

## HOME SWEAT HOME

(4,988 words)

The boxing gym, tucked away in the basement of Memorial Hall, was a vault of preserved sweat. The smell permeated every piece of tape, every glove, every bag, every rope, every towel and rag, every square inch of canvas, every square foot of the wood floor and brick walls.

Collin's nostrils flinched when he stepped inside. He thought his nose was used to BO, having slept shoulder to shoulder with brothers who bathed once a week whether they needed it or not. The gym at Miller had reeked, too. But this was stronger. More concentrated. A different dimension altogether.

He inhaled deeply, held it, smiled as he savored the intense sour saltiness. Imitating a smoker, he curled his lips and slowly exhaled. He took another deep drag. Yeah, he told himself, I'm home. I'll be okay.

On top of his usual September homesickness, he'd been feeling he didn't really belong here at Thomas Jefferson's school. He had an academic scholarship, just like Miller, but the military boarding school's uniforms had made it easy for him to fit in. He could ignore his classmates' jokes about hobos and food lines. They didn't have a clue what the Depression was like for his family. On the University of Virginia Lawn, however, the differences were apparent. His worn, poorly fitting clothes advertised more than his empty pockets. They made him feel like a hick.

Looking around, he pictured how the O'Reilly's four-room clapboard farmhouse would easily fit inside the gym's three side-by-side rings. Before he went

away to school, he'd never thought about how little space there was for his ten siblings and parents. It was a roof over their heads. And it didn't matter that their rocky, red-clay farm, tucked away in the mountains about 25 miles from where he stood, barely produced enough for them to survive. They always managed.

His challenge now was to forget about home and focus on winning a spot on the Cavalier boxing team. With it would come acceptance on campus, he believed, and the guys would ignore his Salvation Army clothes. It wouldn't be easy -- Virginia ranked among the five top college teams in the nation. And the team's welterweight, Collin's weight class, was a senior.

However, Collin was confident he was good enough to compete. At Miller, he won the state military high school boxing league crown three years running in his weight division, advancing from Flyweight to Light Welterweight to Welterweight. And he was now close to 6-foot, 145-pounds, with not an ounce of fat.

He owed much of his success to his coach at Miller, Major Farland. In fact, were it not for the retired major, Collin hated to think about where he'd be. He was just a couple inches over 5-foot and weighed about 100 pounds when he arrived at the military school. But, he was strong and fast, and he loved to fight. In his head, he was the toughest kid in the freshman class, the only one who didn't let the hazing of the upperclassmen faze him. Once boxing practice began, he was determined to settle some scores.

What he didn't realize until he got into the ring was the biggest score he had to settle was internal. Every time he sparred, he relived a particular beating. Except this time he was fighting back and he wasn't going to lose. Each punch was fueled by pent up anger. Each victory became his retaliation against the years of humiliation.

His fury intimidated his opponents, which made for easy victories. It seemed to him that he was getting better and better. He was sure he impressed the coach, too, until he put him in the ring with an upperclassman from Boston named Gerry O'Connell. O'Connell was a little taller than Collin, a couple pounds heavier, and just as fast. Puffed up by his string of successes, Collin was confident when the bell rang, but not for long. After less than a minute, he knew he was helpless against the much superior boxer. Infuriated, he made a fool of himself, swinging wildly, trying to fight back, leaving himself even more open to the Yankee's onslaught. Collin felt saved by the bell ending the first round. He staggered to his corner and tried to think what Coach Farland had taught about how to come from behind, but his mind was blank. He ended up on the canvas four times before Farland finally stopped the slaughter midway through the second round. Collin would never forget how battered, frustrated, and embarrassed he was, and furious, too, with everyone, including himself.

Afterwards, Collin was more hurt in his head than his body. He was humiliated, just like he felt after his daddy's beatings. Why had the coach set him up? He must have known Collin was no match for O'Connell – even though Collin himself believed he would take him.

