

WOODSHED WALLACE
IS IN FOR THE FIGHT
OF HIS LIFE.

SUCKERPUNCH

KICKBOXING

KO'S

TAKE DOWN

WRESTLING

POSITION
PRAWL
IMPETUS
SYSTEMATIC
ROUTINES

JUDO

BOXING
REGISAR

U-JITSU

HONOR

COMBAT

WRESTLING

MMA

SAVATE

SAVATE

SAVATE

TAEKWONDO

SHAOLIN
SUNGTHAI

STRIKE

SUBMIT
GRAPPLING

MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

WING-CHUN

JEREMY
BROWN

SUCKERPUNCH

JEREMY
BROWN

SUCKERPUNCH

JEREMY
BROWN



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CHAPTER 1

No head butts, groin strikes, eye gouges, or fishhooks.

The Nevada State Athletic Commission was taking all the fun out of no-holds-barred fighting.

The referee jabbered on, and my opponent, Glenn “The Specimen” Porter, stared at me from less than two inches away, so close I had to go cross-eyed to keep him in focus. I thought, *Why bother?* He was an ugly bastard, and I didn’t want to look at him anyway.

But I couldn’t drop my gaze. Not because it would show weakness or give him the sense I was worried. No, it was because fans love a good stare down, and I could hear them working themselves into a frenzy, higher and higher like a turbine cycling up for take-off. Besides, if things went well for me, it was going to be the longest part of the fight, and I didn’t want the crowd to feel cheated on the ticket price.

Porter huffed out through his mouthpiece, emitting an odor of onions and sour milk that crept up my face and threatened to wilt my eyes. Who ate those two things before a fight? It couldn't be healthy, and to me, it was downright discourteous.

The ref finished his spiel and told us to touch gloves, which we did. It was the lightest hit either of us would get for a while. I backed up into my corner of the cage and watched Porter do the same. *Specimen* was tattooed across the top of his stomach. The thing about getting your nickname printed permanently on your skin: you'd better live up to the name as long as you have the skin.

Porter had gained about fifty pounds since the last time I'd seen him fight overseas, possibly due to a knee injury, but most likely because of the drawer of hypodermic needles and closet of HGH the cops had found when they went to his house on a domestic assault charge. Now that he was off the juice, his genetics were allowed to blossom, and his nickname stretched across his pooch with enough space between the letters to make it look like an acronym.

We were both heavyweights, but with a sixty-pound window for us to squeeze through, the label didn't mean much. I was thirty pounds over the minimum bracket of two hundred six, weighing in at two thirty-six the day before. Porter tipped it at two sixty-two, and

he looked like he'd stepped off the scale and up to a Vegas buffet. I carried the weight well with six feet and three inches to spread it over. Porter, at a hair over six, looked like a bobber.

The ref checked with Porter. "You ready?"

Porter nodded.

The ref looked at me. "You ready?"

Double thumbs-up.

"Fight!"

I walked to the center of the eight-sided cage, in no hurry but not wanting Porter to get there first and make me orbit him.

He came out slower, his hands down and head tipped back. I guess he didn't watch my tapes.

I was on my toes with my left side slightly back. When Porter came into range, I flicked my left foot forward in a low kick to get his attention. It did. He looked and flinched. My foot hadn't even touched him when I brought the whole leg back at the hip and pivoted forward and sent a Superman punch on a slightly downward angle straight into his mouth. He stumbled backward, and his legs threatened to give out before they knew they were in a fight. I closed the distance and missed with a hook and an uppercut; then he stepped forward and reached out with both hands to try and clinch, make me hold his fat ass up while he recovered.

I pushed his hands off to my left and sent a right cross into his face, which he didn't like and let me know by grunting and bleeding from the nose. The four-ounce gloves laced and taped to my hands were meant to protect my metacarpals, not his head.

I heard the crowd, voicing their primal roars to see someone from another tribe, village, state, country, planet get his skull caved in.

I could do that.

I followed the right cross with a series of left hooks to the body that got Porter to bend over a little, his hands trying to decide which area was more important to guard. If he went with the body, he was going to need more hands.

I have good left hooks. Knockout power from just about any angle, moving in any direction. I train at my cornerman Gil's gym—The Fight House—and the bags there are all slightly curved to the right from the stuffing getting shifted and compressed. Gil bitches about it, but he's the one who makes me work the punches every day. The power comes from the torque in my hips, something I developed a long time ago from constantly looking over my shoulder.

I heard Gil over the crowd, yelling something about clinch and knees.

When Porter's head came down from the hooks, I shot my hands behind his head, wrapped the left

over the right on his crown, and pressed my elbows together over his collarbones, pulling his head toward my chest in a Thai clinch.

Porter started walking backward toward his corner, trying to get his arms inside mine so he could lever them away from his head. I held on like a drowning man with a big fat life preserver and drove knees into his belly with each step, switching from left to right, skipping after him until he hit the cage with his back and couldn't run anymore.

You know what they say about cornered animals: elbow them in the face and knee them in the guts.

I've heard it somewhere.

The knees had Porter hunched over, his forearms crossed in front of his abdomen to intercept the next volley. It was a decent defense against the knees, but we weren't in a knee fight. I brought my right elbow in a downward angle across his temple, snapping his head over and opening a nice cut at the edge of his forehead. Blood welled in the opening, a sight sweeter than water in the desert, and coursed down the side of his face.

If I could get it to run into his eye, the ref might stop the fight. It would be a W for me, but the natives wouldn't like it one bit. To the fans, the only thing worse than a judge's decision is an early stoppage due to a cut, like someone taking your candy bar away

when you're halfway done because it's too delicious.

Porter started to turtle on me, curling into a ball with legs to protect himself. As soon as he was "unable to intelligently defend himself," the ref would stop the fight. It was a funny term, assuming we started out intelligent. I tried a few uppercuts to see if they would get through, but Porter's arms were pressed in tight, covering him from eyes to belly button. I snuck a wicked left hook into the side, catching him with a good liver shot that acted like a short-fused time bomb.

The liver's great. It's the largest internal organ and gland in the human body, helps with metabolism, plasma protein synthesis, and detoxification. In a fight, however, it's a giant bull's-eye and a traitorous bastard. You get hit with a good liver shot, your legs turn into noodles and all you want to do is roll around and try not to shit yourself.

Porter went that route, his knees buckling and head slumping. He made a sound like a dying buffalo. But instead of dropping all the way down and calling it a night, he decided to impress someone and shoot for my legs. He probably figured if he laid on top of me for the rest of the round, he could throw a punch every thirty seconds or so, get his wind back, and work on rearranging his innards.

It might have worked if he hadn't stuck his head into my left armpit when he drove forward out of

the corner. I snaked my left forearm under his chin, grabbed my right hand in front of my stomach, and squeezed, putting his bull neck into a space about the size of a DVD. He drove me backward, trying to find a gap to pry the guillotine choke off, but I squeezed tighter, doing my best to pop his head off his shoulders.

After three seconds I felt a tap on my right arm, the only way a guy in Porter's position can say uncle. The ref was watching for it and yanked on my arm. I released the choke and Porter sagged to the canvas, then flopped onto his back while his cornermen rushed out with towels and water, the two things you need for births and ass kickings.

Everyone from my corner—so, Gil—came in and hugged me. He checked to make sure none of the blood was mine. I have lumps of scar tissue around my eyes and across my forehead tender enough to bust open from a vigorous frown.

"All clear," he said.

We were both relieved. Surgery was somewhere down the line to get the scars cleaned out, but that would limit my training and keep me out of the cage for months.

The ref held my arm up in victory while the announcer bellowed my record, "Twenty-*four* and three!"

