced Walker needed to find courage enough not only to stand up to the girl but to become great as well, a fighter who could knock out opponents, but Reese knew also in helping Walker to find his courage how he might be providing Walker with the means to replace his unsuccessful attempts at destroying himself with the resolve he needed to finally accomplish it. Ultimately, Reese believed Walker's self-destruction preordained, a defect he'd inherited from his old man, something in the blood, and that he couldn't be held responsible for

having helped Walker get to one place when all he'd been trying to do was help Walker get to another.

After the party, the next morning they arrived at the mountaintop camp in the Catskills, with a cook, seconds, and two sparring partners. Gabrielle had not come. For a moment before he left, Robert Walker watched her lie there, a blend of soft black and dark brown snarled up in white sheets, hung over. That afternoon, he sparred.

"That was a good session," said Wilkins.

"Think we can win it?" asked Walker.

"If you fight like that, no problem," Wilkins told him.

"I have to," said Walker, "after losing that last one."

"Don't think about that last one, *anymore!*" Implored Wilkins.

But that night when he went to bed it was all Robert Walker could think about. After taking the fight on short notice, two minutes into the last round he'd found himself flush on the canvas. He'd heard a grunt, the swish of the glove, then the referee counted him out. He got up and went toward Reese expecting Reese to be livid, but Reese had only stared dumbfounded.

In the dressing room afterward, no one said anything and in the car later on, there was continued silence. As they sat in the back seat with Reese driving, Gabrielle had not looked at him or he at her. Walker knew she'd never let him forget *it was the last round*, that he'd been ahead on all the scorecards, and how if he'd lasted one more minute he could have won. Once he reached over and took her hand, but Gabrielle removed it. She leaned forward and put her hand on Reese's

shoulder, then kissed and stroked the back of his head. “Poor Reese,” she said. “You put your fighter in a condition to win. He doesn’t follow instructions; he leads with his chin and look what happens.”

In Walker’s mind that’s what led to the unfortunate incident at the kitchen table two nights ago, in another attempt to end his failure as a fighter and the difficult relationships he couldn’t navigate, and where his father had succeeded in killing himself he was a failure at that too, but he had tried to do the same thing before and the gun clattered and shook before it fell from his hand and for what drove him to do it even at times when he’d been calm and unprovoked Walker had no explanation.

It was now three weeks of autumn into training. After that first night Walker was able to stop ruminating over things that haunted him and he was able to concentrate on conditioning himself for his bout with Volkov. Training was going well, after years of being together as far as his boxing IQ went there was little the veteran Reese Wilkins had left to teach him, Reese said his reflexes were also good, he was strong, and still had excellent hand speed, but Reese never confirmed out loud what it was had taken over both his and Walkers thinking, how Walker had to have this one fight or there’d be nowhere for him to go except back to being a clerk in the army or the street.

Much to the dismay of everyone, Walker’s girlfriend had finally joined them, and on the first night of her arrival Walker lay awake at one in the morning having realized she was out of the room. As his heart raced, he lay there knowing this for two more hours. Then his girlfriend came back into the room, slipped under the covers, and lay quietly in bed.

“Where have you been?” he asked, leaning in.

“Oh,” she said. “Did I wake you?”

“Where’ve you been?” He asked again.

“I just needed some air.”

“Like hell you did. Tell me!” He demanded.

“What do you want from me? I said I needed some air.”

“Is that what you call it? You whore!”

“Well, you’re a coward!” Gabrielle shot back, “and a loser!”

“That’s right,” said Walker, propping himself up. “So what?”

“So, I’m really tired.”

“You can’t do these things, and think I’ll put up with it.”

“But I know you will.” She rolled toward him.

“No, I won’t. And tell me, why you do that.”

“Let’s not talk,” she said, cattily. “What’s done is done.”

“I told you, if you came here there’d be none of that.”

“Well, there is now. I’m sorry I spoiled everything.”

“Why did you do that, come in here and think I wouldn’t care?”

“Please. Can we go to sleep, now? Let’s not talk anymore.”

