



AN UNDISPUTED NOVEL

UNBROKEN II

AARON L SPEER

AN UNDISPUTED NOVEL



UNBROKEN
PART II

AARON L SPEER

CONTENTS

Copyrights

Also by Aaron L Speer

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Preface

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[A note from the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)



COPYRIGHTS

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a database and retrieval system or transmitted in any form or any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the owner of copyright.

Copyright © 2022 Aaron L Speer.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Jo Lawless

Proofread by Michelle Kolesar and Christina Heussner

Cover Design by KatDeezigns. All Rights Reserved.

Interior Design and Formatting By Stephany Wallace @S.W.
Creative Publishing co. All Rights Reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

An Aaron L Speer publication:

2022.

www.aaronlspeer.com





WRITTEN BY AARON L SPEER

NIGHT WALKER (Undeadly Secrets, #1)

DAY DREAMER (Undeadly Secrets, #2)

SHADOW CHASER (Undeadly Secrets, #3)

PACK MASTER (Undeadly Secrets, #4)

PEACE KEEPER: Part One (Undeadly Secrets, #5)

PEACE KEEPER: Part Two (Undeadly Secrets, #6)

THE INDEPENDENTS
THE INDEPENDENTS II

UNDISPUTED (Undisputed #1)

UNBROKEN (Undisputed #2)

UNBROKEN II (Undisputed #3)



DEDICATION

Dedicated with love and respect to Randal Speer.

My father, my mentor, my mate.

I always wanted to be a dad because you made it look like such fun.

I'll miss you.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would love to thank Jo Lawless, whose tireless efforts made this book possible.

A huge thank you to my beta readers who gave me outstanding feedback in what was, at times, difficult material.

And last but not least, my Speerverse Fanatics. Your patience really helps me do what I need to do.



Please note that while this is fiction, I do try to add as much realism as possible. That being said, I have taken a few liberties here and there to keep the story moving.

Any actual errors though, I take full responsibility for.



10 YEARS AGO

THE TEENAGE GIRL WATCHED HER FEET TAKE ONE STEP AT A time, trudging along through the sleeting rain as it pounded down on top of her. Ice cold streams of it fell from her drenched hair down her face and along the back of her neck, past hairs that stood at attention.

GET OUTTA MY HOUSE!

She finally found the energy to pull the hood of her jacket up over her head, then stuffed her hands deeper into her pockets, trying to gain some semblance of warmth, but it was of little use. Her legs were so cold her movements were nothing more than muscle memory.

YOU DISGUSTING PIECE OF SHIT.

She walked on, never looking up. Past house after house, some with lights on, most without. Her eyes stung, and it was simply easier to keep her head down. She walked until her feet and legs succumbed to the pain, and she fell into the freezing water clogged street as the rain pounded on.

At last, she looked up and found herself facing somewhere she hadn't known she'd been heading. The gym. She summoned every last bit of her remaining strength to push up and move to the small element of shelter the entrance provided.

She sat with her knees up to her chest and wrapped her shaking arms around her legs.

YOU WANT US TO CALL YOU WHAT?

She couldn't tell how much of the moisture on her cheeks was from the rain or tears, but her head sank all the same. She barely noticed the door to the gym open and a man in his mid-thirties step out. "Hey, you okay?"

When there was no answer, the man walked forward a touch and lowered himself to his haunches, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Can I call someone?"

She shook her head and buried her face in her hands. "There's no one."

The man was clearly stretched then on what to do.

"Don't worry, I'll be gone when the rain stops." She knew her voice was muffled by her hands but she turned away regardless.

"Where?"

"I don't know. I'll find somewhere."

"Jesus..." The man ran his hand through his hair. "Look, come inside. At least it's warmer. You can make a better choice on your next move once you're warm and dry."

"No. I don't want to bother you."

"You're just going to stay out here all night? That's stupid. Come on. Get inside. You can call me Jonah. What's your name, son?" the man said as he turned and walked back to open the gym door.

And there it was. Right there. What's your name? A simple question for some. Not for others. Not for her.

That question had seen her thrown out of her home. After it had taken her years, to not only find the answer to it but also build up the courage to announce it to her family.

She swallowed. She had figured out who she was, finally. And it had cost her everything. Ridicule? Physical assaults? She had been there, done that. She had nothing else to lose and nothing more could be taken from her.

“My name is Tanika,” she said, raising her gaze to the man that had been training her in mixed martial arts for the last three years.

Jonah looked back at her—seeing her face and clearly hearing her voice for the first time since stepping outside—his confusion clear. But he didn’t scoff. He didn’t move, save for a brief flick of his eyes up and down the boy that sat in front of him. Though that was something she was desperate to begin changing.

“Okay...” He nodded. “Tanika, come on in.”

PRESENT DAY

AVA SAT ON THE HARD FLOOR, LEANING HER HEAD BACK against the cool steel of the door that led to the shower. Her sweat-soaked fightwear stuck to her clammy skin, as did the saturated strands of loose, golden hair. Draped over her good leg, the one whose knee hadn't just been set again by the doctor, was the championship belt.

For a moment, she tried to drift as the painkilling injection she had received began to take effect. To a place where she wasn't world champion. Where the pain in her leg couldn't reach her. Where she hadn't just beaten the best fighter of her generation.

It wasn't that her accomplishments didn't make her happy. She was overjoyed. Yet terrified. Terrified that if she was too fast to let herself believe it had happened, it would turn out to be a dream.

Unfortunately, she couldn't tune out the noise around her—despite her best effort—and she heard repeated cursing from both her boys. Chris and Ruben had requested that she be given some time to recover before doing interviews, but the media didn't appear to care.

“Can we just ask a few questions?”

“Can you just let her shower first? Fuck!”

Ava giggled and readied herself to open her eyes and face reality when a soft voice spoke to her.

“Careful down there. It gets very lonely if you stay too long.”

Ava opened her eyes to none other than Veronica Nash standing over her, looking down with a curious expression.

Less than an hour ago, they had engaged in a war that resulted in Ava winning the belt Veronica had held for over ten years straight. At the end of the match, Veronica had made it a point to hand Ava that belt and embrace her like an equal. The win that had meant so much already, meant even more in that moment.

Now, that same legend had made it a point to move into her opponent’s locker room with no hangers-on, no fanfare. She sported heavy bandaging across her face, and as Ava shifted to accommodate her, she couldn’t help but notice the bloodstains still forming on the white bandages.

“How did you get in here?” Ava asked the woman that she’d once considered her idol. And if truth be told, still did.

“Our rooms are adjacent. It’s not hard.”

Ava let out a breath, trying to forget how awkward this was, the two of them sitting here with all the commotion going on around the corner. “Did you want something?”

Veronica took her time, staring at Ava before moving her gaze down to what lay in her lap. “One last look, maybe?”

“I kinda figured you’d want another rematch?”

“It’s funny. I’ve never believed in rematches. They’re done for the media, the fans. The money. Rarely because a fighter deserves it or even wants it. But I was kidding myself that our first match was conclusive, and before I left for home, I wanted to congratulate you properly. You worked hard, and you deserved your win. I’m not saying I’m retiring, and I’m not saying I’ll never come looking for you again.” Nash nodded at the belt. “Looking at it in the hands of someone else physically hurts, and in a way, every fibre of my being wants it back. But something else is speaking to me. A calmness. I’m

going to take some time off for the first time in, well... a long time. Now that I don't have anything hanging over me, I can actually relax."

