

CHAPTER 1

"You want me to do *what?*"

Rudy Clay looked at his older brother doubtfully.

"Throw rocks at me! I'll bet you anything you can't hit me."

Rudy picked up a small stone and pulled his arm back. But he couldn't bring himself to throw it. After all, his older brother was his best friend.

"Come on!" Cassius shouted from across the front yard of their small home in Louisville, Kentucky. "I'm too fast. Watch!" He began dancing around, darting and dodging in order to prove to Rudy that he was too swift on his feet to be hit. He bobbed his head back and forth until Rudy began laughing.

"Okay, watch out!"

Rudy began tossing rocks slowly at Cassius. But when his brother easily dodged every one, Rudy started throwing faster and faster. Finally, he began hurling two rocks at a time. Not a single rock even grazed Cassius.

"Man, Cash, you *are* too fast," Rudy finally said, shaking his head.

“That’s right!” Cassius shouted gleefully as he ran around the yard with his hands over his head in a victory dance. “I’m the best!”

Even at twelve years old, the boy who would one day be known to the entire world as Muhammad Ali was full of confidence, strength, and excess energy.

“He could talk so fast, just like lightning. And he never sat still,” Cassius’s mother, Odessa, recalled. “I was holding him one time when he was six months old, and you know how babies stretch? He had little muscular arms and he accidentally hit me in the mouth when he stretched. It loosened my front tooth and I had to have it pulled out! So I always say his first knockout punch was in my mouth.”

Cassius and Rudy had so much energy that they were known as the “wrecking crew” in their Louisville neighborhood, since things always seemed to get broken when the two boys were around. Baseballs got thrown through windows, flowerpots got knocked over, and dishes got dropped. When the boys weren’t breaking things, they rode their bikes, played marbles, and organized neighborhood games of tag and football. In many ways, Cassius and his younger brother lived the typical lives of boys growing up in the 1940s and 1950s.

But in many more ways, their lives were far different from those of most American boys during that era.

In parts of the South during this time, black

people were separated from white people. Many white people believed that blacks were second-class citizens and that they were not as smart, as hardworking, or even as clean as white people. For this reason, many cities throughout the South, including Louisville, had what were known as “Jim Crow” laws. These laws ensured that white people would not have to be “bothered” by the presence of black people. Blacks had to use separate bathrooms, water fountains, and even swimming pools. They were forced to the back of buses and into stuffy, crowded balcony seats in movie theaters. Black people were often not allowed to even enter white-owned restaurants. Signs on the doors bluntly announced, “No Colored People Allowed.”

One of Cassius Clay’s earliest memories was of walking downtown with his mother on a very hot summer day. He was extremely thirsty and began crying. Odessa Clay looked around for a black water fountain, but she couldn’t find one. Finally, in desperation, she and Cassius entered a small diner.

“I’m sorry, but I was wondering if you could please let my son have a glass of water,” Mrs. Clay said politely to the white man behind the counter. She gestured toward five-year-old Cassius, who had tears streaking his face. “He’s just so thirsty.”

The man glared at Odessa, shook his head, and pointed toward the sign by the door.

“Get out. There’s nothing I can do for you.”

Young Cassius held tightly to his mother's hand and stared at the white man's hateful face. He would never forget how that moment felt. It was the moment that Cassius realized that he lived in a world of separation. A black writer who lived in Louisville around the same time wrote, "On my side of the veil everything was black: the homes, the people, the churches, the schools, the Negro park with Negro park police. . . . There were two Louisvilles and, in America, two Americas."

As Cassius grew older, he quickly learned just how separated the "two Louisvilles" were. One afternoon when he was out riding his bike with a friend, they turned down an unfamiliar street and found themselves in a white neighborhood. People turned and stared at the boys. A woman hurried out of her yard and onto the safety of her porch. Finally a man pulled up beside the boys in his car and shouted, "Niggers, go home!"

Not long after this, Cassius went to a Halloween party and noticed that a girl who was dressed as a superhero had painted her face white. When Cassius asked the girl why she had made her face white, she replied, "Because my sister told me there is no such thing as a black superhero."