“Well, I’m going to talk all I want.”

“Okay,” she said, “I’m not listening,” and she rolled away not listening and went to sleep.

As Gabrielle slept, Walker stayed up, consumed by old impulses, angry at Wilkins betrayal of him, afraid of what the others heard and might think. At breakfast, they all sat at the same table.

Wilkins asked everyone if they’d had a restful night, there came a few mumbled responses.

Robert Walker detected in Reese’s voice a certain note of contentment.

“Bet *you* did,” Walker said after a pause and in front of the others, thinking, you bastard.

Wilkins looked at Walker with flinted eyes and thought to himself, so he knows, what does he think I am, a fucking saint? It wasn’t my idea to have her here. If he can’t keep her where she belongs, it’s his own damn fault.

Ringling a spoon against her grapefruit bowl, Gabrielle interrupted. “Are we going to win this fight?”

“There’s a good chance of it,” said Wilkins, trying to muster some optimism, then turning away from Walker to look straight at Gabrielle he said, “I hope you’re just visiting and not planning to stay.”

“Absolutely, I’m staying,” she said to him.

“You should tell her to leave,” said Reese, looking back to Walker.

“You tell her to leave,” said Walker, not returning Reese’s look.

“There’ll be no telling,” said Gabrielle.

“Are you ready to train?” Wilkins asked Walker.

“Yes,” said Walker, finally looking at Reese. “But are sure you don’t want her to stay and be a comfort to you?”

“No,” said Wilkins, “and I wouldn’t talk shit anymore if I were you.”

“I’m slightly annoyed,” said Walker. “Don’t I have a right to be?”

“Make some fucking sense, Robert!” Said his girlfriend.

“I am making sense,” said Walker, then he added, “and this food is terrible.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Asked Wilkins softly.

“No more than what’s wrong with everything else around here.”

“Get it together,” said Wilkins slowly. “You don’t want our cook to hear you say that.”

“Fuck him, too,” said Walker, by now everyone had filed from the room. Wilkins got up, lit a big white cigar and blew a plume of smoke into the air, after a moment quietly gazing at Walker Reese left the room.

“If you make a huge deal of this, I’ll leave you once and for all,” said Gabrielle firmly.

“You won’t.”

“Try me.”

“You can’t.”

“No, you’re wrong,” she said. “I can and I will, and you’ll cut this crap.”

“Crap, is that what you call it?”

“Yes, cut the crap.”

“Why don’t *you* cut the crap?”

“Robert, what happened meant nothing.”

“Well, he’s a sneaking bastard, and you’re a slut,” exclaimed Walker.

Gabrielle retaliated. “At least he’s not a fucking—”

“Coward? Well, fuck you!” Yelled Walker.

Reese reentered the room where smoke still hung heavy in the air, Reese strode to the table, looked earnestly at Robert Walker, then Reese asked him, “For the last time, are you ready to train?”

“Yes,” said Walker, with his hands on the table, slow and unsteadily, Walker pushed himself up.

“I’ll meet you in the compound,” said Wilkins. Reese walked out of the room not having paid any attention to Gabrielle and thinking I hope the bastard doesn’t show up with a gun and blow *my* head off. God, she *is* a nuisance.

Now, Reese was not sorry about what happened with the girl, knowing Gabrielle’s methods Reese was only sorry about when and where it happened, because he’d not wanted to undermine his fighter’s morale. But Reese would not take blame nor apologize for his desires as a man either. Reese recalled how at the height of his success he’d run in certain circles, taken part in every excess with insatiable lust and having been overly attracted to that part of the business came to hate it when it finally took everything from him, his marriage, his children, and a portion of his wealth. But the boxing, training, managing, and promoting, Reese had always had his own integrity about that, and the respect that came with it...*Truth was, Walker, chump, cuckold,*