"Was that hard to say?"

"More than you'll ever know," Veronica replied, still staring at the belt. "Or maybe you will one day."

"What do you mean?"

"Here's a bit of advice. Rest. Heal up. But get ready. That belt—being the best—meant everything to me. But it's also a heavy burden. Winning that and keeping it are two very different things. Everyone will be gunning for you. You can't let up; You can't slack off for even a minute. Once you defend it, you'll awaken a hunger you've never known—greed you didn't think possible—but every win will bring you closer to defeat. After ten years of defending that belt—thinking I was at the top of my game—to even think there was someone that could dethrone me made me furious. The mere notion I could lose to a rookie was absurd to me. I was shocked into reality. Don't let that happen to you."

"Is there anyone out there I have to watch out for?"

"There's always someone out there. No matter how good you are, there's always somebody who thinks they're better. And if you're not careful, they will sneak up and take you down like a certain blonde Australian."

She smiled and so did Ava.

A second later, the same hands that had rocketed into Ava's face and ribs not an hour earlier, gently clasped her cheeks as Veronica Nash placed a soft kiss on her lips and whispered, "Good luck. Be strong."

"Thank you," Ava replied as her idol rose to her feet.

Moving back towards her own locker room, Veronica paused. "Oh, by the way, you better win your first title defence. If I've just gone through hell—and lost for the first time ever—only to have you lose my belt the very next chance you get, I'm gonna be fucking pissed," she said, pointing a finger at Ava.

It was a mock threat.

Sorta.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Ava watched Veronica disappear through the door, a flurry of emotions running through her. Pride, wonder, respect with awe at the forefront. She looked down at the belt and couldn't help but feel she was holding Veronica's belt. She had earned the right to hold it, but it wasn't hers yet. She hadn't formed a legacy like Veronica. She wasn't the best. The best had just walked out that door. It was up to Ava to change that. She'd start tomorrow. But first... her shower.

TANIKA TANIELA STEPPED FORWARD TO MEET HER OPPONENT, surrounded by steel and beyond that a hundred or so people in a sneering, jeering crowd. The ref dropped his hand, and Tanika was hit with a few stunted jabs. Then suddenly she smashed into the other fighter's face. The force stumbled the girl around, weakening her legs. Tanika stood still, not bothering to raise her arms. The tactic, not shaping up, staring hard at the opponent, blood splattered all over her cheeks, appeared to work.

The crowd was cheering like crazy as Tanika beckoned the fighter closer, daring her to come forward. When she did, Tanika thundered two punches into her face she couldn't stop. Her body hit the mat and barely moved as the fight was called. Tanika had barely moved her feet except now, to move out of the way as paramedics rushed into the Cage.

Tanika moved towards the back, flanked by no one. The only congratulations she received was through the otherwise vitriolic shouting.

“You crazy, ugly bitch!”

“Fuck yeah, cuz. Three hundred bucks here I come!”

“You better hope you take it up the ass or learn to wear a paper bag, you mutt!”

“Who took your place in the Rugby squad?”

“Nice trunks, babe, do they make them in women's sizes?”

Tanika moved into the backstage area where she found the event manager, one she towered over. She accepted her winner's purse without a sound and found her way to her locker. She flicked her eyes to and from the other women in the locker room. All gave her a wide berth yet were still comfortable enough to prance around with nothing on, taking selfies and even group shots, no doubt uploading them to social media to hundreds, if not thousands, of likes and shares. None of these women had Tanika's record, yet they were all ranked much higher than her.

Tanika overheard them congratulating someone because the fighter's rank had jumped two points due to her match ending in a draw that evening. She took a chance and looked on the same website, where results and ranks were calculated in real time. Nothing. No change. No change in four victories.

Tanika didn't have to wonder too hard why these other women were moving up in their divisions. Most were easy on the eyes. The decision-makers in the MMA world were mostly men, and held to the old saying "sex sells."

Tanika was over six feet tall and shaped more like a stick than an hourglass. She had been fighting her whole life for acceptance, for understanding. Most of her childhood, people made fun of her "bell pepper" nose, chronic acne and wild bushy hair. It didn't matter how good she was or how many she put down. She was always passed over for better-looking women. If she could only break into the professional ranks, she could advance on pure merit, but she had been stuck on the amateur circuit, fighting for a few hundred dollars here and there, for ten years.

She swept the room with one last look of contempt before taking her bag and leaving through the back entrance. Rage made her strong and kept her focused. She knew in her heart she could beat anyone in that room, in that division. Hell, in any division.

She barged out the back door and headed for the taxi rank but stopped to study a poster on the back wall.

An action shot of a blonde woman, holding the title belt aloft, superimposed on a colourful background with bold lettering.

Ava Beckinsale. One Fight. New Champion.

“I’ll fight anyone that deserves a shot.”

Fierce. Determined. Beautiful.

The NEW Women’s Era Starts Now

Tanika dropped her bag and punched the poster, leaving a hole in it and the wall it was stuck to. When she pulled her fist back, the skin of her knuckles was torn. She put her fist down, letting the blood drip to the road.

She dried her tears with the other hand and seethed as she looked at the destroyed poster, thinking of the insults she had endured. So Beckinsale, the gorgeous little white girl, would fight anyone, huh?

“We’ll see...”

The door opened behind her, and she turned to see three female fighters—all dressed in their tracksuits and jackets. Ready to go home.

Except their faces said they weren’t going anywhere.

“Can I help you?”

“You can stay the fuck out of the women’s locker room.”

“Excuse me?”

“Is this how you get off? Entering women’s competitions so you can beat us up and watch us get naked afterwards?”

Tanika swallowed her anger at the ignorance. “I am a woman.”

“Explain this then.”

One of the fighters held up her phone and showed Tanika a picture she, or one of them, had taken of Tanika getting dressed after a previous fight—something she didn’t do unless she thought no one could see her. She was naked. Showing the one thing she still had that connected her to her previous life.

The body she was born into but not the body that represented who she was.

“Women don’t have cocks, you sick, perverted cunt.”

Tanika lunged for the phone, bringing a scream from the woman holding it. She and her friends swung punches directly at Tanika’s head. Tanika blocked and fended off what she could, but when an elbow connected to her jaw, she grit her teeth and shoved the nearest fighter into a brick wall. The woman hit with a SMACK! Tanika gripped the next nearest by the shirt and kneed her in the gut, dropping her. The last remaining fighter swung with rights and lefts, then struck with a sidekick but was felled by one straight punch.

Tanika looked down at all three women struggling to move. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying not to panic. Telling herself it was self-defence. That’s all. After they took a picture of me. She sighed and pulled out her phone, but it came apart in her hands. Dialling for help—when she knew they wouldn’t do the same—wasn’t even an option now.

She went inside and reported the incident to the nearest security person she could find.

“You took three of ’em out?”

Tanika nodded. Eyes closed.

“Shit, cuz. That’s a hell of a thing. But you know we gotta call the ambulance and cops, yeah?”

Tanika nodded again, slower. Eyes still closed.

Three hours later, Tanika sat in a cell at the local police station. Seething.

She leaned back against the cold brick wall and tried to remain calm.