I looked around the place, a few thousand people in the arena attached to the casino, spilling beer

on each other and pumping their fists under a dome of smoke, cheering and booing, their night made or ruined because I walked out while Porter limped.

I got paid the same either way.

CHAPTER 2

Back in the locker room Gil got my gloves off and tilted water into my mouth until I could hold the bottle myself, my hands free of all the tape and gauze. I sat on the only training table, a solid thing bolted to the floor with clear packaging tape on the corners to keep the leather from cracking any further.

Gil's built like a keg and usually has stubble over most of his face and head, the salt starting to overwhelm the pepper. He's a black belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu. His body shape and short arms and legs make him horrible to grapple with; there aren't any angles to hook, and once he gets hold of you with his gator-bite grip, it's only a matter of time before he bends something important the wrong way. He usually wears an expression of mild amusement during the whole thing, which doesn't help.

Ten years older than me and eons wiser, he's smart enough to train other MMA fighters instead of getting into the cage himself. He has me on the right track, much better than the downhill straightaway to a cliff I'd been on before he found me.

I've been fighting—in one sense of the word or another—pretty much my whole life. The day I took my first step, some jackass asked me to step outside. Trace the scars and dents on my head, you got yourself a pretty good topographical map of Trouble, USA. I moved from playground tussles to brutal street fights to illegal pit fighting before I graduated high school. The pit fighting exposed me to some people with money, and they needed people without it to make sure they kept it. So I did some bodyguard work at clubs and casinos, walking around giving people the stink eye and making paths when I wasn't even old enough to get through the door. I added some side work here and there, delivering important things to dangerous people and keeping my mouth shut about it.

It didn't take long for someone to try to make money off me. One of the VIPs I handled sponsored me in a sanctioned cage fight at a strip club, and I made him ten grand in thirty-seven seconds after I broke my opponent's orbital bone with an elbow. After that I saw an opportunity to make some money doing something I was fairly good at. It wasn't a tough

decision; there's no 401(k) plan in undocumented close-quarters bodyguard work, unless you count somebody paying for your funeral.

Gil found me when I was twenty-three, strutting around after my fifth cage fight with a two-and-three record. He said my grappling and jiu jitsu sucked and I ought to train with him. He was right, but I was an asshole. My blood was up from another quick KO, and I had some energy to get rid of. He offered a free lesson right then and there and choked me out inside a minute.

I went to his gym the next day and pretty much haven't left since. Now here we were, still on the undercard at a straight-to-video event. I didn't want the spotlight in my eyes, but it wouldn't hurt to have it drop a little brightness into my pockets.

When they brought Porter back, I hopped off the table so they could sit him down. I gave him a half hug. "Good fight."

"Yeah, right." He held an ice pack to his forehead where I'd cut him. The bleeding had stopped, but he had a goose egg that looked like a third eye. "Did I even hit you once?"

"Sure," I said.

"No," one of his cornermen said.

I looked at him and he shrugged.

Porter groaned as he eased onto his back. "I think

that's it for me."

"Give it a few days," I said. "Don't make any decisions in a locker room."

"I was gonna call it quits for sure if I won, retire happy. But I think this is better proof I'm done."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I patted him on the shoulder and shook hands with his guys and walked away.

"That's rough," Gil said when we were through the open doorway into our prep space, cinder-block walls painted white with a drop ceiling, the yellow water stains on the panels looking like rotten fireworks. There was a droopy green couch along one wall in case you wanted to sit down before a fight or had to lie down after it. If you turned around fast enough, you could smell urine, but the source was elusive. Maybe they mixed it with the paint.

"He shouldn't have taken the fight. Credit to him for not ducking me, but it was a bad matchup for him." I sat down on the couch and felt the fight ease out of me. It was a good feeling, knowing the training was worth it and things had come together.

Gil started putting our warm-up gear in his giant duffel bag, which was starting to smell like a bum's shoe. "I was glad to see you go for the choke at the end. Instead of pounding away until he gave up or you wore yourself out."

I shrugged. "It works in just about every other area of my life."

"Idiot," Gil said.

There was a hubbub outside our room, and I leaned back into the couch to get a better view. Three guys in suits were talking to Porter, who was still on the training table. Porter smiled at something and nodded in my direction. The suit in the middle shook Porter's hand and turned around.

I said, "Holy shit."

Banzai Eddie Takanori walked into the room with the two other guys following close behind. One of them was texting with one hand and keeping his suit from touching the wall with the other. Eddie filled the room at five and a half feet of lean Japanese with his hands in the pockets of a black Armani suit, wrap-around shades, a neon blue faux hawk, and a chip on his shoulder that caused an eclipse when he stood on his tippy toes. He was about thirty-five but looked five years younger. He was also the president of Warrior Incorporated, the biggest professional mixed martial arts organization in the Western Hemisphere.

The company had been around for ten years but didn't elbow its way to the top of the food chain until Eddie took over five years ago. Each event got bigger than the previous one, more celebrities were shown

in the crowds, and better sponsors showed up on the cage padding and canvas.

And here he was. Eddie in the prep room at this event was like Bill Gates stopping by a RadioShack clearance sale.

Gil stopped packing and stared with a focus mitt held in front of his belly. I considered standing up but didn't want to cause offense by being tall.

Eddie's attitude problem mostly came from getting blackballed by the Japanese fighting organizations because he'd grown up in Southern California and could only order Japanese cuisine if the menu had photographs. I say *mostly*, because I'm willing to bet he was an obnoxious prick long before the boys across the Pacific snubbed him.

Eddie looked around the room and stopped halfway through a sniff.

"That smell was already here," I said.

Eddie pointed at me. "You're Woodshed, right?"

"Right."

"And I am?"

"Eddie Takanori," I said. "Mr. Takanori." I finally stood up and shook his hand.

"It's cool, brah. You can call me Eddie. When I'm not around, you can call me Banzai."

I acted like I'd never heard the word before.

"Great fight out there. Did Porter even hit you?"

It was loud enough for Porter to hear, and I saw him look up. I shrugged. "It all happened pretty fast."

"Goddamn right it did," Eddie said.

Porter smiled and shook his head and gave the finger to Eddie's back.

"Hey, we were talking on the way in here, and we've all heard different stories on how you got that nickname. I heard you train in an actual woodshed, throwing logs around and chopping them with axes."

I was stunned he'd heard anything about me at all. I wanted to tell him he was right, but he wasn't. "I got it after one of my first fights. The guy was a bleeder and super pale, like baby powder pale, and by the end of the first round he looked like he'd been in a plane crash. I knocked him out in the second, and the way he landed the paramedics rushed in thinking the poor guy was dead. He was fine, looked like hell, but no permanent damage."

Eddie and the suits seemed to love it. The one with the smartphone watched me past his eyebrows and kept texting.

"So after the fight, the announcer said I took the other guy out to the woodshed and beat him with it."

"With what?" the texter asked.

"The woodshed. The actual structure."

"That's even better than what I heard." Eddie looked at Gil. "Gil Hobbes, yeah?"

Gil said, "Yeah. It's a pleasure to meet you."

They shook hands. Eddie said, "The honor's mine. Anybody who can go down to Brazil and come back with a trophy gets my respect."

The other two suits nodded.

"That was a while ago," Gil said.

"Back before it was cool to know BJJ. That makes it even better. I hear you got quite a gym going here in town."

I thought Gil was going to throw up, but I'd just never seen him flattered before. "Well, we're coming along."

Eddie cocked his head at me. "If your boy here is any indication, I'd say you're doing something right."

Gil sampled the air and raised an eyebrow at the ceiling stains. "Not right enough."

"Well," Eddie said, "let's see what we can do about that. You guys hungry?"