Coach Farland ignored him for two whole days after the slaughter. Finally, Collin swallowed his pride and knocked on the coach's office door. The coach beckoned him to come in and shut the door and pointed to the chair next to his desk. The ensuing two-hour session probably changed his life. After listening to the coach mercilessly chew him out for not controlling his temper, refusing to listen and accept instruction, etc., he was caught by surprise when the retired Army officer suddenly softened his voice and asked, "Collin, what are you hiding?" He reached out and squeezed Collin's forearm. "What's really going on inside that head of yours?"

Collin was stunned. He suddenly couldn't hold back the tears, the first time he'd let anyone see him cry since he started elementary school. Embarrassed, he sprang up and lunged for the door, but Coach Farland was there first. He put his arm around Collin's shoulder and steered him back to the chair. Then he sat and waited for Collin to get control before he continued.

"Take your time, Son. If you don't want to tell me, that's okay. But I hope you'll tell someone because it's obvious to me you're a troubled young man. You're fighting a demon every time you step into the ring, and I'm afraid, even though you're winning, you're losing your battle."

Collin felt the wind go out of him. He felt naked, exposed. Yet he also felt safe. It took him several minutes to control the flow of tears. When he finally could look the coach in his eyes, he told him about his daddy. He even told him how scared he was for his siblings since he wasn't there to protect them.

When he was done, the two of them sat in silence staring into each other's eyes. After what felt like a minute or more, the coach spoke. "Never, ever, blame yourself for this, Collin. You are a *victim*. Your father is a *sick, evil* man. He should be..." He stopped and bit his lip, then looked at the ceiling shaking his head. "It isn't right, but I'm afraid he'd have to kill you or one of your siblings before the law would step in."

Collin felt a chill in his chest. Kill? He really didn't think his daddy would go that far. No, he needed them to work his farm.

"For now," Major Farland continued, "I want you to promise that you'll focus on doing well here. Concentrate on your studies. And (he chuckled) we'll work on your boxing *and* your self-control. You can get to be really, *really* good, if you're willing to work with me...Is that a deal?"

"Yes, Sir," Collin replied.

"And I promise you, I'll see what can be done about your father." Recognizing the talk was over, Collin jumped up and saluted, but the coach waved off the salute. He stood up and firmly shook Collin's hand, holding onto it longer than Collin expected.

He kept his promise to the coach, and the coach kept his as well. Maybe two weeks had gone by when his sister, Brenda, wrote that an older man in Army uniform showed up at the farm and visited with their daddy. She assumed he was connected to Miller, and feared something had happened to Collin. But their daddy never said what

the man wanted. For whatever reason, he was angry as could be afterwards.

Coincidentally, she mentioned, there hadn't been any serious beatings in over a week.

Eventually, as Collin expected, the beatings resumed and continued until he came home for the summer. By then he was almost as tall as his daddy and in one final showdown, the first day he was home, he felt he was giving much more than he got until the old man grabbed his snake whip. Before he could strike, Collin wrestled it away, but he couldn't muster the strength, or the hate, to whip his daddy, even when he attempted to spit in Collin's face.

Collin turned his back and walked away, fully expecting to be tackled from behind. By the next morning, he was prepared to go at it again if the old man so much as touched him, but other than constant profanity and verbal abuse, there seemed to be an invisible line between them – in fact, between the old man and all Collin's brothers and sisters.

When he returned to Miller to start his sophomore year, he reported what happened to Coach Farland. The coach put his arm around Collin's shoulder and said, "Tell me if anything changes." They never spoke about his daddy again.

The coach worked all his boxers hard, but none as hard as Collin, and Collin loved it. Midway through his sophomore season, he started smiling and laughing all the time, just to get the coach's goat. That made Farland work him even harder, but Collin wouldn't stop, not as long as he was happy – and winning. And he won a lot – losing only five fights in his first three years and going unbeaten his senior year.

Now a freshman again, Collin was confident but anxious. The Cavalier coach, Jimmy McPhee, was one of the best and toughest coaches in the college ranks. Despite the recommendation Coach Farland had given him, Collin knew it meant nothing if he didn't prove himself in the ring.