The door to the holding area opened and a voice called, “Taniela? Got a visitor.”

She looked up to find a man she didn't recognise strolling up to stand in front of her cell, wearing casual business attire.

"Hi, Tanika. My name is Martin Jones. I'm a representative for Waikato Pride." He held out a card for her, which she rose and walked over to take. Above his name was the name of the amateur MMA promotion company she had spent the last several years fighting for.

"I certainly don't need to tell you this has been a mess. No one at the company is happy, so they asked me to clean it up."

"And what does that mean?"

"For starters, I've convinced the ladies not to press charges. They've admitted they were the instigators with the picture, so—"

"So, why aren't they in here?"

"If I'd been called in from the start, you wouldn't be in here either. Police involvement and a fighter locked up aren't the headlines we need. No one wants to deal with that kind of media circus. This isn't going on the record for anyone. You or them. No charges will be filed, and I've made sure the picture was deleted. As for you, I've been authorised to pay your bail, and you'll be out of here tonight. That's the good news."

"And the bad?"

"The bad is there's no longer a place for you on the card."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she hissed.

"I understand you're upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm pissed off! You're blaming me? What about those twiggy bitches that admitted they started this, huh? What about them?"

"I'm not privy to that. I would imagine they will face heavy sanctions."

"You would imagine? Oh, bullshit. You know nothing will happen to them," Tanika scoffed. "Look, I'm going to have gender-affirming surgery, then this won't matter. Just let me keep fighting, and I'll make sure to stay away from them. I

won't even use the locker rooms. C'mon, man, I'm undefeated."

"I'm sorry. That's not possible. While they assured me there were no other copies of the picture, and they now understand they can't speak about tonight's events without violating the confidentiality agreement that all of you signed when you first came into the company, information about tonight has started to make the rounds. Specifically rumours about your gender. Your next opponent has pulled out. And others have made it clear they won't accept matches with you."

Tears welled before she could stop them. "This is all I know. It's all I've ever wanted. What am I supposed to do now? This isn't fair. You know it's not."

"What I know, or what I think, is irrelevant. I have an amendment to your confidentiality agreement for you to sign. Basically, it means tonight never happened. You can refuse, but in that case, the company won't cover your bail. It's been a long, hard night. Sign the document, and let's get you out of here. Tomorrow is another day."

Tanika swallowed more tears as she took the paper and pen. It took a lot for her to move that pen even the short distance for her signature. It felt so wrong. And despite his claims, Tanika knew in her heart of hearts that the real reason she had lost her livelihood and the others hadn't, wasn't because they wouldn't be able to find fighters willing to fight her.

No, the real reason Tanika had been let go was that she had the one thing no woman should have. And the company didn't want to deal with helping her fight the prejudice that those in her place had to face daily.

THE LAST FEW WEEKS HAD PASSED IN A WHIRL FOR AVA. WITH all the interviews and TV specials, not to mention doctor visits, she was hard-pressed to imagine a time when she had been more drained in such a short amount of time.

“No one will think less of you if you want to reschedule,” Ruben said, patting her leg.

He and Chris sat with her in the back seat of a hire car, parked in the back of the hospital.

It was where she had found out about the charges against Van Gould, where she had said goodbye to Jasmine, where she had reunited with her father. So much had happened within its walls, including something she had never had the chance to acknowledge properly.

She had used every spare moment to practice what she had to say, and it was time.

“I’ll think less of me,” she said before easing her way out of the car.

She wore a loose business shirt, jeans and a knee brace with flip flops. Her hair in a ponytail, she didn’t look at all like the champion of the world, and she was more than fine with that. Looking up at the many windows, she was wondering where she needed to go when she dropped her gaze back down to the entrance to see an official-looking man quickly making his way over to her.

“Ms Beckinsale, how lovely to see you. I’m Dr. Sarkin. Welcome.”

“Hi,” Ava said, shaking his hand. “Is everything good to go?”

“Yes. They just arrived an hour ago.”

“Alright, cool. Let’s get going. I want to make sure this remains a surprise which means not being seen.”

Dr. Sarkin smiled and extended his arm. “Come with me.”

Ava heard her boys exit the car and follow a short distance behind. Like always, ever-present—ever-guarding—but letting her have her own space and time.

The group followed the hospital’s winding corridors until finally reaching a makeshift kids’ playroom filled with the people she intended to surprise. One by one, tiny eyes rose from their toys and heads turned. One by one, those tiny eyes lit up at the sight of her.

Ava gave a tiny wave—but a big smile—as the kids from the St. Francis School for the Hearing Impaired ran over and wrapped their arms around any part of her they could reach. Brought in for their usual check-ups, they hadn’t known Ava would be paying them a visit.

These kids had given Ava so much more than Owen Gasnier’s fighting shorts—the ones Owen Gasnier had donated to them personally—which she’d worn in her win over Veronica Nash. At a time when it felt like the world had given up on her, when she was giving up on herself, these beautiful, silent children had given Ava back the strength and courage she needed to hope again. That she needed to believe in herself again.

Glancing at the small faces surrounding her, she recognised each and every one of them as Chris pulled a chair up for her to sit in, and the hospital staff directed her enraptured audience to sit on the floor in front of it. Once she was sure there would be no distractions. Ava sat up as straight as she could, concentrating so she could deliver her message correctly. Speaking to them for the first time with her hands.

“Hi. I’m sorry it’s taken me a while to visit, but I had a few injuries I had to recover from. I’ve been practising my signs. I

hope I'm doing okay?"

The beaming smiles and frantic nodding indicated she was.

"I want to thank you all from the bottom of my heart. I don't think I could've won without you. Your kindness helped me so much. No matter where I go in the world, or whatever happens, you've always got a friend in me. And I'm going to help you as much as I can, I promise."

When the kids rushed her again—hugging her and kissing her cheeks—Ava realised not even holding the belt had felt as good as she felt in that room with them. She stayed for a good hour, playing and letting them correct her signing before bidding them farewell.

On her way out, she asked to see Dr. Sarkin privately.

"I wasn't kidding when I said I wanted to help the kids. How much does it cost for them to attend the school and medical appointments?"

"Oh? I have no idea," the gentleman said as his eyes widened.

"Ballpark figure." Ava pressed.

"Well, each year's medical appointments would be—"

"Not each year. Until they graduate."

"Truthfully, I'm sure it's a lot of money."

"Do you take cheques?"

Dr. Sarkin's face froze. "You're kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding? I want to sponsor them. All of them. Quietly. No media. Just tell their parents—or guardians or whoever—that the bills have been taken care of."

Unfortunately, arranging to pay someone else's medical and education bills wasn't always as easy as writing a cheque.

But after accompanying Ava to the hospital's billing department and helping her get in contact with the appropriate personnel at the school, Dr. Sarkin thanked her profusely. "You know, it's funny. We get politicians in here once every

pre-election to ‘visit’ the kids. With cameras and hangers-on, speaking to the people on the other side of those cameras, not the kids. Yet the only two people in recent times that have shown an ounce of genuine care has been you and Owen Gasnier—he visits the children’s ward whenever he’s in Sydney. Two people that get paid to be violent, showing nothing but tenderness and compassion to virtual strangers. And both of you asked for the media to not be told.”