I showered and got dressed while Gil stowed our stuff in the truck; then we followed Eddie and the suit brothers outside. All I had were my jeans and a warm-up fleece over a T-shirt, but Eddie said it didn't matter. We stepped out of the mini event center and into the limo. Gil and I rode backward, facing the bench seat with Eddie in the middle.

He pointed at the suit on his left, the one with the smartphone fused to his mitt. "Guys, this is Benjamin

Walsh. He's the head of marketing for Warrior."

Benjamin was tall and pale and had a dark receding hairline over a face that needed more sleep. I put him in his late thirties.

Eddie turned to his right. "And this guy you might not recognize, but I'm sure you've heard the name. Meet Nick MacYoung, Warrior's official matchmaker. We call him Cupid because he makes the sexiest matchups in the business."

We shook hands with Nick. I asked him, "Do I have to call you Cupid?"

"Please don't." He was close to fifty and had a graying ponytail and a gold canine tooth. His nose had been broken a few times and refused to behave, but he had a genuine smile. I imagined Nick would be a good guy to have a beer with. Benjamin, maybe a root canal, because you wouldn't have to worry about conversation.

Gil said, "I bet your job is a lot harder than it seems."

Nick shrugged. "I love going to work every day."

"Yeah, but with the weight classes you can't do David vs. Goliath anymore, so you have to keep coming up with contrasting styles, grudge matches, something to keep the interest up."

"The fighters take care of all that. I just put them together, and the fireworks happen."

"Don't listen to him," Eddie said. "Of course the

fighters get the majority of the credit, but we put a lot of work into designing the right events at the right time.”

I asked Nick, “Who’s your all-time dream matchup?”

“I bet he gets asked that a hundred times a day,” Gil said.

“That’s because it’s a valid and intelligent question. Nick? What do you say? Lee vs. Norris? Ali vs. Tyson?”

Nick smiled. “Hélio Gracie vs. Bruce Lee.”

I almost hugged him but settled for a low whistle.

Gil kept his composure and gave a satisfied nod. “I’d pay to see that one.” By *pay*, he meant cut off his right leg.

We hadn’t asked any specifics about why Banzai Eddie was taking us out to dinner, but curiosity was starting to overcome my limited manners. Having marketing and matchmaking on board was a very encouraging sign, but I’d never heard of any fighter going from the undercard at a one-off event to the Warrior limo. It was like winning the townie festival face painting contest, then getting invited to touch up the Sistine Chapel.

Eddie was sharp. He knew what was happening across the car and said, “We’ll get to it. I just don’t like talking deals in cars. Seems like we’re doing something dirty, illegal.”

I nodded. He’d said “deals.”

Eddie leaned forward. “Our business should be

conducted in the same establishments where multi-million dollar deals go down. We should be one table over from the NFL and NBC. Coke and McDonald's. Nike and Kobe. They don't think we belong in the same tier as them, but we do."

The car floated to a stop at the curb, and Gil reached for the handle but pulled back when he saw the shape of the driver hustling along outside the windows. The door opened and I followed Gil out.

Without moving his lips, Gil said, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

We were behind Caesars Palace near an overhead door with guys in service uniforms rolling heavy carts around. Some staff members on break were standing around a melting ice sculpture of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, tapping their toes in the puddle it was turning into. They stopped long enough to check us out, weren't impressed, and went back to the puddle.

I was impressed. Casinos like having important people come through the front door. It makes the tourists think they should be there too, either to get a photo or because they're just as important. Telling a casino you want the back door—and getting it—means something.

We trailed Eddie, a fast walker on those legs, until we came to a set of double swinging doors propped open with large cans of olive oil. Steam

and noise rolled out from the opening, and we went through into the kitchen of Restaurant Guy Savoy.

Gil and I had heard of the place, but we'd never even been in Caesars Palace, let alone what some considered the best restaurant in the city. We looked at each other's clothes and faces and decided there was nothing we could do.

Eddie said something to a waiter, who left and came back with a guy in chef's whites. That guy greeted Eddie like an old friend and didn't even glance at our clothes while he led us to a table near a window that was surrounded by waiters sliding partitions into place to make it a private dining room.

They finished and disappeared, and the guy in whites sat us down, Gil on my left and the Warrior crew across from us, just like in the limo. A waiter showed up with menus and got waved away immediately. The chef told us not to worry, he'd make us all very happy, and he was gone.

I looked around—nice lighting, good smells, a comfortable murmur of conversation from the other tables but nothing intrusive. The tablecloth was probably the softest material I'd ever felt, possibly made from clouds. I sipped the ice water and tasted pure glacier. "What's good here, the club sandwich?"

Eddie laughed. "The only bad thing about eating here is once you do, every other place tastes like dirt.

Now let's talk before the food comes, because I don't want you to think I'm bribing you with the best meal you've ever eaten. And if you're going to walk out, I want you to do it before you get a taste. Is there anyone I need to get on the phone while we do this?"

I was confused and must have looked it.

Eddie said, "An agent, manager, some kind of rep?"

"I guess that's me," Gil said.

"Good deal. You ready, Woody? How would you like to fight on the next Warrior Pay-Per-View card?"

"Yes, please." I suck at poker too.

Eddie clapped Nick on the shoulder. "You see? That's what I'm talking about. No questions asked. Do you want to fight? Yes. Boom. It's on. Now, Woody, I know it's short notice, but your fight tonight wasn't much more than a hard sparring session."

I frowned. "Short notice?"

"Yeah, our next event is the day after tomorrow. Didn't you know that?"

"Whoa," Gil said. "You want him to fight *this* Saturday?"

"That's right, brah."

"Are you adding a fight to the card?"

Eddie smiled. "Nope."

Then Nick smiled. It wasn't quite as charming as before.

"Morris is out," said Eddie. "He pulled a hammie

running up some goddamn stairs.”

I said, “And Morris was going to fight . . .”

“Junior Burbank,” Eddie said.

I sipped the water again. Someone had pissed on my glacier.

Eddie’s team was prepped and drilled for this. Nick said, “Gil, you were saying how tough it must be to find the right matchups, but this one is a no-brainer.”

“On two days’ notice?” Gil asked. “No brains sounds about right.”

Benjamin leaned in and splayed his hands on the table like he was going to do a magic trick. “Rematches put asses in seats and TV buys in the bank.”

“Rematch?”

“Woody is the only guy to beat Junior,” said Eddie.

Gil laughed, but he wasn’t happy. “That was three years ago. At a barn in Illinois.”

“It was a sanctioned fight,” Eddie said. “It’s on both their records. And I know quite a few top ten fighters who got started in that arena.”

“How many of them are still fighting on no-name cards for gas money?”

“Hey,” I said. “Which one of you is on my team again?”

Gil put a hand on my arm. “I’m just curious. Because you’ve fought more than Burbank since then and haven’t lost, either. But he’s been with Warrior for two

years, and this is the first we've heard about a rematch."

"The timing's right," Eddie said.

"For Burbank to avenge his one loss?" Gil asked.

I looked back at Eddie, like watching ego tennis.

"I think he deserves the opportunity," Eddie said, "just as Woody's earned the chance to prove it was legit. It's up to them who comes away with the win."

"But you want him to win," I said. "You meaning Warrior, the whole company."

Eddie shrugged. "We want a good fight. It's no secret we've put a lot of marketing behind Junior, but he's easy to market. Big, blond, aggressive. He's what guys want to be like and what women want their guys to be like."

"Not my woman," Gil said.

Eddie opened his mouth to say something, paused, and started over. "Another reason Junior is so marketable is because of what he *isn't*." He looked at me, and I knew what was coming next. "He *isn't* associated with various criminal elements. Or rumored to have been involved in illegal pit fighting. Or—"

"I got it," I said.