would get over it. There was talk of it having gone on before and Walker always got over it. Just as there was talk of Walker trying to off himself, how it was in his DNA but the poor fucker didn't have the guts yet to do it. Reese knew why Walker didn't have the guts yet to do it, that what Walker needed to fight great and to destroy himself was one and the same thing and hadn't manifested itself as courage enough to do either one yet, Reese had urged Walker to get help, but Walker refused, and Reese felt it not his business to intervene or force on Walker something he didn't want, and then the girl came along and Reese remembered she said once that Walker was too much of a coward to ever have to worry about whether he'd take his own life, but just as Reese tried to fortify Walker with enough courage to at least become a champion, Gabrielle tried to thwart him anyway, to keep it from happening, to drive a wedge between them, and Reese recalled how she seemed to have been suspicious of his efforts all along, knowing that if he succeeded with Walker what it would mean for her, what she feared most, Walker leaving her or worse, not having power and control over him, having to return to not having power or control over anything in her life again....

A wet heavy smell of perspiration and perfume permeated the complex. Gabrielle had watched and left. The intensity of preparation was winding down. In Reese's mind, Robert Walker was as well-trained and conditioned a fighter as he could make him. Wilkins instructed the two sparring partners to give Walker one last test of his fitness and skill and though it had been a good session overall, Reese knew how a boxing ring reveals the truth, through his trainer's eye Reese noticed, just as he had before, there was still no evidence of the swagger and confidence in Robert Walker that would sustain him against a warrior like Volkov. Frustrated and disappointed Reese realized that maybe his time in the fight game was over, this next foray into the ring being that of an old man providing proof of it, proof he'd lost his touch. With the gym's activity reduced to an

occasional echo of conversation, Reese, tired and weary, put it aside. He thought of past triumphs, his excitement at every camp and how this time was different, how after weeks of a long hard slog he'd not had the same enthusiasm, how maybe it was time to go, and leave it to his young assistants. It would be a new year soon, and what would it be like Reese wondered, not having to endure another grind with a new stable of fighters. But it was just a thought, Reese was a pro and a well-known one at that and he had this next fight to see his way through, Reese only hoped it would not go too badly for him.

Then it dawned on Reese how events prior to his leaving could affect him in a practical sense if he did decide to retire, he did not want his career to end in failure, with what he now viewed as the likely mistake he'd made with Walker, something with all his experience he should have seen coming. Reese felt he would have to have this one final win, to wall off his legacy against what boxing historians were sure to call a regrettable end to a great career. What would be more practical and appropriate reasoned Reese, than to give Walker an edge? What would the loss of a little self-respect matter to prevent damage to his legacy? Then he could be done with it, left to care only about what they'd say about him when he was gone.

Reese was willing to risk it, just as he'd taken a risk with Walker in the first place, then he would have nothing more to do with Robert Walker or the girl, especially the girl, but he did not want to show it yet. He would make some phone calls to call in some favors he was owed, somehow arrange for Walker to prevail and then with his legacy intact he could pass the enigma that would still be Robert Walker onto his associates and have nothing more to do with either of them. With Walker's fate less important to him than his own now, suddenly Reese could see this boil of moral uncertainty they'd all been festering in coming to a head.

PART II

The black limousine slid south into the metropolis like a snake through cloud darkened city streets to arrive at a grandly lit promenade in front of the arena, the limo stopped and the doors flung open, Wilkins and the others climbed out. Reese winced at the spectacle of it, as he looked at the great façade with the fighter's names on it, he thought how it might be the last time he would ever arrive at such a place in the same way. The fight between Robert 'Colt' Walker and Sergey 'Nine Lives' Volkov was billed as a title eliminator, the winner moving on for a shot at the title. Its doors slammed shut the limo slithered away and disappeared into the thickening crowd. Reese glanced across the walkway to catch a glimpse of Sergey Volkov and his entourage entering the building.

"We're here," said Wilkins, then pointing straight ahead, he added, "and so are *they*."

Reese took note of how the former champion and his associates moved swiftly into the lobby and disappeared down a right-side corridor to avoid the crowd, confident and business like with little hesitation, and no fanfare surrounding their appearance. Walker and the others too, had watched as they moved quickly, boldly up the ramp, stiff-necked in suits, nothing casual about them, and in front of the pack had been the journeyman fighter himself confidently leading the way.