“What we do for a living doesn’t define us, doctor,” Ava said with a smile as she shook his hand before turning to exit with her boys via the same doors she had entered hours earlier.

“I’m seeing that,” the doctor called out. “I’m definitely seeing that.”

Ava sat down at the family table in the house she shared with Ruben and Chris, photos of women lined up in front of her. Four months of physical therapy had ensured her leg had healed and the company was getting impatient to get back to business as usual.

Max Stanmore had sent over the profiles of each of the top contenders for her title. The fact that Ava, a rookie, had not only jumped over twenty spots but had won the belt had been great for business—interest in the sport was still running high—but it had also sent a shockwave through the rankings which had already been on shaky ground. After Ava chose her next opponent, the women’s division could get back to some kind of order—a hierarchy—establishing matches to determine where the other fighters would be ranked.

“Yep... yep... hang on,” Chris said into the phone he carried, angling his neck so he could talk while stirring the eggs in the pan. “Are we ready?” he asked the room.

Ava turned her hands up, wordlessly asking Chris who he was talking to.

“The board. They are connected live to like thirty news sites. As soon as you make the choice, they will make an

official announcement. So... whenever you're ready."

Ava let out a breath and looked over the pictures again, so many things going through her mind. She couldn't believe there was all this hype over a simple choice. Ruben stood about a foot away from her, his camera poised, recording. As far as she knew, it wasn't for anything other than his personal memories. His baby girl. Her journey as champion.

Ava looked over Ruben's personal notes on each fighter. Strengths and weaknesses. Her head began to spin with all of the options so maybe it wasn't so simple.

In the end, to stop herself from going crazy, she looked at their win-loss columns up to this point and went with the simple after all, choosing the one with the most victories: Kim Lynch. There. Done.

Within thirty minutes, Max called to say Beckinsale vs Lynch had begun to trend on social media.

"That's good... right?" she asked Ruben.

"Who cares? There's only one thing we need to do."

"Win?"

"Close. Train. Like a champion."

WHEN JONAH DUTCH OPENED HIS OFFICE DOOR TO GO YELL AT the teen boys goofing off instead of working out in the gym, he never expected to find someone he hadn't seen in well over six months with her hand raised ready to knock. Reaching out, he pulled one of his favourite people in for a hug. "Tanika, you didn't say you were coming home when we talked last month." But his words slowed when he felt her stiffen in his arms. Something was wrong. He pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "What's on your mind?"

"I need to tell you something," she said, flicking her eyes to the left, looking over his shoulder.

"Come on in." He stepped aside and let her pass, pointing to the chair in front of his desk. It was a chair she had sat in often over the years as they discussed their plans, their dreams, their fears. Life. So when she continued to avoid eye contact as he sat down behind the desk, he prompted her. "Go ahead."

"I'm no longer on the Waikato Pride card."

"Okay. Tell me why?" he said, his brows furrowing.

And she did. The whole thing—having told him about the confidentiality agreement, he had to believe she hadn't left anything out. "What did Greg say?"

"He dropped me too. Brushed me off. Wished me luck but said he had fighters with a real shot at the pros that needed his focus."

"Fuck," Jonah said, hanging his head. "Well, that's that then. I was always afraid of this."

“That’s what? It’s bullshit! I’m the best fighter he had. The only one with a shot at the pros. Speaking of, when am I going to get my shot with the company?”

“Tee, you just said it yourself. There’s no place for you.”

“I’m not talking about the indies. I’m talking about the real deal. Furious Cage Promotions. I’ve been fighting in the indie circuit for years. Proving myself in New Zealand—the toughest amateur circuit outside of Thailand. When are you going to sign on as my trainer and take me pro?”

“Tanika,” Jonah said, drumming his fingers on his desk. “We have talked about this.”

“I want to know what I have to do to get a different answer.”

“There’s nothing you can do, Tanika. I’m sorry.”

“What do you mean, you’re sorry? The company did it for her...” Tanika replied bitterly.

Neither of them had to say who she meant. They’d had this conversation many times since Ava Beckinsale hit the world stage due to her exhibition against Veronica Nash.

“That was a unique circumstance. A one in a million chance.”

“If it worked once, it can work again. What about my unbeaten record?”

“It’s something you should be very proud of.”

“That’s it? That’s all you can say?”

“Tanika, what do you want me to say? Winning amateur fights doesn’t automatically open a door to the big leagues.”

“I want to know why they can pluck some blonde bimbo from obscurity and make her a champion when I have worked longer and trained harder. Before she got her shot, put our records together and I absolutely mop the floor with her.”

“You have been mopping the floor with all your opponents! The last three have spent time in hospital. What

was it, a fractured skull one had? Impacted teeth, another? Torn rotator cuff?”

“It’s a combat sport! What am I supposed to do, go easy?”

“No, I don’t—”

“Let’s just address the elephant in the room.” Tanika stood up and began to pace from her chair to the door and back. Her voice rose with each pass. “They aren’t going to give me a chance—I was never going to rise from the indies—because I’m trans. Yet some white girl’s name gets pulled out of a hat and suddenly she’s a household name.”

“Tanika, look, you have the right to live however you want. But now that the promotion knows you’re trans, they’re putting two and two together and making ten. I mean, come on, you know this. Being trans in the women’s division means someone is going to say you have an unfair advantage. That’s why those girls went after you. I’m not saying it’s right. Fuck them. But add in putting opponents in the hospital and spending time in jail for assault—I know you signed an agreement, but believe me, these things still get out—you’re going to be seen as dangerous.” He held up his hand to stop her when she started to interrupt him. “But say we do keep this quiet somehow. Say we find another indie circuit that has never heard of what happened. Say you carry on winning—you don’t put anyone else in the hospital—and you get spotted by a scout. You still can’t chance a professional bout. Why do you think I chose Waikato Pride for you? They’re middle of the road when it comes to rules and safety. I knew it was unlikely that they would ask questions or drug test you, and I was right. If you move into the professional circuit that will change.”

“What are you accusing me of? Getting on the juice?” Tanika stopped in front of his desk and stared down at him with an incredulous look on her face.

“No! Jesus.” Jonah threw his hands up in the air. “I’m saying you’d be under a microscope. The chances of your secret coming out would go from what if to when. All it would take is for one reporter to start asking questions or your

testosterone levels being messed up during one drug test. I wouldn't be able to protect you anymore."

"Protect me? You call hiding me protecting me?"

"Yes. You were doing what you love to do. There were no cameras, and no one that could derail you took much notice. Do you have any idea the people out there that would kill for something like that?"

"Jonah, I don't want to hide. I shouldn't have to hide!"

"You were born a male, Tee—and like it or not—there is a stigma attached to that."

"That's bullshit. I make my weight the same as anyone else. And I started hormone therapy ages ago. I'm not doing anything wrong. This isn't fair."

"Tanika, you know more than anyone that life isn't fair. If you were to reveal yourself, your career would be over before it even started professionally. No one would book you for fear of injury, negative media attention, online hate. Who would fight you?"

"A champion would."

"Why? Because you're trans and have had a hard life, you just deserve it? You haven't earned a shot, Tanika."

"Neither did she! I just need one break, Jonah. One professional bout. If I lose, I'll retire. If I win, I get a contract and then we see what happens. Can we put that to them?"