"Do you?" Eddie asked. The table narrowed down to him and me. "Because I've heard some things, and while it's really none of my business, if you're going to fight for me, for Warrior, you represent the brand in everything you do. You take a dump and start to

walk out without washing your hands, I want you to think, ‘Will this make Warrior look bad?’ You get what I’m saying? Football players get busted all the time for knocking their wives around, drunk driving, hell, packing an arsenal for the end of days, but see, the NFL is *established*. They can survive it, because people know it’s a good product and they want their players to be a little crazy. Makes for good highlights.”

“But not *too* crazy,” Benjamin footnoted.

Eddie stayed on me. “MMA is young. We’re like a new cola coming in and competing with Coke and Pepsi, and if we get a few bad cans poisoning people before we get the benefit of the doubt, they’ll pull us off the shelf like that.” He snapped his fingers. “Good-bye, Warrior. Bye-bye, Woodshed. You just fought that piece of crap Porter? I’d never let him in the same building as a Warrior event. With his history? No way. And Gil’s right; where you just fought, you know what they had in that arena last weekend?”

“No,” I said.

“The Nevada State Pinochle Championship. I’m not fucking kidding you. Wall-to-wall sweaters and hearing aids. You want to keep fighting at that level so you can stay under the radar and screw around with who the fuck knows what, let me know right now. I’ll take you back to the glorified bingo hall, and you’ll never see me again. Other than in magazines, on

billboards, the Internet, and TV.”

I poked my silverware around. I didn’t know who he’d talked to about me or how much he knew. The people with the worst of the info wouldn’t have given him anything. Or couldn’t. And if he knew any of that, he wouldn’t have brought me to Guy Savoy and sat at the same table with sharp knives. I said, “All that stuff is behind me.”

“See, that’s the sticky part. With a guy like Porter, he gets busted and put on probation. All the world can see whether or not he’s keeping his nose clean. But with you, it’s all whispers and sideways looks. So either it’s all bullshit and you’re a Boy Scout with a massive slander campaign, or you just never got caught.”

“Which one would you prefer?” I asked.

“I would prefer that you promise me I’m not going to get a call at 4 a.m. telling me you’re holding some chick from Cirque du Soleil hostage on top of the fucking Stratosphere.”

“You won’t get that call,” I said. “I don’t like heights.”

Nick thought that was funny, and Eddie cracked a little smile but got right back to business. “Promise me.”

“You want my word on it?”

“I’ll take that over a contract any day. But it *will* be in the contract.”

I stood up, said, “You have my word,” and leaned over the table.

Eddie rose and we shook on it. We sat back down. I felt Gil staring at me.

"You never gave me your word," he said.

"I got a couple you can have right now."

He ignored that and said to Eddie, "I'm going to have to look at that contract."

Eddie pulled a stack of trifolded pages out of his inside jacket pocket and handed them over.

Gil opened them and sat back.

Benjamin said, "So, is any of that stuff true?"

"What stuff?"

"Come on."

I shrugged. "I'm sure whatever you heard was exaggerated."

"I hope so. Because from what I heard, you—"

Gil pointed at page three of the contract and said, "This is only for one fight."

"We're in a tight spot here," Eddie said. "We don't have time to go over Woody's medical records, see if there's anything preexisting that could keep him from fulfilling an extended commitment. If he even wants one. Then there are the exclusivity clauses, sponsorship deals, appearance schedules and fees . . . It's a huge hassle. After Saturday, we can all sit down again and talk about the future."

Gil flipped a few pages. "More money would be nice."

"Always," Eddie agreed.

“How long do we have to consider the offer?”

“Until I stand up from this table.” Eddie tapped his fork against the bottom of his water glass. It looked a bit like he was pouting because we weren’t bowing while signing the contract with tears of gratitude, but maybe it was just the light. He let the fork fall. “And it isn’t an offer; it’s a goddamn gift.”

“You came to us,” Gil said.

“Lucky you.”

“Settle down. You can’t walk away from this without Woody on board, so let’s figure out a better deal.”

Eddie stood. Nate and Benjamin did the same.

“Okay, Jesus,” Gil said. His pride was like a horse pill with barbs on it, but he was smart enough to know when to swallow it. “We’ll sign it. But I want *your* word we’ll talk long-term right after the fight.”

“Win or lose,” Eddie said. They all sat down. I appreciated them looking only a little smug.

Eddie said, “Woody, I want to ask you something I ask all my fighters: Why do you fight?” He had his hand up, forefinger and thumb pressed together like he wanted me to touch on the exact point he was trying to make.

I didn’t want to get it wrong. There were plenty of reasons why I’d been *in* fights—survival being the most common—but that didn’t explain why I stepped into the cage. Practically ran to it. “It’s what

I was made to do.”

“Yes.” Eddie made a fist and pounded the table.
“It’s what you were made to do. So don’t get caught up
in stupid shit you weren’t made to do, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now let’s sign that bitch and talk about
how we’re going to make Woodshed Wallace famous
within forty-eight hours.”

CHAPTER 3

The only thing worse than training is losing.

It isn't a close race, but Gil does his best to make it seem that way.

Friday morning I was doing renegade man-makers with forty-five-pound dumbbells, dropping to the floor with them in my fists, exploding through a push-up, then rowing the dumbbells up one at a time like I was starting a lawn mower, all while keeping my feet together and my hips square to the padded floor. Then I got my feet under me and stood, throwing the bells into a push press over my head. When I was horizontal I could see my reflection in the puddle of sweat beneath my face. I looked very unhappy. The circuit was one minute each of seventy-pound kettlebell swings, burpees, pull-ups, frog jumps, and now these bastards back to back. This was the sixth and final circuit.

“It’ll be a light day,” Gil had said. “Just to keep you loose.”

I heard him sip coffee from a mug that was as big as his head, and I prayed for him to die. He’d sent me to bed as soon as we got back from the restaurant, then stayed up all night watching tapes of Burbank’s fights. The coffee mug was standard every morning, but today he actually needed it.

It had started out as a great day. Word of the Warrior deal spread quickly, and everyone at the gym was stoked over it. When they heard I was fighting Burbank the enthusiasm dipped a bit; then it was all grins again when Gil told them a camera crew was going to be stopping by. Roth, from Perth, Australia, and rumored to speak English but sometimes had everyone guessing, asked if he had time to get his hair cut.

Gil told him to get everything from the shoulders up taken off. Then he pulled out his stopwatch and my day went to shit.

We were in the open area toward the back of the gym. To my right and past Gil was the half-scale cage with its black fencing and raised canvas. Farther along that wall and about halfway to the plate-glass windows at the front was the boxing/kickboxing ring, the canvas a little higher than the cage’s. When I had the audacity to lift my head during the circuit, I could see Roth

and Terence Overton in there going at it with boxing gloves, shin pads, and headgear. I envied them.

Rows of hooks and pegs lined the wall behind the cage and ring. Walk along the row and you could smell the various levels of human suffering from the headgear, focus mitts, kicking shields, Thai pads, and boxing and MMA gloves. The first day Roth trained with us about four months ago, he thought it was acceptable to hang his jockstrap there to dry. Gil set it on fire.

The front of the gym space had a reception desk to the right of the glass double doors and behind that a display of the trophies the fighters had won. The belts and prizes I'd taken in various small promotions were dwarfed and hopelessly surrounded by Gil's jiu jitsu haul. Coming back toward me along the left wall were the heavy bags, Thai bags, double-end balls, and a wrecking ball that had an ongoing blood feud with me.

The wrecking ball is a sixty-pound black leather bastard shaped like an acorn, about as wide as me in the shoulders. It's hung from a set of chains, the top of it level with my chin and the bottom almost down to my waist. It's for working body shots, uppercuts, knees, and whatever else you want to throw, as long as you understand it will seek vengeance on the backswing.