"She was right," Muhammad Ali would write many years later. "When I turned on the television, everyone was always white. Superman was white. They even made Tarzan, king of the jungle in *Africa*, a white man. Nothing good

was reflected in our image. Even at that early age, I could see that something was very wrong. I didn't understand it. I thought my skin was beautiful.”

A simmering anger and frustration began brewing deep inside the young Cassius Clay. It bothered him that his father's talent as a painter was never taken seriously, simply because of the color of his skin. While Mr. Clay dreamed of being an artist, he was reduced to painting signs for beer, groceries, and gasoline for a living. Even worse, Cassius watched his mother leave before daylight every day to go to a house in a fancy white neighborhood where she cleaned, cooked, and took care of babies for twelve hours—for barely thirty cents an hour. There was often not enough for Cassius and his brother to eat unless their mother spent her entire day's earnings on food for a complete dinner. Rain leaked through the roof of the Clays' home, because there was no money to fix it. Clothes came from Goodwill, and even when shoes got so worn out that there were holes in them, the two boys had to wear them to school.

“My father became an expert at cutting out cardboard and putting it in the bottoms of our shoes,” Ali later said in his autobiography.

The separation, the name-calling, and the lack of opportunity for his parents may have frustrated and confused Cassius Clay, but one event in particular made him furious. In a small town in Mississippi, a young boy who was the

same age as Cassius went into a grocery store to buy some candy. His name was Emmett Till. Like Cassius, 14-year-old Emmett was outgoing and friendly, and he talked to everyone. According to the white woman who was working behind the counter at the store, however, Emmett didn't just speak to her—he flirted with her.

Some of the white men who lived in the small Mississippi town heard about Emmett's "crime" and hunted him down. They beat him senseless and then drowned him in the nearby river. His body was found several days later. Heartbroken and outraged, Emmett's mother refused to let her son be buried until mourners and newspaper reporters saw the boy's bashed-in and swollen face. Two pictures of Emmett, one of him handsome and smiling and one of him in his coffin, were printed in black newspapers nationwide. Cassius stared at the pictures in horror, and then the horror turned to fury.

"I couldn't get Emmett out of my mind," Ali later wrote. Looking at Emmett's face was a grim reminder of just how limited and brutal life could be for a black person in the South. "One evening, I thought of a way to get back at white people for his death."

Cassius met a friend late at night, and the two of them sneaked down to a deserted railway station. They stared at a poster of Uncle Sam, the thin white man in striped pants and a tall hat. The poster read *I Want You for the U.S. Army*, and Uncle Sam was pointing right at Cassius with a

stern expression. It made Cassius so angry that he picked up handfuls of rocks and threw them at the poster, swearing at the old white man.

Next, the two boys broke into a shoeshine shed and stole two iron shoe rests. They jammed the rests into the railroad tracks and waited for a train to come along. When the train wheels hit the rests, the wheels locked up. The locked metal wheels proceeded to tear the wooden ties of the track to shreds for nearly a quarter mile. Cassius and his friend ran off laughing, but in the morning, Cassius was still angry. He knew that throwing rocks and destroying train ties was not the way to vent anger. He knew that anger should be channeled in a more productive way. But what could he do?

Unexpectedly, the answer came to him one winter afternoon. It was an answer that would change Cassius Clay's life forever.

"My bike!" twelve-year-old Cassius shouted. "My bike is gone!"

Cassius and a friend had ridden their bikes downtown to go to the Columbia Auditorium to see the Louisville Home Show, a mostly black trade show. Vendors displayed everything from window frames to gardening tools. Many of the vendors offered free candy, popcorn, and trinkets to get people's attention. Cassius and his friend spent half the day wandering around, eating the free goodies, and looking at displays. When they finally walked out in the afternoon, Cassius's brand-new red bicycle, which he had just gotten

for Christmas, was gone. It had been stolen.

“I was so upset that I went looking for the police to report it,” Ali later recalled. “Someone directed me down to the gym run by a local policeman named Joe Martin, who was teaching young boys to box in his spare time.”

Cassius stomped into the gym, half crying and half shouting about his bike. Joe Martin came over and put his hand on Cassius’s shoulder and told him to calm down.

“If I find whoever stole my bike, I’m gonna whup him!” Cassius said angrily as he wiped his nose.

