

Chapter 13



The Language of Money

IN 1938 IN HAVANA, THE palm trees were swaying in the breeze, and under a cabana, Jimmy Nap sat with Meyer Lansky and Cuban President, General Fulgencio Batista. And on Jimmy's lap, in the middle of this power meeting, was little ol' me, at four years old.

Lansky was in his late 30s and had already established himself in the New York, Florida and Vegas rackets, as well as in Europe. He was nearly ten years my father's senior and that much more ahead of him in the mob pecking order. Lansky had long been a connection for the mob in Cuba. He had a close business relationship with Batista and other South American dictators to promote gambling casinos in their countries. Lansky was one part gangster, and two parts entrepreneur. My father liked that about him.

My father and Lansky's relationship went back to the prohibition years of the 1920's, when Jimmy Nap drove the trucks back and forth from New York to Chicago for Yale and Capone. During that time, Lansky and Bugsy Siegel

managed their own bootlegging operations in and around the New York and New Jersey area with the backing of Lucky Luciano. Together they also formed Murder Inc., which carried out hundreds of murders on behalf of the mob. Their targets usually included informants and mob members who had broken mob rules.

Jimmy Nap and Lansky ran in the same circles, with a lot of the same friends like Yale, Luciano, Frank Costello, and Salvatore Maranzano, the first *capo di tutti capi*—or “boss of bosses” of the American mob. Who Lansky killed under Luciano’s orders in 1931. Then after Maranzano’s death, Luciano and his colleagues pushed to form The Five Families, which was intended to abolish the position of Boss of Bosses.

Lansky was a short, slight man, always in a suit and brim. He talked in quick, pointed directives and sprinkled his words liberally with curses.

Batista, who was also in his late 30s, always wore his military uniform and turned his unlit cigar between his lips as he listened intently to what Lansky was saying.

“This is the guy I was talking to you about, general,” Lansky said, “Jimmy’s from New York. He promotes fights in the city. All the big fights. He’s the man that can bring a championship bout to your island.”

Then Lansky turned to my father. “See, Jimmy, the general here is looking to bring boxing to Cuba. We’ve been helping him with the casinos and racetracks. Now he thinks it’s time to branch out. Championship boxing! A title match, right here on the island. It would be a big draw. Big. Whattaya think, Jimmy?”

"I'm listening," my father said, sincerely, as he bounced me on his knee.

Lansky laughed. "He's listening. He's a funny guy. What I was explaining to the general is that the gambling revenue generated between his fighter, Kid Chocolate, and the kid we bring in from America—whoever you think we should bring in—would be a reflection of the solid relationship between our two countries. A relationship that's good for all involved. It's good for America. It's good for Cuba. And it's good for us because, well, money is always good for everybody. Am I right, Gentlemen?"

The "kid" Jimmy was referring to was Eligio Sardiñas-Montalvo, a wildly popular Cuban fighter known as "Kid Chocolate."

Lansky knew how to speak the language everyone understood. Whether Cuban or American, it was the language of money. My father knew Lansky wanted this fight to happen. My father wanted it to happen. They both assumed Batista wanted it too. They got right down to business.

"I got a kid named Nicky Jerome," Jimmy explained. "A featherweight. Tough as nails. You think your kid can take him?"

General Batista smiled and plucked his cigar from his mouth, "Kid Chocolate is one of our great Cuban fighters in history. He has the power in both hands."

Batista put his two hands out to show my father and Lansky. "*Dos Manos!*" Then he looked at me. "Can you say that little boy? *Dos Manos...*"

I repeated the words, "*Dos Manos*"—two hands—then I tucked myself under my father's arm.

"He won his first twenty fights by knockout," Batista said.

"I know who he is," Jimmy acknowledged. "But you have to understand something, general. My guy is from Brooklyn."

The general laughed.

"He's laughing. I'm serious," Jimmy looked from Lansky to Batista. "They call him Machine Gun Nicky, because he throws lightning fast left jabs and left hooks. Fast."

"Kid Chocolate's first twenty one fights as a pro, he won by knockouts," the general said, putting his cigar back in his mouth.

They were now going tit for tat.

"Yeah, but you can't hurt what you can't hit," said Jimmy Nap.

Lansky brought the conversation around to something they could all agree on. "Kid Chocolate is box office gold in Havana, Jimmy," informed Lansky. "We bring in Jerome and it's a match made in heaven. Do we got a deal?"

Batista leaned in. "If Meyer brings you here then I know you are a man of respect and honor. If you say your fighter is the right man and it is the right time, then we have ourselves a deal."

Batista extended his hand and Jimmy Nap shook it. Batista stood and patted me on the head and repeated the two words, "*Dos Manos...Cute boy.*"

Then he walked off, followed by two heavily armed guards.

Once Batista was out of earshot, Lansky turned to my father. "Whaddaya think of the general?"