Gil knows I hate that thing and loves to watch me argue with it. When he saw how much I enjoyed

hitting the regular heavy bags in comparison, he did his best to ruin that too by introducing me to his “Keep the Change” drill.

You seize the bag’s chains and jump up and lock your legs around the bag like you’re pulling guard. Then let go with your hands and hang upside down so you can see the floor, where Gil dropped a handful of pocket change. Grab one coin at a time—one, because he’s watching—and curl your way back up to put the coin on top of the heavy bag. You’re done when all the change is off the floor, including whatever fell off the bag from you jerking it all over the place.

All I have left is the Muay Thai bag, and I know Gil is cooking something up about that one.

Under the bags and loose against the wall were the grappling dummies, about fifty pounds each and contoured to simulate an opponent’s torso and trunk. They were good for tossing around and drilling ground and pound, but when it came to actual grappling, nothing less than pain on pain would cut it. We used the rack spaces in between the bags for pull-ups; during the circuits just follow the trail of your sweat back and forth and you won’t get lost.

In the back where we were the building widened out to my left—from above the whole space looked like a backward L—and along the front wall of the short leg was the iron. Kettlebells, dumbbells, medicine

balls, barbells with enough plates to keep a champion powerlifter busy for a few weeks, and an assortment of torture devices Gil had cobbled together out of heavy scraps, brackets, and duct tape.

The wall to my left was padded and clear of anything else so we could use it for shadowboxing, elevators, handstand push-ups, and whatever else Gil devised. Behind me was the half-windowed wall between the gym and the hallway that led to the back rooms. Some of them were air-conditioned. I couldn't remember what that felt like, but I knew it was good.

"Ten more seconds," Gil said.

I didn't believe him. It was probably twenty seconds, but I cranked it up a notch to finish strong.

"You been holding out on me, Woody? Where's this energy coming from? You got him down. He's on the canvas. Finish it. Finish it. Finish it . . . Time!"

I dropped the left hand dumbbell to the floor and fell away from it onto my back. Sweat ran into my mouth and I didn't care. I couldn't get my stomach to expand far enough to get the air I needed. My heart offered to exit through my mouth to give the lungs some room.

"In through your nose," Gil said and sipped more coffee.

I spit out my mouthguard and gulped air. "Call 911."

"You keep saying that. Look at Jairo. He's fine."

I let my head fall to the right and opened my eyes. Jairo Arcoverde was next to me on the mats. He looked like he'd been hit by a planet. He'd done the whole circuit in his forest green jiu jitsu gi, and the thing was almost black with sweat. "Are you dead?" I asked him.

"Yes."

I picked my head up and looked down the line. Jairo's younger brother Javier was facedown and spread-eagle, and beyond him the youngest of the clan, Edson, twenty-two, was sitting against the wall sipping water. I vaguely remembered him dropping out and spending some time with his face in the trash can during the frog jumps.

The Arcoverde brothers were from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Gil had earned his black belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu from their father, Antonio, and now the sons were getting ready to represent the family in MMA. It was a good deal all around; the boys helped me and the other guys at The Fight House work on our ground games, and they got to work on their stand-up with us. As a bonus, they also got to work on their conditioning.

Jairo stood up and peeled off his gi top and dropped it on the mat. It sounded like a sack of mulch. He was thirty and bigger than me, six four and about two forty-five—almost as big as Burbank—and had

been doing his best to take me down and submit me for the past three weeks when I wasn't drilling the strategy for Porter. More often than not, Jairo got his way. We'd done some stand-up to make me feel better about myself, but the brothers were picking that up faster than I was avoiding tapouts.

The brothers had olive complexions, dark eyes, and cauliflower ears. Jairo's stood out more because of his shaved head, which he claimed helped him slide out of chokes, but I suspected his bust-worthy skull was the main factor. The thing gleamed like polished bronze when they all walked around in the Vegas heat and pretended to shiver and thought it was funny every time. Jairo had a heavy-lidded way of looking bored most of the time, even when he was working to sink an armbar or triangle choke. It was unnerving, like a brain surgeon yawning with his hands inside someone's skull.

We were lucky to have Jairo around for the Burbank fight. He could come close to simulating the size and brute strength I'd be dealing with, but Burbank was much more aggressive. Maybe Gil could poke Jairo with a stick while we sparred. Porter had a similar fighting style, but relying on my prep for him before fighting Burbank would be like eating a crouton each day leading up to a pancake eating contest.

There wasn't enough time to bring anyone else

in before Saturday. Gil had a Rolodex of judo guys, Division 1-A champion wrestlers, and a former Olympic Greco-Roman wrestler from Montana who almost threw me into the ceiling the last time he came through, but they were all either overseas or getting ready for their own fights. Gil and I agreed none of those guys could really simulate what it would be like to fight Burbank, either. They were too little, too slow, too stiff, or too nice.

I'd just about returned to subpanic heart and respiratory rates when Gil said, "Get in the cage."

Jairo and I dragged ourselves over and got our mouthguards back in and wrapped our hands in the training gloves, the same size and weight as the official version but with Velcro straps instead of laces. I pretended to have trouble getting the straps just right so I could take a few more deep breaths, but Gil caught on right away and threatened me with his coffee mug. I followed Jairo into the cage.

The canvas was still the original light gray color in a few spots. They looked like bleach stains on the mottled surface. No one wanted to bleed in training, but it happened. The scar tissue around my eyes had caused the most trouble, ending sparring sessions when a glancing elbow or inadvertent head butt opened a gash. It was important to let those heal completely before a fight; the athletic commission

wouldn't let you compete with a preexisting cut. Like not having sex because you'd worked too hard on the foreplay.

Gil got in front of me and Jairo and looked us over. "How you feeling?"

"Good," I said.

"You look like shit."

"Thanks."

"Is that food from last night causing any trouble?"

"Nope." Even if it made my legs fall off, I wouldn't risk a ban of that menu.

"Are you focused?"

"Yes."

"What are you thinking about right now?"

I didn't know the answer to that.

Gil said, "Are you thinking about Junior Burbank or about how tired you are?"

I sucked on my mouthguard. "Both?"

"Wrong. If you're thinking about how tired you are—*at all*—nothing else matters."

"That's true," Jairo said.

I appreciated his input.

"Junior Burbank," Gil said. "He's the guy you're fighting tomorrow. Remember him?"

I nodded.

Gil scoffed. "No one wants you to win this fight. Eddie sure as hell doesn't. A one-fight contract? Please. He wants his golden boy to powerbomb and

ground and pound his way all the way to the belt so he can sell Junior Burbank chewing tobacco and T-shirts that are way too tight. Eddie brought you in to be the guy getting fucked up in a highlight reel. The clip they show before the rest of Burbank's fights. Look what he did to Woodshed Wallace, the only guy to beat him."

I bit down on my mouthguard. The rubber protested.

Gil was good at this. "After that, Eddie's got no use for you. One and done. What do you think about that?"

"I think he's going to get a surprise."

He smiled. "Okay. So tell me the game plan." Switch me from running through a wall to chess, just like that. "And take your mouthguard out. Don't spit on me."

I popped it out. "He's going to try to take me down. I'm not going to let him."

"And if he does?"

"I'll get back up."

Gil nodded. "Show me."

Jairo shot in again, and again I sprawled on top of him and shoved him back. I wrapped his head in the Muay Thai plum on the way up and pulled his face down into my knee, stopping an inch from impact. I pushed him away before he could go for a Greco clinch and moved to my left.

"Good," Gil said. "If you feel that Thai clinch is

tight, keep it. But he's a strong bastard, so be careful he doesn't just pick you up with his head."