"This isn't professional wrestling. This isn't a storyline deal. The company won't care about anything other than their bottom line and how much money you can bring to it. A trans fighter would certainly bring headlines, but would they bring enough money in to counter the negativity? I don't think so. You are throttling these women. And you spent time in jail while three of them spent it in hospital."

"Who's fault is that? FCP just had the biggest match of all time based on giving a nobody a chance—twice! Look at me." She quickly slipped back into the chair, smiling. "They can capture lightning in a bottle again. They put me up against her

—in an exhibition like her first Nash fight. If I win, she puts the belt on the line.”

Jonah rubbed his forehead with his right hand, closing his eyes for a moment. “Tanika, you have to let things settle down. We need to see what they are going to do with the women’s division before you make any kind of move.” He opened his eyes back up and looked Tanika directly in hers. “Beckinsale captured the fighting world because of all the shit that happened to her, before and after the first Nash fight. She’s tough, real tough. But, as you pointed out, she’s also the blonde-haired, blue-eyed media darling. Every promoter in the world wants a piece of her. Everyone has fighters who want to get noticed and face her. Even if you were born female, we would be laughed out of the room. We are so behind the pecking order it’s not funny. And you aren’t even in her weight class. She’s completely untouchable, kid. Forget it.”

“Untouchable or not, I want Beckinsale.”

“Why? What’s so important that you take her on specifically?”

“She’s beat the best that’s ever been in the Cage. If I want to take her on after taking all the hits I have—working hard and paying my dues—who honestly has the right to stop me? I want to be seen as a serious athlete, and I have a right to be accepted for who I am. Not just by you, by everyone. If I can drop to bantamweight, will you train me?”

Jonah hung his head. “I can’t, Tee.”

“Please? I don’t want to make it in the big leagues just for me. I want to do it for you and all these kids too. You’ve helped me so much—helped them. You got so many of us off the streets, and you’ve given us a purpose, a way to channel our anger. They should know they don’t have to settle. That they can chase after what they want, whatever it is.”

“Maybe you’ll get your shot one day but not right now, Tanika. They won’t do it. Believe me, I’m thinking about you too—about what the media would do to you if they found out the truth before the right time.”

Tanika stood slowly, towering over the desk. “This isn’t over. You think they won’t give me a shot? Fine. I’ll make them.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“You will hear it, goddammit,” Jonah said as he stormed out into the gym where more than one person stopped their workouts to look over. “Can you get back in here, please?”

“I need more money to pay for my surgery. Are you going to help me?”

“I don’t have any money to give you, Tee.”

“You know I’m not asking for a handout! Find me fights based on my record, not on fucking politics. If I make more money, I can help you make more money.”

Jonah gave an uneasy shift. “I can’t.”

“Then what else is there to say? I’m going to make my dreams come true. All of my dreams. If you don’t want to help me, fine.” Tanika covered her mouth with her hand and suppressed tears as she turned and walked out of the gym and away from the person that meant so much to her, leaving him cemented to the floor.

“Oi...” came a voice behind her. She sniffed and turned around. A rather stumpy looking man approached. “You really want to make some money?”

Tanika looked him up and down. “Not that badly.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’m talking about serious money for serious fighters. Are you interested?”

“Go on,” she said.

He handed her a card. “Be there tomorrow night. We’re holding an initiation.”

“Excuse me? Initiation? What is this, a gang? Coz I’ve dealt with gangs already.”

“No. We’re a fighting organisation. Off-grid. Not your flashy worldwide fighter company. Not some pussy second-string effort either. Serious fighters. Even more serious investors. You want to make money based on victories and not bullshit politics and ratings.” He nodded toward the card and said, “That’s where you go. Think about it. But we keep moving. That address is only good tomorrow night. After that, we’ll be on the move again.”

When Tanika’s Uber pulled away from her the following night, she was left staring at a nightclub. There was no way she was in the right place. But looking at a long line of people waiting to get in, she glimpsed a couple—sporting gym bags—cutting the line to flash a card at the bouncers. They were let right in.

What the hell? She didn’t have anything to lose. She walked forward and presented her own card. That was all it took. The door was opened, and she was motioned inside.

She hurried after the couple who had veered right. They headed down one flight of steps, then another that led to a corridor with an elevator at the end. At the elevator, they were greeted by a doorman who checked the couple in without a word but looked Tanika over with a scowl. She held out her card and he stepped aside, rather reluctantly.

No one said a word as the elevator descended. When the doors opened, they were met with a wall of sound.

People were everywhere. Cheering and jeering around a cage containing fighters circling each other. No chairs. Standing room only.

Tanika moved closer to the cage as the couple disappeared somewhere to the side.

The fighters were bare-knuckled—their faces a mess. They could barely stand, and yet, the crowd bayed for more blood. With a crushing headbutt, one was sent to the canvas, blood squirting out of a gash on his head.

“Like what you see? Or feeling a bit squeamish?” a familiar voice said from her right.

“Both and neither. What am I looking at, exactly?” she asked as she looked over at the man from the previous night.

“Full contact. No padding. No championship. Mixed genders.”

“Mixed genders?” Tanika asked as the combatants for the next match were announced.

The couple from the elevator entered the cage together, followed by another couple.

Four people inside the cage. Two men. Two women.

Tanika couldn't believe it.

The match started and it looked like the fighters would stick with fighting their own sex. But when it looked like one man was getting dominated, his female partner leapt onto his attacker from behind.

The crowd went nuts as she unloaded fists into the head of the guy from the elevator before he slammed his back into the cage, hard. She kept a desperate arm tightly around his throat as he slammed her against the cage again, but it slipped when he elbowed her in the ribs and flung her to the mat. By that time, her partner had sprung to his feet, but he was sent sprawling into the cage when the woman from the elevator snapped a high knee into his face. The injured fighter wasn't moving, but that didn't stop elevator guy from heaving kicks into him as he lay prone.

This was real. Not a show. Not done for the amusement of the crowd.

There was no ref. And it didn't stop until the two women began fighting again and elevator guy moved in to help his partner. Two punches later, the couple she had followed into the club stood tall over their opponents. Raising their arms to the roar of the crowd.

The man beside Tanika gestured for her to follow him into a makeshift office where they sat down. “Here's the deal, I

overheard your fight with Jonah, and I don't give a shit if you're transgender. No one here will. Whether you have tits, a cock, both or you want to call yourself a unicorn is completely irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that if you're in, you come to fight. And I mean fight. Depending on the roster we have, you'll fight women, you'll fight men. Two on two. Two on one. Once you're committed, you'll be entered into a digitally secure messaging system via an app. You get told where an event is going to be every fortnight or so, and you respond yes or no. If it's no, no problem. If it's yes and you don't show up, you're deleted from the system. We don't have time for half in, half out. We're a serious business. You see out there? Those people? Paying customers. Betting with cash as there are no markets for this. This is NHB. No Holds Barred. New Zealand's version of Vale Tudo. No ranks. No belts. No friends. Only wins and losses. The more you fight—the more you win—the more you earn. A very simple equation. How much money do you need till you can afford to lop it off?"

Tanika swallowed. "A fair amount."

"Won't take long to earn a fair amount, if you give the crowd what they want." He chuckled and nodded towards the door, and as if on cue, the boos of the crowd watching the fights turned to cheers. "And win. So, are you in?"