"They're old pros," said Wilkins. "But we'll get to them, soon enough."

Then the night clouds erupted with fingers of rain pouring straight down from thunder and lightning onto Robert Walker who'd remained as the others went inside. A large and rowdy crowd had assembled for the undercard, amid booming loudspeakers, and undulating strobe lights, some holding plaques or waving flags for the TV cameras, and it was a newly christened

Robert Walker who'd signed himself and finally entered the building into this clamorous surge of cheering fans and special effects.

From a balcony walkway, as he went to his dressing room Walker had looked down at the ring, a tiny white square bathed in blinding artificial light and as the bell sounded at the end of round one, he skidded into the corner and plowed sideways onto his stool, with Wilkins out in front of him now at his feet, and the spinning by of the canvas in his head, he could hear the roar of the crowd.

Walker hit the floor again in the next round and he'd not been offered any advice from his trainer other than, "that's twice," said Wilkins, "he's had you down twice, once in each round, but you got up."

Walker felt bad as he ever felt, as if he'd been run over. "How many times?" Walker managed to mumble.

"Twice, two times," said Wilkins. "If he's out to test an injury, he's damn well over it, he's out to send a message, he'll try to finish you, watch for a head butt, throw punches, hold if you have to, but stay on your feet."

Walker managed to stay on his feet in the third and then managed to stay on his feet again in the fourth but was cut over both eyes. As his cut man worked furiously, the referee and doctor conferred over the ropes to determine if Walker's wounds were bad enough to stop the fight. Inside the ring the Russian fighter had begun to taunt Walker. "You have a chance," kept saying Wilkins, slapping Walker's face, "if you just stay on your feet."

The fighter sat bulked forward with his head over his gloves and knew he was in a place he'd never been with something stirring in him he'd never felt. Walker finally realized how his back

was truly against the wall and suddenly lifted his chin, his misshapen face underneath the swelling and crusted blood, came aglow. If Reese had looked dumbfounded at Walker when he'd lost his last fight with only a minute to win it, Reese looked even more dumbfounded at Walker now.

It was suddenly evident to Reese what he was witnessing, it was a look he remembered, he'd seen it on the faces of young soldiers in combat as a platoon leader in Viet Nam, and like those young soldiers from some unknown place Walker'd found his courage.

Gabrielle had seen it too. She recognized it in her own way but said nothing as Wilkins moved in closer to see if it was what he thought it was. And yes, it was clear to Reese that his boxer was no longer the Robert Walker any of them knew, that maybe in Walker's case it took just a little longer to become a man, but regardless, the important thing was it occurred, and occurred at the right time. He stayed afraid so long, thought Wilkins, the poor bastard almost wasted his life, and then Reese thought he might like Walker now just as a dark foreboding came to the back of his head, but in his euphoria, Reese ignored it.

Reese felt his legacy secure, maybe if he changed his mind about retiring it could be a new start for both of them, without *her*. What a change Reese marveled, it took place right in front of him, he'd seen it. But the girl, she'd seen it too, and Reese could tell something was in the girl's head, and he prepared himself for what he thought it was.

"Stop the fight," said Gabrielle, bitterly, her face pallid, she looked sick.

Reese was sure Gabrielle would not be so agitated had she not seen what happened with Walker, that Walker'd found his courage and could leave her, that she could lose her control of him, and her life become imperfect again.

“No!” Shouted Reese. “It’s my legacy, damn it. You took everything from *him*, now you want my legacy.”

“What about me?” Gabrielle shot back. “What’ll happen to me?” She asked, gasping with contempt. “He’s frightful looking, look at the blood and swelling on that face. He can’t win.”

“He can, and you know it, too,” answered Reese. “I never expected it; he’s about to breathe fire in there.”

Thinking she’d bide her time Gabrielle bit her lip and moved a short distance away.

With arms crossed and trademark fedora pushed back on his head Reese watched as the referee waved the fighters up for round five. When the bell rang Walker marched toward the center of the ring. “Party’s over for old ‘no lives left,’ testified Reese, talking to himself.