The fights Gil watched didn't show Burbank having to defend the Thai plum, but his neck was thick enough he might just bull right out of it. If I got a good clinch on him and he didn't know what to do, I'd put some knees into his belly and liver and legs and hopefully open him up for a couple to the face.

But I had to be careful. If my elbows were too far out, he could get a single underhook by wrapping one of his arms under mine, hooking his hand over my shoulder, and pulling it close to his body. From there he could go to double underhooks and wrap his arms around the small of my back in the Greco-Roman clinch and pull my hips in, and once that happened I'd get a good look at the world upside down.

Gil said, "Let him get it. Work your way out."

Jairo did a great impression of a wrestler and pulled me in. I dropped my weight down, but it didn't matter. He lifted me off the mat and torqued his body to the left fast enough to make my legs flap around like charged fire hoses. He dropped to one knee and set me down gently on my back with his shoulder in my sternum. If he'd gone full force, I probably would have been dazed or had the wind knocked out of me. At the very least something would have shot out of my body from somewhere inconvenient.

Jairo dropped into side mount, his torso on top of and perpendicular to mine. He gained about three hundred pounds and put them all on my lungs. He had his right elbow tight against my left hip and his right knee digging into my right hip to keep me from turning. I bent my right leg and crossed that foot over my left knee to keep him from sliding over into a full mount.

He started pushing my left wrist away from my body, but that was to get me to pull it in so he could grab my wrist with his right hand, wrap his left arm under my triceps, reach through and grab his right wrist, and pop up into a kimura. I didn't fall for it, but it was a decoy anyway. He dropped a few elbows into the air above my face to show he could. Point taken.

Gil said, "Now this is the tricky part."

"Really?" It came out much higher than I'd expected.

Jairo paused but kept his weight on me.

Gil said, "You've been training with Jairo to avoid submissions, but I think Burbank will go for pure ground and pound. So while you're working on angles and creating space, he's going to completely smash your head."

"Tricky," I agreed.

"So you should probably get up. Jairo, don't let him, but pretend you're a big dumb blond wrecking machine instead of a big sexy Brazilian wrecking machine."

"I can't help this," Jairo said.

We got back at it. Jairo wrapped his left arm behind my head to get a better grip and brought his left knee back to drive it into my ribs. I put my right hand on his left hip and pushed him away and off balance. The knee came in, but it hit my shoulder and didn't cause any trouble.

He tried again, and I pushed and rolled to my right and shrimped my right knee up into the space created between us and twisted clockwise on my hip so we were face-to-face. I reached down and pulled my right leg all the way out from under his hip and locked him tight in my guard.

"Good," Gil said. "But now he's going to posture up and rain devastation on you."

Jairo leaned back at the waist and brought half-speed hammerfists down toward my face.

I covered up and moved and kept my head off the mat so it would have somewhere to go in case a hammer slipped through. I caught his right hand in my left and clamped down on the wrist and kept it close to my chest. I tried to pull it across my body to get him to fall to my left so I could roll him that way, but he was too strong. His left fist came down, and I snagged that one and got good hand control. He couldn't hit me anymore, but that went both ways.

Gil said, "Now what? You can keep it stagnant until the ref stands you back up, but that could take

all day. Meanwhile, the judges are thinking he's in a dominant position and you're just flopping around on your back because they don't know shit."

"I bait the powerbomb," I said. "Make him stand me up. Or take him down when he tries."

"I'm waiting."

We went through it. Over and over. By the time we were done, we had half a dozen options for if and when Burbank took me down and tried to murder me. I kept saying *if*. Gil stuck with *when*. Jairo stayed out of it. He and I were soaked with sweat and sitting in the cage with our backs against the fence when Gil's wife, Angie, came into the gym.

"Woody, the camera crew from Warrior just called. They're on the way over."

"That was fast." I took a breath through my nose for the first time that day.

"Eddie wants his hype," Gil said. "And you know what he wants you to say."

I stood and waited to see if my body accepted it. I didn't quite die. "I'm not going to say it."

"Come on."

"No."

Angie said, "For me?"

I considered it. She was way too good-looking for Gil, taller than him, and ten years younger, blonde with a light spread of freckles across her little nose.

She taught yoga and Pilates a few nights a week in the gym and spent most of the time trying to keep her class from lying on the bloodstains on the mats.

She had her head tilted to the side with a pouty lip. "Just once?"

"Sorry."

"Come on!" Roth shouted from the ring. He and Terence had stopped sparring and were leaning on the ropes. Terence was from Detroit and didn't say much, but he was grinning.

"You two get back to work," Gil said.

"We want to hear it," said Roth. "Say it, Woodrow. Then tell us what it's like to be famous."

"Shut up."

"For me?" Jairo asked.

"Okay. For you." I wiped a handful of sweat off my face. I looked around the gym at the faces. Edson and Javier had recovered from the circuit and were rolling in their gis. They stopped in mid-pretzel to watch. Roth had a gloved hand cupped to his helmeted ear. I took a deep breath. "I am going to impose my will upon Junior Burbank and prove our first fight was *not* a fluke."

They all booed. Roth threw his mouthpiece at me.

"Go take a shower," Gil said. "You can't be filmed looking like that. There are laws." He turned to Roth. "And if you're done in there, grab a mop and clean these mats."

I followed Jairo into the hallway at the back and down to the right, past the bathroom and then a left into the kitchen. He plucked an apple off the counter and offered it to me.

“Not yet,” I said.

He nodded and ate half of it in one bite.

Some of us stay at the gym during training camp to limit distractions and keep Gil from calling us every hour to see what we’re doing, so the kitchen has a constant stock of protein shakes, energy bars, lean meats, raw vegetables, and enough ice cream to keep a fat kid quiet for a week. Gil passes out the ice cream as a reward, and if he catches you with any unsanctioned, you work until your stomach gives it back.

I’d been sleeping in the back room, what we called the Hole, for the six weeks leading up to the Porter fight. Going back to when I started training with Gil I’d probably spent more time at The Fight House than at my apartment. Every month I paid the rent and wondered why.

Jairo and I went past the fridge and through the door on the other side of the kitchen into the Hole. It was a big open space with high ceilings where they worked on cars when the building was a dealership. We had a card table and foosball and console video games on the big screen that usually ended with somebody getting submitted on the floor while the

game waited for someone to push a button.

I had my cot pushed up against the wall on the right, and past that in the far corner was the square of four showers sectioned off from the rest of the room with exposed framing showing and the drywall panels still taped together leaning against it. The inside was tiled and watertight, but Gil loathed drywall and thought if he let it sit long enough someone would get bored and hang it. I'd seen fighters in camp resort to lighting their leg hair on fire to pass the time, and no one had touched the drywall.

Jairo looked over to the far left corner at the big-screen and the person watching it on the black leather sectional couch. All I could see was the top of a head poking up past the back cushions. The head was covered by a sweatshirt hood the same forest green as Jairo's gi. Jairo said something in Portuguese to the head. The tone sounded a lot like, "Are you going to watch that garbage all day?" The reply was short and made Jairo stop walking. He turned to me and said, "Do you believe that?"

I shook my head.

Jairo muttered into the showers. I picked the stall diagonal from his and got clean and into a pair of loose cotton pants and a Fight House T-shirt for the cameras. The shirt also featured Arcoverde Jiu Jitsu and some sponsors I'd try to thank after the Burbank

fight if I could still talk.

When I walked out, the couch head was still hooded and aimed at the TV. I heard Jairo turn off the water, and I got the hell out of there before he came out with whatever rant he'd been brewing during his shower.

I grabbed a protein shake out of the fridge and entered the gym.