As it happened, Collin soon attracted Coach McPhee's attention. Boxing season wouldn't start until late fall, but the coach opened the gym to anyone interested in the sport, experienced or not. He was always on the lookout for new talent and the red-headed newcomer looked surprisingly polished. He made a point of watching him whenever he sparred, and observed his workout habits as well.

The kid appeared to be kinda skinny at first sight, but as McPhee watched him move, the coach realized he had a typical farm-boy build, all muscle and sinew. He couldn't decide which were faster, the boy's fists or feet. He unleashed combinations without ever seeming to stop and plant, yet his punches popped, stinging his opponents.

Concluding that the boy had been well-coached, it suddenly clicked: This must be O'Reilly, the kid recommended by Frank Farland, the boxing coach at the military school in Batesville. Farland ran a clinic in Richmond every summer and McPhee had helped him a couple times.

McPhee waited until O'Reilly finished sparring and then found Mort Caplan, his team captain. He asked what he knew about the skinny red-head in Ring Three.

Caplan, a smart-ass from Brooklyn, answered in his heavy accent, “You mean the hillbilly? His hair ain’t red.”

“It’s red to me, Caplan.” McPhee spit tobacco from his cigar to make his point.

Unperturbed, Caplan shot back, “It’s what we call sandy, Coach.”

“Okay, Wise Ass, let me start over. Who’s the skinny kid with the sandy hair in Ring Three?”

“I don’t know,” Caplan laughed, ducking as the coach clapped him upside the head. “Looks pretty good, though.”

“Thanks for all your help. You’re my captain. One of your jobs is to be on the look-out for new talent, and you don’t even know who this guy is? I’m going to demote you.”

“Heck, Coach, I told you he’s a hillbilly.”

“And how do you know that Mister?”

“Jis’ wight ’til y’all heah him tal-ik,” Caplan imitated the new boxer’s pronounced twang.

McPhee snorted and sauntered over to where Collin was talking with his sparring partner.

“Hello Coach McPhee.” The sandy-haired boxer stuck out his gloved hand.  
“I’m Collin O’Reilly and this here is my friend, Thomas Fogarty.”

The coach was surprised. Usually new boys were intimidated in his presence and waited to be spoken to. But O’Reilly, his twang not as bad as Caplan’s imitation, immediately started peppering him with questions about the team’s chances for the upcoming season. The boy finally got around to asking if he could try out for the team, and probed to find out how the coach decided who fought in each weight class.

The answer to the first question was easy—“Sure.” The answer to the second wasn’t so easy. Once a boxer was on the team, it was hard to oust him.

“Why, what weight do you think you’d fight at?”

“Welterweight, sir.”

“Well, O’Reilly, we’ve already got a very good welterweight. This’ll be his fourth year on the team, and third in that weight.”

“Yessir, I know. I came here and saw him fight last year.”

“And?” Coach McPhee let his question hang in the air, but O’Reilly didn’t bite. He just smiled and danced, bobbing his head from side to side. The coach finally said, “I don’t particularly like fighters who smile, O’Reilly. You’re either nervous or cocky. Whichever, a fighter takes nervousness as a sign of weakness, and it gives him an edge. And cockiness makes him dig deeper – wants to wipe the smile off your face.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t sir me, O’Reilly. This isn’t a military school.”

“Coach?”

“Yeah...”

“What if my smile just means I’m having fun?” He grinned.

McPhee couldn’t stop from smiling back at the boy. He’s the “real McCoy,” he laughed to himself, wondering if he smiled when he shot the Hatfields.

“Is this all a roundabout way of saying you think you’re good enough to challenge Murphy?”

“I may not be in his class yet, Coach, because I’ve never boxed at this level. But it’s my weight, and I’d like to try out.”

The coach laughed sarcastically. “You’re just a tad ambitious, aren’t you? You think you can waltz in here and beat one of my best fighters?”

“Oh no, Sir. I didn’t say that. I just said I’d like to try out. I know I have to win the spot.”

“Don’t bullshit me, son. You’re saying you think you can.”