Did she have a choice? She was a fighter. Her dream had been taken away, and Jonah had refused to help. She looked around the office and thought about what she'd seen. It was brutal. Uncompromising. And it just didn't sit right. But that's what some people might think about her.

Tanika held out her hand and a smile crossed his face as he took it and said, "Welcome to No Holds Barred."

AVA BECKINSALE VS KIM LYNCH

Undisputed Championship – First Defence

“HELLO, FIGHT FANS, AND WELCOME ONCE AGAIN TO FIGHT Night! Some great matchups on the card, and of course our main event, Ava Beckinsale’s first defence of the title she won from Veronica Nash. That was a match I won’t soon forget, John.”

“Nor I—or any fight fan that saw it, I’d wager. We have had the privilege of seeing Beckinsale everywhere of late. Interviews, billboards, TV spots. Would that be a distraction in this, her first defence?”

“Everyone wants a piece of the new champ. Nothing new here. As to whether it will affect her, only time will tell. So far she has handled all the craziness with style and professionalism.”

“Speaking of craziness, we haven’t seen much—hardly anything—of Veronica Nash in months and the division looks a lot different without her. Dave, let me ask you, is it refreshing or is it up to the women to step up and regain the... shall we say ferociousness—or legitimacy—that Nash brought all those years?”

“No matter what, the division has to establish itself in the post-Nash era. It has a chance to prove it can move forward without her. It’s an exciting time for everyone. The one person

with the most pressure on them is Ava Beckinsale. She dethroned the queen in brutal, spectacular fashion. The fate of any division rests on the shoulders of its champion and the matchups they are involved in. We've seen this before—where the champ ducks the best challengers to keep their spot, and the division suffers. So far though, I have to say that I can't fault Beckinsale's choice of challenger. Kim Lynch is no slouch, and to me, indicates Beckinsale won't cower from the best challenger out there."

"A great champion is a fighting champion. And win or lose that's what Beckinsale looks like she wants to be."

"Speaking of which, how do you see this one, John?"

"You know, it's funny, I think people actually forget this is Beckinsale's third-ever professional fight, and she's champion. That is incredible. Kim Lynch has eleven victories and two losses in a four-year career. On paper, Kim Lynch should have way too much experience for Beckinsale and make short work of her. But, as we've seen, matches aren't decided on paper. In saying that, I'm predicting a win by Lynch by judges' decision."

"Interesting choice. I'm going for a second-round knockout by the champ. Who will turn out correct? That match isn't too far away."

"Close your eyes," Ruben said in a voice just above a whisper. "Block out everything except what I'm saying. Let it all go. The cheers. The insults. They don't matter. Nothing else matters. Not who you've beaten. Not how you got here. You are here. That's all that matters. Block it all out and focus on one thing, and one thing only..." He paused and tenderly touched her face with one hand. "Open them, babes."

The first thing she saw was the belt.

Ruben stood holding it in his free hand. "Who are you?"

"Ava Beckinsale," she replied.

His voice dropped into a low growl. “Who are you?”

“The champion.”

“You are the goddamn champion! Now, let’s go.”

Ava nodded and tapped her fists together hard, cracking her neck as she followed Chris out into the hall and heard the crowd roar at Lynch’s entrance. When they were in position to make theirs, Ruben placed the belt around her waist and moved behind her to clasp it, but she halted him.

She wanted to hold it on her way out. Wanted to feel it in her hands—the weight of it. She remembered the way Veronica had handed it to her after her win. Knew she would never forget that.

Ava would hand the belt over to the official before the match as one more reminder that it was on the line, but if she lost, she would hand it to Lynch herself. She flipped it over her shoulder and took a deep breath. “I love you guys.”

“And here she is, folks. The newly crowned champion of the world, Ava Beckinsale. Belt over her shoulder as she makes her way down the ramp flanked by her trainers. She steps into the Cage and responds to the cheers of the crowd chanting her name. Each fighter moves into their corners now for last-minute instructions as the match referee moves into position. The ring clears and there’s the opening bell! Both fighters come forward and touch gloves, but it’s Beckinsale that moves away, giving herself some distance.”

“Both women have a tendency to be hesitant starters, don’t forget. Measuring and calculating each move. POP! A nice jab by Lynch caught the champ just on the side of the face!”

“Beckinsale using some footwork there, but it wasn’t enough to completely get out of the way. She’s gonna have to watch that. Lynch can throw ’em fast.”

“That’s better! Huge left hook missed Beckinsale—who darted sideways—AND NOW THE CHAMP THROWS ’EM

BACK. Corners Lynch close to the steel! Chopping away at the mid-section! Lynch covers up, trying to shift away and BANG! Gets a hook to the face for her trouble! OH! Lynch counters beautifully with a crisp combo to Beckinsale's head, but the champ regroups and takes Lynch down to the mat!"

"Beckinsale trying to get on guard position, but Lynch frantically fighting it as Beckinsale hammers down with fists! Beckinsale adjusting, shifting over her... THERE IT IS! The armbar locked in! That's it! Lynch taps! It's over!"

Ava rolled over with a delighted smile, even through her chunky mouthguard. She rose to see the boys rushing to her side with pride—prepared to smother her with hugs—but she quickly held up a finger and turned to Lynch who was being helped up by her own team. Ava made sure she was okay, embracing her and shielding her face—her tears—from the cameras that had just poured in.

Lynch only needed a minute, then peeled herself away, trying to smile it off with a light "Thank you" before going back to her corner as she pressed her fingers into the arm Ava could've broken.

Ava moved next to the referee, and after a minute to get checked over, Lynch moved to his other side.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in a time of one minute, three seconds in the very first round, the winner by submission... and STILL Undisputed Bantamweight Champion of the World... AVAAAAAA BECKINSALE!"

Ava acknowledged the roar as the belt was placed around her waist but waited until it had been fastened on before shaking Lynch's hand. Then she moved towards the Cage wall and climbed up onto one of the perches used by the camera crew during the fight. Standing upright, she removed the belt and held it aloft in both hands, hearing the roar of the crowd increase as it began to chant her name.

If this was what life as champion was like, she could really get used to it.

BECKINSALE IMPRESSES IN 1ST TITLE DEFENCE WITH QUICKFIRE SUBMISSION

—Front Page of The Daily Telegram

TANIKA THUNDERED A ONE-TWO COMBO INTO THE HEAVY BAG, hissing her breath on its way out.

The warehouse-turned-gym reeked of sweat, puke and the Deep Heat gel used to soothe tired and aching limbs. There was no better place for Tanika to think. The world didn't exist here except for what lay in front of her.

Her next combo was interrupted by her phone ringing from a nearby bench with an incoming text. The message was simple. An address and time for the following night.

No Holds Barred.

She hadn't said yes, exactly. But she hadn't said no, and she knew what shaking the man's hand had implied. Had thought about nothing else since leaving the club two weeks ago.

She'd have to send a definite answer about tomorrow night's fight soon.

Checking the time, she saw she had been hard at it for three hours and headed towards the showers. Usually the calmest space in the gym. No one had the energy to care who was showering or changing clothes next to them after Jonah or one of his trainers finished with them. However, at that

moment, it sounded like there was a storm brewing on the men's side.

“Hey,” she said, breaking up two teens yelling and shoving at each other. “What’s the problem here?”