‘Nine Lives’ came out with gloves down, standing straight up, expecting no attack, but two minutes in Walker landed a left hook and finished with a right hand that stunned Volkov. On shaky legs, eyes glazed, Volkov reeled backward into his corner, Walker pummeled the Russian until the bell sounded then turned to give the girl a steely look.

“He’s finished in there.” Reese clasped Walker’s shoulders. “Good job!” He exclaimed sending Walker back out for the sixth.

Then overcome with shame at not having believed in his fighter or his own efforts to produce an honest champion in an unguarded moment Reese lamented, “I rigged it, and didn’t have to,” just loud enough for the girl to hear.

“What did you say?” Asked Gabrielle, who’d heard Reese talking as he backed away from the corner.

Reese recognized his mistake; he'd not seen how close she was.

"I arranged it," Reese owned, "if Walker stayed up, and threw punches, he'd get a decision," not knowing if she'd even heard correctly what he'd said in the first place. Reese realized he'd just confessed to fight-fixing, then tried to diminish it, by saying, "it's a moot point, though, isn't it, or soon will be."

But Gabrielle could see what Reese Wilkins really was now, a common criminal like the ones his father had driven from the sport and Reese could feel the weight of her having something on him.

The usually imperturbable Volkov stormed out as a great cheer went up from the crowd and all Reese could see was the Russian's head jerk back each time 'Colt' Walker fired his jab. Volkov held, clinched, and leaned on Walker until Walker sidestepped. And when the Russian's tired and careening mass came forward and was almost on him again Walker delivered a strike that sent Volkov through the ropes and into the seats. At the same time Walker felt a shockwave sweep over the arena. And it was a newly confident Robert Walker who saw a blinding flash inside his head, just as he had become fully and courageously himself.

They had arrived at the hotel and then went to their rooms. An elated Robert Walker dominated Gabrielle in bed until he was exhausted and fell asleep. Gabrielle soon followed. Hearing a noise, Gabrielle awoke, and Walker was not in bed. Instinctively she pulled her .38 from the drawer. She slipped quietly toward the kitchenette where in a dark shadow at the kitchen table Walker sat still and silent with the barrel of his .357 pressed against his temple. He was not moving, there was no tremor in his hand, nor did his body quiver, he looked at peace. She raised the .38 and

shot it into his temple. She called Reese Wilkins. Robert Walker lay now, face down, on the kitchen table. Reese arrived in minutes.

The girl stared straight ahead and confessed; she'd committed her last act of control over Robert Walker.

"I wouldn't touch him," said Wilkins, relieved at how each had something on the other.

"Where's the gun?" Asked Reese.

She pointed her finger.

Reese picked up the gun. He wiped it off and replaced Walkers with it. Staring at the dead man, he imagined his future felt his legacy safe and with both his and Gabrielle's secrets put to rest he'd retire now. Reese called police then walked to the corner where the girl sat calm and quiet. He could hear people stirring in the hall.

"That was a helluva thing to do," said Reese. "You knew he'd gotten courage enough to do it, but you couldn't let him have the satisfaction, you had to take that away from him, too."

"Stop," she said.

"Don't worry," said Reese. "You're perfectly safe."

"Stop it," she said again.

Of course, it'll be suicide, like his old man, everyone suspected it might happen."

"Please stop," she said once more.

"I guess we're all through here, and I was beginning to like him again."

"Oh, will you *please* stop!" She cried.

“Okay,” said Wilkins, he pulled her up and held tightly onto her wrist, “say you don’t know anything to police, that you’re shocked and saddened by it, and say it with feeling.”

EPILOGUE

After the police left and before Walker’s body’d been removed from the hotel, the two of them went out to sit on the steps, “think of the money we left up there,” one of them said to the other. And with Robert Walker being of no more use to anyone, Reese Wilkins slipped quietly into retirement and was later inducted into boxing’s hall of fame, and Gabrielle Moscone with no one else to torment packed her bags and promising a return someday went back to LA for a second try at it.