The Warrior Inc. camera crew was setting up to run the interview with the cage as a backdrop, using Roth as a stand-in for getting the lights right. He was telling the producer, "As for Woodrow's face looking any better, it can't be helped. If you want, you can keep the camera on me, and he can talk from the next room. Can we do a quick something for me to send to me mum?"

The producer saw me and walked over. "Kevin Jacobson. If we start doing or saying anything you don't like, just holler, okay?"

"Okay."

"Great. You ready for tomorrow?"

"I better be," I said.

"Yeah, short notice, huh?" Kevin seemed like a decent guy, young with a good haircut and rectangular glasses and a wedding ring, but his job was to get me to say things that would create drama and conflict for the fight. I thought there was going to be enough

of that, what with the punching each other in the face and all.

It's a business—I get that—but I just don't have it in me to hype a fight.

Besides, when it comes down to it, I'm in there fighting myself. My limits.

The other guy's just a mirror.

"I think we're ready over there," Kevin said. "Now, if we could, let's get you saying something along the lines of 'I'm going to impose my will on Burbank and prove to the fans it wasn't a fluke when I beat him before.'"

They sat me and Gil on the cage apron in the lights, and a burly guy held a microphone over our heads. Kevin pulled a step-up platform over from the weight corner and sat down with the camera on his right. Angie and Roth and Terence and the Arcoverde brothers lined up behind him and crossed their arms and tried to keep serious faces.

Kevin said, "When you talk, look at me, not the camera."

Gil and I looked at the camera; then Gil put an elbow in my ribs.

Kevin opened a black binder and scanned the notes. "All right, guys, we just need a few clips for the preshow and prefight sequences. Eddie really

wants this stuff to crackle through the building, you know? Get people in the crowd looking at each other and going, ‘Oooh, he’s gonna pay for saying that.’ Cool?”

Gil said, “Can I say something about Eddie wanting Burbank to win?”

It was my turn with the elbow.

Kevin looked up from his binder. “Well. Uh . . .”

“Don’t listen to him,” I said.

“No, no, it’s good. We can use that energy. But how about instead of saying you think Eddie wants Junior Burbank to win, you say you *know* the *world* wants him to.”

“Never mind,” Gil said. “But don’t get me wrong; we’ll take Junior any day of the week. We just get the feeling Woody isn’t supposed to win this fight.”

“I don’t really know about that,” Kevin said.

Roth whispered something to Angie, who shook her head and frowned at Gil. He shrugged.

I started to panic. I suspected that pissing off a producer would be like swearing at the kid in the drive-through. I didn’t want to get pulled into the hype machine, but I also didn’t want any loogies in my burger. “Sorry. We’re a bit on edge around here. Like you said: short notice.”

“It’s all good,” said Kevin. “If we could just get through these questions, I’ll get out of your way.”

“Hey,” Gil said, “Woody’s right. We’re just fired

up for the fight. Please, my full apologies. Fire away.”

Kevin was good at his job and jumped into the window. “How is Woody’s jiu jitsu?”

Gil said, “Well, it’s like watching a bear trying to change a diaper. It’s very confusing.”

“I’m not very confident,” I added.

Kevin looked at us. “Do you want me to use that?”

“No, let’s do it again,” Gil said. “Serious now. Ready? Okay. Woody’s jiu jitsu is improving. He’s not gonna win any tournaments yet, but his takedown defense is very good, and if he does get taken down, he knows how to avoid submissions and damage and get back on his feet. And when he does, he’s usually pretty upset.”

“Nice,” Kevin said. “For the show, I’ll probably have a drop from somebody, maybe Benton, spliced in saying that ‘improving’ coming from you is the same as saying it’s excellent. Because of how good you are.”

“Hell, I can say that,” Gil said.

“It will probably work better coming from someone else.” Kevin turned to me. “What do you think about Burbank saying your fight three years ago was a fluke?”

“I think he’s improved a lot since then, and this is going to be a completely different fight. But I’ve improved too, so he’s not getting the same fighter, either. It’s going to come down to who makes the first mistake. And the last one.” I nodded. That was some

good shit right there.

But Banzai Eddie wanted more, and Kevin wanted to get it for him. He said, "You couldn't knock him out in your first fight. Does that worry you?"

I smiled. "I wouldn't say I *couldn't* knock him out; I just didn't get the chance. He gave me the opportunity to submit him, and I took it. The first and only time I won by an ankle lock."

"I'll take credit for that," Gil said.

Kevin smiled. "So you're going to knock him out this time?"

"I'm not picky. I'll take the win however it shows up. I'd like to keep it out of the judges' hands, though."

"You're a finisher," Kevin said. "That's why Eddie loves you."

Gil swore. "Sorry."

"No problem," Kevin said. "Woody, Junior Burbank said he'd never trained to defend ankle locks before that fight, so it doesn't really count that you beat him that way."

"His record has a No Fair category? Can I get one of those?"

"Good point." Kevin laughed. "If he decides to take it to the ground, what are you going to do?"

I smiled too, but it was getting harder. I leaned forward a little and in my peripheral vision saw the cameraman adjust to keep me in focus. "It's not a

dictatorship in there. Not until about two seconds before somebody gets knocked out, so it doesn't matter what he decides. He's a big boy and a great wrestler, so he probably will take me down. I'll get back up. Maybe I'll take him down."

Kevin made a note. "Burbank's coach said they've been watching tapes of you since they got the call that you were the replacement, and in your last four or five fights you've been cut pretty badly, and you open up pretty easily in general. Are you worried that might be a strategy for Burbank, to try to cut you and win by referee stoppage?"

"Are you serious?" I looked at Gil.

He sipped his coffee and stared straight ahead.

I said, "That's pathetic if it's what they want to do. If that happens, I'll go to the hospital, get stitched up, and come back for a rematch *that* night." I took a breath. "But it won't happen, anyway. I have a great corner and we use the best cutman in the business, and if I get cut they'll keep me from leaking too much."

Kevin kept his eyes on mine. He was circling me in the water. "Burbank said no matter where the fight goes—on the feet, on the ground, in the clinch—he'll dominate with his strength and break your spirit. He said he'll see it in your eyes when you break. And when he sees it, he'll punish you for as long as he can before the ref stops the fight or you go unconscious."

“Did he really say that?”

“I’ve got it on my laptop if you want to watch it.”

“No. I’m sure I’ll see it enough tomorrow.” I stared past him and let what Burbank said work its way in to see how it felt. I could see the cameraman twisting in closer on my face.

“Woody,” Kevin said, “do you have a reply to that?”

“Yeah. I don’t care what he does. I don’t care how much he’s improved. I’m going to knock him the fuck out. And if anybody in his corner so much as cocks an eyebrow at me, I’ll put them down too.”

Gil let the front door close behind Kevin and his crew. He spent a moment squinting through the window while they loaded up their van.

I tapped the Thai bag with slow hooks and tried to look sheepish. It was harder than I’d expected.

Without turning around, Gil said, “You’re going to knock out his entire corner?”

I put a soft dig into the bag’s liver. “I may have gotten carried away.”

“What about the ref? Should I tell him to wear a mouthguard?”

“You heard him. They want to cut me on purpose? Come on.”

Gil turned around. “What I heard was Eddie’s puppet strings yanking you all over the place. Cuts

happen. Sometimes on purpose, sometimes not.”

“Still,” I said, “you don’t call your shot like that.”

Gil walked over and stopped the bag from swinging. “Leave it right here. Don’t carry it with you into the cage; it’ll burn you out in the first minute.”

“Right.”

“I want to see you drop it.”

I took a deep breath and ran my hands up my face and over my head. Reached behind my neck and pulled my hands forward over my shoulders and held them cupped in front of my chest, let them come apart. “Happy?”