“There’s no water,” one said.

“Bullshit. He just used it all!”

“That’s a fuckin’ lie!”

Tanika shoved both of them away from each other. “You gonna get into a fight over a shower? Save it for the Cage. Go on.”

The boys gave each other filthy looks but walked away, giving Tanika some privacy to double-check what had happened. She turned the dial both ways. Nothing. Nada.

She swore under her breath, careful not to let any of the others, especially the younger kids, see her frustration as she headed towards Jonah’s office where she knocked once before stepping inside.

“Did you know there is no water?”

He held up a piece of paper. “I just saw this in the mail. It’s been shut off.”

Tanika felt her eyes widen and her jaw drop. “What?”

“I’m a little behind. It was either the water or the rent. I’ll fix it.”

“I just stopped two kids from throwing down over this. With all the adrenaline running through the place... did you want to maybe make a notice or something?”

“Okay! Jesus Christ. I will. Just lay off today will you?”

Tanika looked down at his desk. The paper in his hand wasn’t the only bit of mail he had received lately. The surface was strewn with second or third notices, rates and bills. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s called life for most of the working world,” Jonah rattled off quickly.

“It’s called drowning. What is going on with you?”

“It costs money to run this place, Tee. Quite a bit of it. We aren’t attracting new talent anymore. And with Johnson moving over to Sydney to train with Sanderson and the hit O’Connor took during his last fight putting him out for who knows how long, things are just a little tighter lately.”

“What about gym memberships?”

“I’m not exactly rolling in paid memberships. Most kids here have been kicked out of their homes. They can’t pay. What am I going to do, kick them out too? I’ve been doing this for years. It’s a juggling act. I’m doing my best. Be patient.”

“I am patient. If I start going off then you’re in huge trouble.” She looked down at his desk again. “You need money.”

Jonah gave her a big, fake smile. “Gee, nothin’ escapes you, does it?”

“I’ve got some saved up—”

“That’s for your surgeries. No. I’ll figure something out. I always do.”

“If you get me in a match…”

Jonah shook his head, a look of disbelief on his face. “I’ve told you—”

“What other choice do you have? You don’t have anyone else ready to compete seriously.”

“I’m not running the risk of having your life destroyed. Thank you. But forget it, kid.”

Tanika took a moment before leaving Jonah to his thoughts. Pride goeth before a fall—so the saying went—and Jonah was definitely falling. But if Jonah was going down, she would make sure she was the one fighting to pull him back up.

She pulled her phone out and sent a one-word text. Yes.

AVA ROLLED OVER—NOT YET FULLY AWAKE—GETTING comfortable again. She could tell it was morning. Her memory awakened, and she couldn't help but smile as she stretched and yawned. It was the morning after her victory.

She was still the champion.

What better way to prove it to herself than by sleeping with the belt in her bed? She reached for that gleaming gold—held it against her chest, nuzzling it like it was a puppy—and with a lazy, contented smile, she got out of bed and headed to the bathroom, still holding it. She brushed her teeth, then posed in the mirror, stupidly trying to squeeze every moment of childlike joy she could from her accomplishment. Not only had she won the belt, she had successfully defended it, and looking at herself, she started to feel like a champion not just look like one.

Downstairs her boys were already up, fixing breakfast. Chris flashed her a warm smile and walked over to hold out his hand for a high five. After which, they let their hands follow through to slap each other on the arse. He turned and wrapped his arms around her from behind, lifting her to hold her tight and she giggled as he said, “We are so proud of you, babes.”

“Team effort!” she yelled as he put her down.

Twenty minutes later, all three had eaten everything on their plates, and Chris headed to the fridge to put things away.

“We are putting the load of washing on, make sure you added in everything you need.”

Ava looked down at what little she wore to bed. A moment later, she stripped, and bobbing with her knees, flung both her bra and undies into the basket from a good distance away. Shadow dancing—smacking her own arse—she sent them a look that asked, did you see that shot?

She felt great—silly even—like she didn’t have a care in the world. And she loved it. Bad news could always be around the corner, so why not enjoy the good while it lasted?

Ruben looked over his glass of orange juice at her with a satisfied smirk. “What did you want to do today, babes?”

“I’d like to do fuck-all except work on my tan. The pool is looking awfully good right now. What do you say, coach?”

“Race you.”

Ruben bolted for the back door before he finished speaking.

Ava screamed, “Cheater,” but he flung himself into the crystal-blue water where she dove in after him and they wrestled until they were out of breath.

Instead of joining them, Chris chose to strip down and lay on one of the deck chairs. Crawling out of the pool, Ava lay facedown on a chair next to him.

When Ruben joined them he sat down beside her—whistling to himself—and ran tanning lotion all over her. Being naked in front of each other was a common occurrence. There were times she couldn’t believe how—after all she had gone through—comfortable she was with a man—even a gay man—touching her. But she was. They were a family and they weren’t self-conscious with one another. Plus, it wasn’t as if sex was in the cards. Not with her anyway.

“Rubes...?”

“Yah?”

“Do you think it’s possible to get obsessed with the gold?” she asked, pushing her torso up to lean on her forearms and

grab a newspaper from a table next to the chair.

“Yes, I do. It’s happened to plenty before you. That’s why they call it gold fever. It’s good that you recognise it, but why bring it up?”

“Something Veronica said to me. I don’t know.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I just hope I don’t get obsessed. I felt prepared to hand the belt to Lynch if I lost last night. I feel that’s the best sportsmanlike thing to do.”

“I agree,” he said.

“But I also felt unsportsmanlike anger. Rage. Like, how dare you think you can take my baby away from me? I have never felt that before. I’ve always wanted to win, but last night I wanted to destroy her and keep the belt close to my chest. Like I was turning into the animal they call me. It’s freaking me out a little.”

“Babes, why? It’s just a nickname,” Chris interjected.

“I mean, I slept with it.” Ava looked over at him. “I know it sounds childish, but it’s exciting, and this morning I woke up still feeling elated. Like I’m high. But what if that’s how it starts? What if I win again and this feeling gets worse?”

“You’re afraid you’re already becoming obsessed?” Reuben asked.

“I think I understand Veronica a lot more now. How she felt when we fought that first match. But that was after ten straight years. This is only two fights in a matter of months. Is it wrong to want the belt more than anything? Or, on the flip side, would it be wrong for me to not want it more than anything? To want other things? Would that make me less worthy of holding it?”

“Babes, you’re overthinking this way too much,” Chris said.

“Maybe, but I…” Ava turned around and lay on her back, making sure to look at him before turning her face to Reuben. “I’m scared.”

Ruben nodded. “Would it help if I told you I am too? Because I am. I don’t know what it’s like to hold a championship belt for myself, but it was all I dreamed about for years. I was obsessed with it, and it almost destroyed me. Then it almost destroyed our family. We could have lost you because I let that obsession put blinders on me again.”

Ava sat up, grabbing one of Ruben’s hands in both of hers. She knew he would always blame himself as much as Veronica for the injuries she had suffered in her first professional bout, but she hated how he beat himself over the head with it. She started to interrupt him, to stop him, but he shook his head and placed a finger over her lips.

