



The Point Spread

BY DOUGLAS M. HORN

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CHAPTER 1

Harry ordered another beer and leaned back from the table allowing the waitress to remove his empty glass. He checked his watch, 11:30 PM. Stilts was rarely late, especially if it involved money. He looked around the room. Several men were occupying the video poker machines, intently pushing buttons to release cards or hold them on the blue-lit screen. Singles occupied several tables with racing forms spread over their surfaces, coffee cups or rocks glasses pushed aside, with ashtrays overflowing on the newsprint. A large group was watching a bank of televisions that blared coverage of football and basketball and a few horse races across their screens. Stale beer and whiskey invaded the senses. Smoke in the air filtered down to the floor giving the room a blue haze. Neon signs advertising various beers added to the hues in the cloud. A small din of conversation in front of the TVs would swell occasionally to a crescendo and suddenly die down to an intermittent snarl or laugh.

Harry's train of thought led him to his first assignment three years earlier as an investigative reporter. He had received an anonymous tip that the manager of the local minor league baseball team had been placing bets on certain opponents during their recent visits and he would bench his best players during the series to assure a loss. After many arguments with his city manager, the new staff reporter was allowed to pursue the story. It turned out that the source would prove to be only half right. The manager was placing bets, but the reason for the two key players being sidelined was

because they were drunk the night before the first game and had been arrested by a cop whose underage daughter was half dressed in the back seat of their car.

If the manager hadn't kept them off the field, he feared the cop would not keep quiet as per his payoff. The players it seemed were star material for the major league club which owned this team. The manager was fined by the league and suspended until further notice. After the story broke, the anonymous source contacted Harry directly. That's how he met Stilts for the first time.

Stilts had always provided backing for small stories, mostly gambling issues with City Council that Harry used occasionally but he hadn't provided anything solid in over a year. Harry imagined he stayed in contact in part out of pity and in some part out of loyalty. They rendezvoused at O'Bannon's betting parlor for the last two years. Stilts got his nickname from his wooden leg which he had Harry believing he'd lost to loan sharks. Then, drunk one night, Stilts cried about Nam and the landmine that left him crippled. When he sobered up Stilts couldn't remember if he'd blabbed the truth. Harry, understanding the need to add to the mystery, quieted Stilts' concerns by commenting on his own drunken state to the point of unconsciousness and asked Stilts what they had discussed.

Stilts said "stuff" but that was all. His face revealed a moment of concern but then broke into laughter about how the stupid New Orleans had cost him another \$100 by not making the point spread.

About two-thirds through with the beer he spotted Stilts coming through the door. His eyes shifted nervously over the patrons until they fell upon Harry. A small

smile formed on the corner of Stilts' mouth. As he hobbled toward the booth, he pulled a waitress aside muttering something, and then he grabbed her bottom.

"Didn't think you were going to make it," Harry said, motioning Stilts to sit across from him.

"You'll be glad you waited," he answered, winking, then sliding across the torn vinyl seat. Stilts was dressed in a deep red silk shirt with black slacks. The shirt betrayed its age as it was developing a sheen on the elbows and slight fraying at the cuff. His face showed signs of a rough life. Deep crevices were carved in his forehead attached to crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. A scar underneath his lip created a natural break between his chin and mouth. The square jaw was covered with a three-day beard, but his teeth were perfectly even and they flashed a smile as the waitress placed his martini in front of him.

"Put it on his tab, sweets." Stilts pointed at Harry.

"Up yours, Stilts, you've never paid for anything since I've known you," she snapped.

"Never will either, kiddo – especially you!" He reached out to grab her and she skittered away.

"Only in your dreams, Buster," she laughed moving back, then looked toward Harry.

"Want another, hon?"

"No thanks, this'll do."

"Suit yourself." She smiled at Harry and stuck her tongue out at Stilts, then wiggled her ass in their direction as she walked back to the bar.

"Nice bit of fluff, that," Stilts said, then sucked down a generous portion of the martini.

"You bring the cash?" He looked at Harry. "I don't have a lot of time."

"I've got it but let's fondle the merchandise first." Harry leaned forward toward him.

"No, no. Cash up front." Stilts leaned back in the booth.

"Look Stilts, you can trust me. We've known each other for years. When have I ever let you down?" Harry held up his hands in surprise.