“Maybe, Coach.” He looked around the gym and then looked back at McPhee and grinned again. “It’s going to be fun trying.”

And he made it look like fun as he worked out every morning, running farther and faster than everyone else, even the team captain, Caplan. He worked the heavy bag until he could barely lift his arms, then jumped rope for 10 minutes, then moved to the speed bag and somewhere inside found the strength and stamina to work another 15 minutes, always smiling.

A month later, McPhee had seen enough to put O'Reilly and Murphy in the ring together to determine who would fight at welterweight in the first pre-season match against Pittsburgh. The matchup created enough buzz among the other boxers that workouts came to a standstill. McPhee didn't mind. He wanted the boys to realize that every spot on the team was up for grabs. The best boxers made the team.

Going into the contest, Collin now knew he was at least as skilled as Murphy, but the senior had much more experience and was a lot stronger. He'd watched him numerous times in the gym and observed how he liked to turn a boxing match into a brawl. Collin was quicker on his feet, and his punches were fast, but Murphy was a stalker. He maneuvered his opponent backward into the ropes where he could pound away with both fists, apparently believing he could absorb any punch thrown in close while he hammered away at his opponent's body.

Since Collin could not outslug him, the best and maybe only way to beat the shorter, stockier senior was to keep moving, go in fast and jab, move away from the countering left, look for opportunities to follow up with either a right to the mid-section or a left hook to the head if it was open. And never let him get close. If he

could avoid it, Collin didn't want to get tied up, particularly near the ropes. Murphy would bull him backwards, and if the ref was slow to break them up, he'd do damage.

GONG!

Collin dances to the center of the ring then circles to the right, out of Murphy's reach, moving swiftly on the balls of his feet. Darting in, he connects with two hard jabs, then skips back and circles again, this time to the left.

For the first minute, Collin dodges or easily deflects every jab Murphy throws, frustrating him, seeming to be in a different time zone, immune to gravity, moving effortlessly in and out and around. And he scores points, using his longer reach to land solid jabs and then dance away before Murphy can unleash a counterattack.

Midway through the round, Collin notes Murphy crouching lower and tucking in his elbows, keeping his gloves higher up on his forehead – he's realized he has to do a better job blocking Collin's jabs or he'll lose on points. Collin now expects him to try even harder to knock him down. He probably believes he can absorb everything Collin could throw at him. But to take control of the fight, he will also have to move his feet quicker and cut off Collin's angles.

Collin adjusts by picking up his pace, but this means he has to loosen his stance, even drop his elbows and leave himself exposed. He dances around the outside of the ring close to the ropes. What's important is to not appear to be running. He has to keep feinting, attempting to make contact even if he doesn't.

He feels his legs beginning to tire – he’s moving far more than planned – but he’s still in command. He’s even able to land a couple good rights by dipping in, faking a jab and then coming around with a right hook as he dances back to safety.

The third time Collin tries this maneuver, Murphy surprises him by coming out of his peek-a-boo defense and leading with his right. Collin dodges away, but Murphy connects with two hard blows to his right shoulder, barely missing his exposed chin.

The gym bursts with shrill whistles and raucous cheers as the bell rings ending Round One. The freshmen chant “Collin! Collin! Collin!” as he sits in his corner, but it sounds like the rest of the crowd is roaring for Murphy to kill him. Collin tunes everything out to listen to his trainer, Joe. He doesn’t like how winded he is, and how rubbery his legs are already.

“Geez, Kid,” Joe says sarcastically, “he hardly laid a glove on you, but ya ain’t leavin’ much for Round 2, and forget Round 3.”

“I know, I know,” Collin mutters through his mouth guard. “But he’s frustrated now -- he’ll do something stupid.”

“So don’t you get stupid, too. Save yourself. Slow down a little. But don’t get caught or try to slug it out with him. And if he does get ya, tie him up, both arms! And when the ref makes you break, get out of his reach quick!”

