

(Scene takes place in a bar near Boston after I accepted an \$800 bribe to keep a horse I was riding at Suffolk Downs from finishing no better than third. The horse won. The next morning my then wife, Debbie (who insisted on going) and I meet the race fixers in a public place.)

The bar looks public with booths, a mini pool table and a back room with no door to close. A round green velvet card table sits in the middle. The entrance is wide and open and in sight of the bar and restaurant. I give Debbie a reassuring nod, and I follow the jockey and the heavyweight into the room. We sit on folding chairs, and I put my elbows on the table, ready to give my best speech. I look up, and five other men file into the room, two from the back and three from the front.

They look like the front line for the New England Patriots. I stand, thinking we should walk out. The bouncer type I talked to when I came in walks to the room's wide entrance and nods to the folks in the restaurant. Everyone there gets up and files out the front door. One of the five walks over, locks the door and lowers the window shades.

Two men walk to me, and one pushes me to the chair. Two guys sit on either side, one of them fat, weighing at least 300 pounds. The bouncer guy sits in front of me. Flanking him is a man in his forties with sandy hair, clean shaven and wearing slacks and a sports coat. The porkpie hat parked on his wide Irish-looking head makes him look natty and neat. He's smiling, but it's not a gotcha grin. It has professional warmth, like he's about to sell me a used car.

"Look, about yesterday," I start. "I gave the money back. There was nothing I could do. The whole race was jimmied. I was hardly in a gallop. A pony could have run the race faster. We went the mile in a minute forty-five, that's a little better than a two-minute lick, guys."

I look around. They're glancing at Debbie and back and forth at each other. I get the feeling they're adjusting their plan. They turn to glare at me, and I know they're not convinced. All are huge, except for the fairly short man in the porkpie hat who seems to be the boss. Everywhere I look are faces, middle-aged, vibrant and seething. Much of their shtick is scaring people. They do it well.

I'm packed in between two guys I realize may have killed before. None remotely looks or sounds Italian. "Look," I continue. "If I jerked the horse back to fourth, it would have been obvious. The stewards would have investigated the race. There would have been major heat on all the riders. Someone might have cracked. I knew you wouldn't want that."

No one seems to be listening. With the exception of the man in the porkpie hat, they all look mad. "Look, I owe you one. I'll make it up. I'll call you the second I got a winner at good odds. I know I can do this, I've ..."

"We lost \$50,000 on the race," says the fat guy to my left. He says it dryly as if they plunk down that kind of cash every day. But I'm amazed. I know that if they put that kind of money through

the betting windows at the track, the horse's odds will drop faster than a running horse that breaks a knee. I don't believe him.

"You rode the first part of the race for us, and you rode the last part of the race for the stewards," the fat guy says.

I shake my head, suddenly feeling like the place is overheated and making me sweat. I ache to be outside in the cool drizzle. "The only thing I could do was jump off. If I do something stupid like that I could not only get killed, but the stews would be all over the race. I didn't think you'd want them looking. It'd just bring a lot of heat on you guys. I didn't want to do ..."

The back of a hand the size and texture of a cured ham slaps me across the face. My head feels like it exploded. The blow sends me reeling backward. The chair tips for a second. I think it's going to turn over, spilling me out into the floor.

The guy who hit me says nothing. His glare makes me think he's just getting started. Somewhere in the fog inside my head I hear a scream. Debbie races toward me, a metal ashtray in a raised hand. Two men rise to block her entrance. Another leans over, grabs my jacket and nearly pulls me out of my seat. "You know I got a car parked out back. I put you in the trunk. You wouldn't be the first guy I put there."

Another puts his face so close I can smell his aftershave lotion. "You punk. I ought to dump your naked ass in the barn area so the other stealing jockeys will know we don't play."