“Damn near giddy.”

“Woodrow! Look here, mate.” Roth tugged Edson toward us, Edson shaking his head and looking embarrassed. “You wanna talk about cuts? Show him.”

Edson leaned forward, exposing a puckered line behind his right ear about as long and wide as my index finger.

We all hissed and cringed.

“How’d that happen?” Roth asked.

Edson didn’t speak much English, but he understood the question. He started talking in Portuguese, his hands demonstrating something that looked like combat knitting. He paused to make sure we were getting it. Our faces made him frown.

“Did it hurt?” Roth asked.

Gil pointed to his own lip. "You got some stupid right here."

"What?"

"Nope, missed it. Still there."

Edson started again and we got more confused. He gave up and called for Jairo but didn't get an answer. He hollered again, and after a few seconds the hooded couch lump shuffled on bare feet from the back hallway.

Edson said something crisp, and the feet might have moved a fraction faster. Edson rolled his eyes at us.

The feet came to a stop on Edson's left, and the hooded head turned to him and waited.

Edson tugged the hood down and let a spill of black hair fall out. His cousin Marcela was in there somewhere. She was a few years older than him and, from what I'd heard from anyone who'd talked to her, terminally bored. The sleeves of her Arcoverde Jiu Jitsu sweatshirt swallowed her hands with a few inches to spare. She smacked one of the flaps into Edson's face and kicked him in the shin.

Roth loved it. "Sweetheart, will you marry me?"

Marcela pulled her sleeves up and ran her hands through her hair. She produced an elastic band and made a loose ponytail with her dark bangs still wisping down to frame her face. She blew most of them out of her eyes and looked Roth up and down. She said

something to Edson that made him cover his mouth.

Roth panicked. "What'd she say?"

"What are you asking him for?" Gil said. "He brought her out to translate."

Roth was on the verge of tears. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

Marcela gave me the once-over too in case I had any ideas. We'd nodded at each other in passing since the clan arrived last week, but I'd been wrapped up in training for Porter. She was small, maybe five three and a sandwich over a hundred pounds. When her hair was loose, it fell halfway down her back. She had very thin, arched eyebrows over eyes the color of wet beach sand, a shade lighter than her skin. I liked the little bump in her nose on the way down to her lips, which were shiny with light gloss and looked comfortable wearing a skeptical twist.

Her neck was thin, and everything below that was a mystery inside the sweatshirt that went almost to her knees. Her toes were unpainted and stubby. The tops of her feet looked calloused; she'd spent some time on the mat.

I wasn't sure why Jairo brought Marcela to the States. Maybe she wanted to see Vegas, but the brothers wouldn't let her out into the city by herself, and they'd pretty much just given her a tour of the streets from their hotel to the gym and back, the boys either training or caught up in other pursuits. Javier

wouldn't shut up about some redheaded stripper named Pandora.

Marcela held her arms out and asked Edson something.

He replied and pointed at the scar, then at us.

Marcela snorted. "Oh, you're kidding, right? That stupid thing?"

Edson pointed at Roth, who pointed at me.

Marcela was disgusted with all of us. "You want to know about that scar?"

"No," I lied.

"He was fighting Vale Tudo in Brazil, you know, this means 'anything goes'? It was his first fight. His last too, I think." She frowned at Edson. "He was fighting some skinny guy, all bones, and an elbow cut him in the head there, behind his ear. Edson had him in the guard, and the guy stuck his fingers into the cut and tried to pull it open to let more blood out."

"Awful," Roth said.

"The guy, he wanted to make the cut so bad the judges would stop the fight. It's not easy in those fights. He pulled on Edson's ear with one hand and pushed at his hair with the other. The crowd did not like it, but he didn't care. You could see Edson's bone in there, his skull."

Roth whistled. "Christ."

"Did the ref stop it?" Gil asked.

“No,” Marcela said, “the blood wasn’t in his eyes, so he could still fight. But the blood was everywhere else. Edson wouldn’t tap because he’s stupid, and Jairo had to throw the towel in from the corner. It was a big towel, and they pushed it against Edson’s head, and it was full of blood before they announced the winner.”

Edson saw she was done and smiled and nodded at us. He gestured like he was pulling curtains open and peeking inside; then he pointed to his scar. Gave everyone a thumbs-up.

Marcela shook her head.

Jairo walked up with another apple. “What are you talking about?”

“The scar,” Marcela said.

Jairo smiled. “That.” He looked at Edson’s head and became very concerned. “We did not see sign of brains.”

Gil checked his watch. “You ready for the goat rodeo?”

The weigh-ins. Everyone fighting tomorrow had to make weight today. Most guys fighting light, welter, middle, and light-heavyweight walked around ten to twenty pounds over their fighting weight and got down to four or five over by the day of the weigh-in. They cut those last few pounds of water in the sauna, stepped on the scale looking ripped from the dehydration, and couldn’t wait to get something down their necks.

The heavyweights had a much larger bracket to

work in, from two hundred six to two sixty-five, so we didn't spend a lot of time consulting the scale. I didn't trust the weigh-in numbers anyway. A heavy-weight skipping around at two fifty today could easily be stomping at two seventy tomorrow.

I asked, "Eddie said four o'clock?"

Gil nodded. "It's just past three now."

Marcela perked up. "You're going to the arena?"

"One of the convention rooms attached to the casino," Gil said. "We can check out the arena, though."

"Let me shower," she said and ran out of the gym faster than I'd seen her do anything else.

Roth leaned around Jairo to watch her go.

"Hey, come on," Jairo said.

"Sorry, mate. Why's she so mean to me?"

"Have you seen your face?" Gil asked.

"That'll do from you, thanks."

Jairo folded his arms and spread his feet, ready to discuss. "She don't like the culture in Brazil, you know, the macho kind of guy, and I try to tell her it's a fighter thing. She's around fighters all the time, and we have to be a man in the ring and cage, and outside, we still have to be a man. So, you're like that."

Roth nodded. "What if I sing to her?"

Gil looked appalled.

"Listen," Jairo said, "I think if you do that, she punches you in the face. No joke."

“Well, that’s my whole arsenal. Does she like flowers?”

“Yes, she does, but she doesn’t like you.”

Roth looked at me. “Christ, the whole family’s mean.”

“You can sing to me if you want.”

“Nah, mate, you’re fighting tomorrow. I can’t have you distracted with confusing feelings for me. And I believe it’s my turn to wash the towels, yes, Master Gil?”

“Whatever keeps you from singing.”

Roth waltzed toward the back hall, massacring Sinatra the whole way.

Jairo winced. “Punches to the face. I’m sure of it.”

“Okay, let’s get packed up.” Gil took a look at me. “You’ve done this before. It’s the same stage, just a bigger crowd. You won’t notice them anyway once you’re in the fight.”

“I know.” I wasn’t scared of the fight—that had passed a long time ago—but I hadn’t had any time to get used to the Warrior situation. Every time the reality of it popped in, that I was in my first big-time show tomorrow, the fight that could get me facing the right way and not half turned all the time to see what was catching up, my stomach came into my throat to get a look around. I’d be glad when Burbank landed his first punch just so I’d know the waiting was over.

“Hey,” Gil said, “this crap is for the fans. The

goddamn hype. This is Eddie's day, so let him worry about it. Enjoy it and don't take any of it too seriously. You already made it through the hardest part right here on these mats. The fight is cake. A surprise cake, but aren't those the best kind?" He grabbed the back of my neck and pushed and pulled me around. "Today is like Christmas Eve, boy. Tomorrow you get to open your presents, right?"

"Right," I said.

He let go. "I don't want to ruin the next surprise, but I think Santa is bringing you Junior Burbank's head."

"Good. I don't have one of those yet."

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