When the bell rings to start Round Two, Murphy charges across the ring and almost catches Collin in his corner. Tasting panic-induced bile, Collin feints left, then

ducks and dances right, making Murphy's wild right haymaker miss. The brawler is momentarily off balance so Collin quickly pivots on his left foot, steps in and connects with a rapid left-right-left combination to the side of the head. He knows instantly that he's stunned Murphy. He sets himself and throws another swift combination as Murphy turns his face into Collin's punches. He then closes with a hard right uppercut to the gut.

Murphy isn't as fazed as Collin thinks. He shakes off Collin's blows and counters with a fierce right hand that Collin doesn't see coming. It lands solidly on his left temple, stunning him and momentarily freezing his whole body. His reflexes kick in just in time to get his gloves up to absorb some of the impact of Murphy's next left hook. Covering up, he tries to move back and away but Murphy bulls him into the ropes and pummels him with both fists. Desperate, Collin lets Murphy's jackhammer combination knock him back into the ropes with such momentum that he bounces back into the fighter. Murphy isn't quick enough to keep Collin from wrapping his arms and locking them to his sides. Collin holds on for dear life as Murphy fiercely struggles to tear his arms free, managing to loosen his right enough to drive his fist repeatedly into Collin's kidney.

As the ref tries to break them up, Collin's head clears enough to know he has to get out of danger. He digs deep and finds the strength in his legs to spring back when he releases Murphy's arms and skip to the left, ducking behind the referee to block Murphy's attempt to charge him again. With space between them now, Collin gets back up on the balls of his feet and dances laterally, shaking his arms to loosen

his muscles. He spends the rest of the round staying away from the stalking Murphy, darting right, then left, then feinting right and going left again, faking an attack and dancing away, making Murphy chase him. He doesn't care if it costs him points. Hearing someone in his corner hollering 15-, 14-, 13-, Collin knows Murphy hears the count, too, and watches him gather himself for one last charge to end the round. Timing a feint to the left perfectly, Collin ducks to his right and, as Murphy lunges past him, he comes up, spins around on his pivot foot and puts everything he has left into a right cross. It catches Murphy square on the left side of his headgear, and Collin knows he's done damage again. But, this time he isn't going to fall into Murphy's trap. He steps away and watches. Murphy stops, shakes his head to clear it, then turns toward Collin as the bell sounds.

Expecting Murphy to stop with the bell, Collin drops his arms and is turning toward his corner when he feels a crushing blow to his right kidney—Murphy has head-butted him. Staggering, he goes down just as the referee gets between them and pushes Murphy back.

The gym is stone silent. Collin lies curled up on the mat. Joe and Coach McPhee jump into the ring and try to help him sit up. Collin hears a lone loud boo-o-o-o-o, and then the gym erupts with angry shouts.

Murphy, back in his corner, sits on his stool and thrusts out his jaw. His trainer, an assistant coach named Bill, screams at him.

Joe and Coach McPhee lift Collin to his feet and help him to his corner. McPhee then joins the referee at the ropes and they lean down to talk with the timer. Collin watches, fury rising as his head clears. He wants the bell to ring. He'll make Murphy pay for this.

As the referee signals toward Collin's corner, Joe tells Collin to keep his mouth shut – he'll handle this. He says he wants Murphy disqualified and kicked off the team.

Collin stands up and begins slowly bouncing on his toes, yelling he's okay. He glares across the ring at Murphy and mouths, "I'm gonna kick your butt!" He hasn't been this riled since the last time his daddy used the whip on him, and he vows to finish this later if they don't finish it in the ring.

Joe is disgusted when he comes back. Since this was an intra-team match to determine who the starting welterweight will be, he says the coach wants to let the fight continue if O'Reilly is okay. Collin looks across at the coach and nods. The coach then walks briskly to Murphy's corner and gives him a stern warning that can be heard by everyone in the gym, threatening to not only kick him off the team, but refer him to the student court if he tries anything else. He warns the corner team as well, and then announces why he's allowing the fight to continue.

The crowd applauds but Collin hears some muffled boos and looks to see where they're coming from. He isn't surprised that it's his freshman buddies.