"I know, I know, but this is really big, kid, something that could make you a Pulitzer Prize winner. Just like Woodburn and that other guy, you know, the ones that got Nixon."

"Woodward and Bernstein."

"Yeah, those two. Anyway, this is big. Besides if you don't want it, I'll take it elsewhere." Stilts raised the martini glass high then consumed the rest of the clear liquid in one gulp.

Stilts sat on the edge of the booth constantly looking around the dimly lit bar. His hair was somewhat matted and a closer examination of his clothes led Harry to guess he'd slept out the night before.

"Well, did you bring the money or not?" He looked directly into Harry's eyes. There was a nervous laugh that barely escaped after his question.

"Like I said, let's have the info first." Harry sat back in his part of the booth and lit a cigarette, then offered one to Stilts who took the whole pack.

"Go ahead and keep them."

"Look, why the stall? I've always come through for you before." Stilts tore the filter from the end of the cigarette then lit a match from a book at the table. Lighting the cigarette, he took a drag and inhaled deeply. He leaned back in the booth and appeared to relax some. He pulled at a piece of tobacco stuck to his lower lip.

"Not for a long time, Stilts. What's worth five thousand dollars? Certainly not a tip on which councilman owes the sharks, or which player is sleeping with an owner's daughter, or wife. Not even which one is sleeping with another member of the team."

"Look, Harry," Stilts leaned forward. "I've got something big. Really big. None of the social crap."

Just then the waitress returned to the table and asked if the two wanted another drink.

"Of course we do. Ya think I came here to die of thirst?" Stilts responded.

"No, more like drown, Asshole." She turned and walked toward the bar.

The crowd in the far corner cheered loudly at a bank of TV sets on which several football games were being shown. Some of the spectators were patting each other on the back and giving high fives all around. One man, dressed in a Dallas sweatshirt was visibly angry and yelled at the rest.

"That was a bum call. Saunders never touched him. Crappy officiating."

The noise died down some and Stilts leaned close to Harry.

“What if I told you it was rigged?” He thumbed over his shoulder at the crowd of drinkers.

“What -- football?” Harry looked at him.

“Yeah, not all of it, just some of it.”

“Sure. Next you’ll be telling me the mob’s involved and the players are on the take.” Harry put out his cigarette. “I’ve heard it all before, Stilts. It’s not new and it’s definitely not worth five thousand of my hard earned dollars. Sorry.” Harry reached in his pocket and pulled out a fifty dollar bill and shoved it toward his dejected stoolie. “This should cover the tab with some extra for tonight.”

“Wait!” Stilts grabbed his hand.

“Why?” Harry stopped for the moment and realized that the grip Stilts was applying was hurting his fingers.

“What if I have proof?”

Harry looked down at their hands and Stilts realized his hold, then sheepishly moved his hand away.

“What kind of proof?” Harry was rubbing his hand.

Stilts looked around the room slowly. His eyes glided over the crowd in the corner and then to the waitress returning with a fresh round. He waited until she placed the drinks in front of them.

“Look,” Stilts began quietly, “about three weeks ago I was hanging out over at Donalee’s. There was a lot of betting going on, it being Monday night football and all.

Especially with the playoffs approaching. I thought I'd catch the KC and New England in a showdown.

"So?" Harry took a sip of the fresh beer.

"Well, in the crowd were a couple of guys that didn't fit in. You know the crowd at Donalee's, rough, blue collar." Stilts stopped talking and looked at Harry to see if he understood what was being said. Harry, however, sat patiently holding the base of his beer glass with both hands resting on the table.

"Anyway, these two guys were Madison Avenue types. Real suits. They had bet on the game by the quarter and bet big. I know this because I know Sammy behind the till."

"How big is big?" Harry took a long sip of his beer.

"Ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?" Harry sat up erect in the booth, then recognizing his reaction, he immediately slouched back down. "Maybe they're game junkies. Maybe they were drunk."

"Yeah, I thought maybe too, but this is a football game for Christ sake.

A guy playing that kinda loot does it on the tables, or scatters it over 10 or 12 games, maybe 15 games, college and pro. This was on one goddamn game!" Stilts sat back, realizing he finally had peaked Harry's interest. Another eruption was heard from behind him.

"Okay, so they bet big. So what?" Harry tried to look disinterested but Stilts was grinning from ear to ear.