"He's a politician," Jimmy Nap said. "Never trust a politician. You know that."

"He's a good man. He opened up the whole fuckin'... 'scuse my French, the kid's here...He opened up the whole island to me and Charlie." He was referring to Lucky Luciano. "He loves us. We got a stranglehold on a foreign government with this guy in place. Do you know how big that is, Jimmy?"

"Nothing lasts forever, Meyer," my father warned. "These guys cut each other's heads off down here for power. Be careful."

"A lot like the people we know up North, huh?"

"You can't trust them. They don't trust each other."

"This guy's the president here, Jimmy. The main man. That ain't changin'. He ain't goin' nowhere."

"My father used to say something to me" Jimmy shared Grandpa Antonio's wisdom with Lansky. "He used to say, 'When the chess game is over, the king and the pawn go into the same box.' He used to say it in Italian. *Capisce?*"

"So you don't like the fuckin' general? Is that what you're sayin', Jimmy?"

"Meyer, the mouth, please, my son's here..."

"Eh, I'm sorry, Jimmy, but you're aggravatin' me."

"Look, he's a politician, which means he's a crook. Just by nature. He cheated his people out of everything they have. Where we come from, a street guy gets killed for that."

"He ain't cheatin' us, don't you worry about that."

"We'll make the deal, Meyer," Jimmy conceded. "It's good for all of us, like you said. But don't be fooled. He's doing it because it's good for him. It allows him to keep

his hold on power here. He's not doing it because it's good for us."

"You're smart, Jimmy. That's why I brought you down."

"And that's why I came."

Meyer and Jimmy smiled at one another. They raised their glasses of champagne and toasted. I raised my glass of milk and they both clanked glasses with me too.

"So, now..." Meyer asked, "Can this Nicky Jerome give us a show or what?"

Jimmy flew back to New York and informed Dixon that his boy Nicky Jerome was going to get his shot, his break, the one he couldn't get before under Bruno.

As Nicky sparred in Stillman's, Jimmy Nap broke the good news to Dixon, who threw his arms around Jimmy. "You got us our shot!" Dixon called out to Nicky in the ring, "Hey, you hear that Nicky, Jimmy Nap got us a championship fight! Only you, Jimmy. Only you could do it!"

Nicky stopped fighting for a moment and lifted his hands into the air.

"God bless you, Jimmy Nap!" Dixon proclaimed, "We won't let you down."

"I know you won't," said Jimmy. "I know you won't."

Other wiseguys and managers looked on from across the gym, as Jimmy, Dixon and Nicky celebrated.

The fight was scheduled for December 18, 1938 at the Sports Palace in Havana.

In the dressing room Dixon taped up Nicky's hands. Jimmy Nap entered the room, unseen by Dixon and Nicky, and he listened from the back.

"This Chocolate is like a legend here," a nervous Nicky said to Dixon.

"Yeah, so?" asked Dixon.

"No, nothin', I'm just sayin'."

"He's a man, just like you, Nicky. He can be beat."

"No, I know that," Nicky said. "I ain't worried about losin.' I'm worried 'bout winnin'."

"Winnin'? What's wrong with winnin'?"

"I don't want there to be no riot in the place. They love this guy. He's like a national hero. The Bon Bon's won 28 straight fights. If I break his ass in front of his people..."

"Just break his ass," instructed Dixon. "Don't worry about nothin' else."

After hearing the conversation, Jimmy stepped forward in the dressing room, as if he had just gotten there. He was dressed sharp as always in a dark suit.

"Ay, look who's here..." Dixon greeted Jimmy.

"Hope I'm not interrupting. Just a fast hello and good luck to you, champ," he walked up to Nicky.

"Thank you, Jimmy," Nicky said. "This is all because of you."

"I'm not the one in the ring. You earned this. With those machine guns you call hands."

"Thank you for saying that."

"Got a lot of supporters out there tonight."

"Really?"

"He was a little worried," Dixon admitted to Jimmy Nap.

"Worried about what?" Jimmy asked.

"Worried he breaks Chocolate's ass and, ya know, the crowd, they turn on him."

Jimmy looked Nicky right in the eye for a few long seconds and spoke three simple words, "Break his ass."

Nicky nodded and cracked a smile.

The Sports Palace had electricity in the air that night. The capacity crowd was antsy and buzzing.

Nicky appeared in the tunnel and made his way to the ring, led by Dixon and his cut man. The crowd cheered. Some even waved American flags. They chanted, "USA! USA! USA!"

Nicky entered the ring. He looked ringside to see the supportive face of Jimmy Nap. Jimmy made a fist and held it up so Nicky could see it. Nicky winked at him. Beside Jimmy sat Meyer Lansky and several of his crew members.

Kid Chocolate came from the other tunnel. The home crowd erupted. Cuban music filled the air. Cuban flags waved in the stands.