The bell rings and Collin walks slowly to meet Murphy and the referee in the center of the ring. The referee barks at the fighters to keep it clean and box. They acknowledge his instructions and tap gloves. Murphy resumes stalking, arms cocked, chin uncovered. Collin, confident Murphy won't do something stupid like bull-rush him again, at least at the start of the round, shuffles in and out, faking and then jabbing to test Murphy's tactics. He's determined to make Murphy pay, but he isn't going to be a fool.

Now Collin dances in suddenly and delivers four piston-like jabs to the face that catch Murphy by surprise. Skipping back, he circles to his left and just as suddenly attacks again, leading with a right that again finds Murphy's face unprotected.

Collin sees Murphy is pissed at himself. Shaking off the blows, he stalks Collin, shuffling his feet faster, but staying almost flat footed so that he'll be solidly planted if he catches Collin in his range. Collin purposely skips side to side back toward a neutral corner, luring Murphy in. He can see in Murphy's eyes that he thinks he's cornering his prey.

Collin attacks, catching Murphy unprepared. He goes straight in, leading with stiff jabs that stop Murphy's advance and thwart his wild right hook. Collin then feints left, and, on his toes, fakes a dancing retreat that causes Murphy to lower his gloves and come after him. Collin surprises him again when he reverses and skips straight in, firing two rapid combinations, left, left, right, left, left, right, stunning Murphy and knocking him back on his heels. The best he can counter with is a weak left followed

by a weaker right that hits nothing but air as Collin dances back for real this time and circles.

Collin calculates that there's a minute or so left to go. He tells himself to back off, catch his breath, and make sure Murphy doesn't get close enough to use his right. He would like to set up one or two more attacks, but he's wary of his own stamina. His legs are rubbery again. And with the clock ticking away, Murphy will be desperate and dangerous.

He's ready when Murphy bull-rushes him again but isn't prepared for his wind-milling fists. He tries to block them by ducking his head below his gloves, but this allows Murphy to drive him back into a corner. He tries to tie him up, but Murphy alternately measures him with jabs and pounds his body. He must escape.

Still covering his head, his arms and elbows absorbing the worst of Murphy's assault, Collin crouches lower, sucks deep, and then drives sideways off his left foot along the rope. He stumbles but catches himself and scrambles a few feet further, feeling Murphy chasing him, his blows glancing off Collin's left forearm and headgear. Through his gloves, he watches Murphy adjust his stance and attempt to renew his bombardment, but Collin has gained just enough space to straighten up and regain his footing. He feints away to his right, then pivoting on the ball of his left foot, swings a wild right hook that Murphy has to duck. As Murphy comes up he jabs twice at Collin but Collin brushes the blows off, plants his feet and launches a furious left hook that catches Murphy flush on the side of his head. Stunned, Murphy tries to counter, but his arms are wild.

Now Collin's adrenalin kicks in. He unleashes three combinations. By the third, Murphy is staggering and the referee steps in between them, signaling the end of the fight and raising Collin's right glove.

At that moment, Collin feels everything go out of him. He realizes he probably couldn't hold his fist up without the ref's assistance. His punches had lost every bit of sting by the end of the second combination, and the third was a series of marshmallow blows that landed like cotton on Murphy's headgear.

Gradually the bedlam in the gym sinks into his ears. Shouts of "Collin! Collin! Collin!" bounce off the ceiling.

He looks at the ref and thanks him. Then turns to accept Joe's embrace and smiles at Coach McPhee. He looks for Murphy, but he's already leaving the ring. Shaking his head, Collin watches him for a moment, annoyed that he didn't shake hands. Shrugging, he looks around and smiles at the other boxers gathered around the ring still cheering him.

"Come on, Collin," Coach McPhee grabs his arm. "Gotta clear the ring for the next fight." He hands Collin his University of Virginia Cavaliers robe and claps his shoulder. "Well done. I wish Farland could have been here."

Collin smiles. "Yes Sir, Coach. That would have been great."

And his next thought surprises him. He actually wishes his daddy were here. He doesn't know why. He doesn't want to make his daddy proud of him. No. But maybe scared is okay.

The end.