Mr. Martin looked at the scrawny twelve-year-old and smiled. “Well, you better learn how to fight before you start challenging people that you’re gonna whup.”

Mr. Martin pointed to a makeshift boxing ring where two boys around Cassius’s age were sparring with one another. They were wearing small padded helmets and big boxing gloves. Cassius watched the boys, fascinated by their skill and the way they moved around and threw punches. But the two boys in the ring were white. Cassius looked at Joe Martin, a white policeman, doubtfully.

“You’d show *me* how to fight?” Cassius asked.

“Yes sir,” Martin said as he slapped Cassius on the back. “As long as you work hard and stay out of trouble, you’re welcome here.”

At just a little over 100 pounds, Cassius Clay

was uncoordinated and unfocused when he first began boxing. In fight after fight, he got beaten. In one fight with an older opponent, Cassius was daydreaming about a scooter he wished he could buy when a left hook hit him right in the face. It was the first of only two times Cassius would ever be knocked out in the ring. When he came to, he looked around in a daze and asked, “Where’s the scooter that hit me?”

But in spite of his unimpressive beginnings, there was something people noticed about this skinny kid with the friendly grin.

“When Cassius first came in, he looked like a young colt,” one young boxer remembered. “He was spindly-legged and wiry. But even then, there was an aura about him. People would stop and look and not know what they were looking at, but they were looking at *him*.”

Cassius didn’t have much of a punch at first, but he was fast and light on his feet. And he was completely determined to become a boxer—a great boxer. He shared his dreams with Rudy, who began tagging along with his big brother to Martin’s gym. Rudy was as fascinated and excited by boxing as his brother was, and within the year, Rudy also began training. Although he would never achieve the success of his big brother, Rudy would follow in Cassius’s footsteps and also become a professional boxer. From the very first moment Rudy slipped his hands into boxing gloves, Cassius encouraged his brother and talked about his own big plans.

“At twelve, he predicted he’d be the heavyweight champion of the world,” Rudy later said of Cassius. “I’d say, ‘Yes, and I’m going to be there with you.’ We were always so close.”

Cassius’s positive attitude drew the attention of a black trainer, Fred Stoner, who owned a real boxing gym downtown. Soon, Cassius was training at both Martin’s and Stoner’s gyms. Stoner knew something about the lack of opportunity and dead ends that young black boys and men faced. He’d seen too many black kids give up and turn to the streets, drinking, and crime. Stoner saw something different in Cassius. He saw something of himself.

“Clay was a hungry fighter,” Stoner recalled. “He didn’t come out of a rich family. He didn’t have it too easy. We fighters are all out of the same bag.”

Within a few years, Cassius was training six days a week. He would go to school from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. He worked a part-time job until six, grabbed a bite to eat, and then trained at Martin’s gym until eight. From there, he headed over to Stoner’s gym to learn the finer points and tricks and moves of boxing until midnight. This schedule left little time for schoolwork, but Cassius didn’t care. His grades had never been very good. Cassius knew he would never go to college, so what was the point of good grades?

“Boxing was my way out; my only way out,” he explained. “It became my world.”

Soon, Cassius began winning fights. He wasn't a hard hitter, but he could dodge punches with lightning speed. He danced and around his opponent and moved around the ring until the other fighter was exhausted. Then Cassius would finish him off.

With the first taste of success, Cassius became absolutely focused on one thing: becoming the best boxer. Not a good or very good boxer—the *best*. Everything he did, he did with boxing in mind.

“At Central High School, Clay was known as the kid who drank water with garlic, who drank milk with raw eggs, who wouldn't smoke, who wouldn't drink even soda pop, who ran and shadow-boxed as often as he walked,” an old classmate remembered of the fifteen-year-old.

Cassius became unstoppable in his drive and determination. He would wake up before dawn, put on his old sneakers, and slip quietly out of the house. He'd run along the railroad tracks until he'd hear a train in the distance. In his mind, the chugging of the engines was the roar of a crowd: “*Clay! Clay! Clay!*”

Cassius pictured himself in the ring in a world-championship fight. He ran faster and faster, racing the train as it approached. As it roared past him, Cassius would lift his arms in victory and shout at the top of his lungs: “I'm the heavyweight champion of the world! I'm the greatest of all time!”