Nicky turned and whispered to Dixon, "He's a pretty popular guy, huh?"

"That's all right," Dixon said. "You just do what you gotta do."

Kid Chocolate stepped into the ring. He saw Batista and his military men, all in uniform, sitting ringside. Batista nodded his head in approval. Chocolate acknowledged him with a bow.

The ring announcer introduced the fighters.

Nicky was in the red corner. He fought out of Brooklyn, USA. His professional record was 28 wins, 20 defeats, and four draws.

In the blue corner, was Kid Chocolate. The crows went nuts when he was introduced. His record was 135 wins, nine defeats and five draws; 50 of his wins came by way of knockout...the featherweight champion of the world, Eligio "Kid Chocolate" Sardiñas!

Nicky and Kid Chocolate came to the center of the ring where the referee gave them their final instructions. "Okay, Gentlemen, I've already given you your instructions. Obey my commands at all times. Watch the low blows and the rabbit punches. Let's have a good clean fight. Now touch gloves and come out fighting."

They touched gloves and returned to their corners.

The bell rang.

The fighters met at center ring and exchanged blows.

Nicky then moved swiftly around the ring. He was light on his feet, landing his jab quickly and effectively.

He was faster than the older Kid Chocolate, but Chocolate was the harder puncher. Every shot Chocolate landed was greeted with approval from the crowd. When Nicky connected it was more jeers than cheers.

The two fighters slugged it out. Their styles were different, but they complemented each other. The result was an evenly matched, ten-round brawl that delighted the crowd. Nicky stuck his jab and moved; Chocolate landed hard body shots. In the end, it was clear that Nicky had gotten the best of Chocolate.

By the late rounds Kid Chocolate was cut badly and moved slowly around the ring, as the slightly fresher Nicky Jerome continued to move and land. Chocolate showed heart by not going down or giving up. He didn't want to let his home crowd down.

At fight's end, the crowd stood for the weary fighters.

Nicky looked over to Jimmy, Lansky and their crew.

Jimmy called out to him, "Put your hands up! Dixon, put his hands up! He's the champ, raise his arms!"

Dixon grabbed Nicky's arm and lifted it.

“Raise your arms! You won. Raise ‘em up,” Dixon told Nicky.

Nicky barely raised them over his head.

Across the ring, Nicky saw Chocolate, sitting in his stool. His trainer attended to the cuts on his face.

The referee leaned over the ring, talking to one of Batista’s military men.

Nicky took all this in from the ring and looked to Jimmy.

Just raise your arms!” Jimmy shouted to the nervous Nicky.

Nicky looked around. He could feel the crowd growing uneasy as they awaited the referee’s decision. Something was stirring.

Nicky marched across the ring to a weakened Chocolate, who could barely get off his stool. Nicky grabbed Chocolate’s arm and lifted him from the stool. He raised Chocolate’s arm in victory and turned to the referee.

Nicky insisted to the referee, “It’s a draw! A draw! He’s still the champ!

Then Nicky shouted out to the crowd, “He’s still the champ! He’s your champ! Here he is!”

At their seats, Lansky leaned in to Jimmy and asked, “What the hell is he doing?”

“Showing a lot of class,” Jimmy informed Lansky. “A hell of a lot of class.”

The crowd once again erupted, this time in a chorus of cheers for both fighters. Chocolate was bloodied and puffy but he basked in the glory of the crowd for what would be the last time. Kid Chocolate retired after this bout.

From across the arena, Jimmy Nap and General Batista made eye contact. Batista nodded to Jimmy in recognition of Nicky's act.

After that night, my father, who was a fighter and who loved the fight game, was hooked for sure. My father had stars in his eyes when it came to boxing. And to see two proud warriors conduct themselves as Kid Chocolate and Nicky Jerome did on that December night in Havana just reinforced everything my father knew boxing should and could be.

When he returned to the states, my father became heavily involved in boxing promotions. He promoted the as Tami Mauriello vs. Joe Louis, Paddy DeMarco vs. Jimmy Carter, and Rocky Marciano vs. Roland LaStarza bouts.

Someone once asked me, if my father had a choice, would he have been a fighter instead of a gangster. I said, *gangster!* My father was no gangster. Don't ever use that word in describing my father. A gangster is a member of a gang. As an adult, my father was his own man. He was a businessman, an entrepreneur.

And anyway, in those days, people didn't have choices like that, about what they wanted to be. They just were. They became. This was before choices were even invented. Back then, people just lived, doing what they did, dealing with what was in front of them.

That was in front of Jimmy Nap after the Nicky Jerome-Kid Chocolate fight: the world and everything in it. That's what he aspired toward. Like Lansky and others before him, Jimmy Nap was beginning to speak the language of money. And it was beginning to speak back to him.