“Fighting is 90 percent mind, 10 percent body. A cliché, but true. I can fight, but I’m not as strong mentally as you are. You went through hell to get that title. You worked hard for it, and you defended it—they say that’s harder than it is to gain it. Not sure I agree in your case,” he said with a grimace and a pat on her cheek before placing his free hand on top of hers. “But my point is, why shouldn’t you be proud? Why shouldn’t you sleep with it? So what if it’s childish, who cares? Life is about balance. The fact that you are scared it might take over your life, means you have the clarity to stop it, and we’re going to help you. Starting with breaks. After each fight, you’ll be getting a month off from fight training. Do whatever you want, just minimal fitness maintenance and don’t go crazy with the junk food.”

Ava let go of his hands and threw her arms across her eyes as she let her upper body fall back against the chair. “But double burgers are soooo freakin’ tasty.”

“So is Chris’ cock but I know it’ll go straight to my arse every time.”

Ava frowned and dropped her arms away from her eyes. “You mean your thighs.”

“No. I don’t.”

When his meaning hit her, her mouth dropped open before she gained her bearings and said, “Now that you mention it, I could go for some pepperoni or some thick salami, maybe?”

“You’ve never had pepperoni in your life. I’ll order you some furry fish fry. Extra clam sauce,” he countered, patting her on the hip.

“Cocksucker.”

“One of the best. But at least I don’t steal the batteries out of the remote control. I knew I should have never bought you that mini vacuum cleaner for your room.”

Ava leant her head back and laughed.

Later that night, Ava woke up to someone tapping her on the shoulder, opening her eyes to find her boys by her bed with an unexpected guest.

“Daddy?”

“Hi, honey,” he replied solemnly.

Ava blinked to clear the blurriness from her eyes and checked the time on her phone.

“Why are you guys in my room at two in the morning?”

“We have something to tell you,” Ruben said.

She sat up straight, blowing the strands of hair from her face. “All of you? In the middle of the night? What’s wrong? What’s going on?”

“Babes, please try and relax,” Chris said, reaching out to hold her hand.

“Ava,” came her father’s calming voice as he sat down on the edge of her bed. “There’ve been photos taken of you and released online. And the story’s gone viral.”

“What photos?”

“Of us, this morning,” Chris replied.

Ava couldn’t understand what they were telling her for a moment. All she had been doing this morning was swimming and tanning with her boys. When her brain finally decided to

switch on, she sat up straighter. In the nude. She had been swimming and tanning in the nude. They were telling her that photos had been taken of her completely naked and released online to the entire world.

“How...” was all she could muster.

“Paparazzi, hiding in the trees. Long lenses,” Ruben answered. “Probably. It’s a guess. It doesn’t really matter. What matters is, it was done. It was illegal, an invasion of privacy, and we have engaged lawyers to get them taken down. But it’s going to be difficult with how many sites already had them up.”

“How many did they take?”

“Twelve. But it may as well have been twelve thousand. The internet lit up, and they spread like wildfire. Most news sites blurred everything except our faces. But there were other sites that didn’t.”

“What sites?”

“Blogs that focus on celebrity porn, mostly.”

Ava let out a breath and dropped her head into her hands. Telling herself to keep breathing slowly. She understood this was serious. Her entire support system was here with her in this one room. She reached for her phone as some part of her wanted to get an understanding of how big of a deal this was, but Ruben halted her.

“Don’t.”

“Why? I put myself in this position.”

“Ava,” came her father’s voice. “You did nothing wrong. This is a clear and gross invasion of your privacy. It’s illegal.”

Ava nodded slowly and placed her phone back on the dresser as she leaned back into her pillow. “Can we talk about this tomorrow, please? Thank you for telling me. It’s just late and it’s doing my head in.”

As they filed out of her room, her dad stopped to tell her that he would be sleeping on the couch if she needed him. But at that moment all she could think was she needed her phone

and once she was alone—as if her arm was on a spring connected to the door—she reached for it.

She didn't want to know the gory details, but this situation was an obstacle to overcome.

Another opponent to face.

Even outside of the Cage, the key to winning was preparing.

And to prepare, you had to study.

She took a deep breath and opened a search engine. She didn't have to wait two seconds before the opening headline shot out at her. Of all the troubles going on in the world—the wars, the political maneuverings—this was the topic of the hour.

NUDE SCANDAL ROCKS MMA CHAMPION

The world of MMA has been hit by something worse than a punch: the unrelenting savageness of the paparazzi.

Ava Beckinsale, the sport's newly crowned star—fresh from her first title defence—was captured on film in the nude. The stunning world champion can be seen sunbathing by her backyard pool, getting massaged by one of her trainers—also sans clothing.

The images lit up the internet within minutes of being uploaded. MMA blogs, fanboy sites and more, sharing and posting with abandon.

Ava backed out of that site, scrolling lower. To a random blog for MMA fans. There they were, right at the top of the page. It seemed to be one photographer, all the images taken from the same position. Straight across from her. Those images that weren't blurred... you could see everything in high definition clarity. Her ass when she lay on her stomach. Her boobs when she flipped back around to talk to Ruben about gold fever. Hell, when she lifted her leg to scratch, they zoomed in on her vagina. She scrolled lower, seeing all the pictures in their uncensored “glory.” Then she got to the comments.

She knew to stop there—that no good could come from reading them. She wasn't new to being talked about on the internet after all. But her fingers moved the page down as if possessed.

“My prayers have been answered.”

“Can I get the job of lubing her up or does she only hire gays?”

“Perfect pussy.”

“Shaved smooth... my goddess!”

“Absolute perfection.”

“I've rubbed four out already, and I'm still horny over her.”

“Annnnnnnnnnd... I'm pregnant.”

“Shit tits, though. Look too big to be real.”

“God was in a good mood the day he made this fit slut.”

“I'd love to pound the spoilt little princess before she swallows my nut butter.”

“Anyone fucks her, I bet they'd get a gold star. Pity she doesn't like dick.”

“Looks like a dud root.”

“I would so turn lesbo for her in an instant.”

Men, women, old and young all having their say after poring over her body with their eyes. It was here that her fingers stopped moving the page. The comments the final straw.

Putting her phone down, she settled back into bed. She knew she would have to face this tomorrow—and the next day and so forth. Tonight she just wanted to feel safe.

But the images and the comments kept playing in her mind. Soon to be joined by all the comments she remembered surrounding the Van Gould case. Her brain wouldn't shut up,

and the further along the night crept, the lower down in her bed she sank, raising the covers higher as if they could hide her from the monsters. A childish notion, perhaps. Of course, she didn't particularly feel like an adult right then. That didn't mean the monsters didn't exist.

Within these walls, she should feel safe. She was the Bantamweight MMA Champion of the World for crying out loud. But she no longer felt like a champion and—even with her boys and her dad in the house—she didn't feel safe. She felt lost, guilty, humiliated and alone.

More alone than even during the Van Gould trial.

AVA'S PHONE HADN'T STOPPED ALL WEEK. CALLS. MESSAGES. Mentions on social media. News bulletins on TV. God Almighty, she was everywhere. Trending, viral. Whatever.

Her eyes blurred as more messages came up on her screen, and she gave up trying to make any sense of them.

The boys and her dad had knocked, trying to get her to come down to talk or to eat the day after the world lost its mind over what she did in her own backyard. Several times. But she had denied them as politely as she could.

When her dad had left for work, he had left a set of keys to his new apartment. She was encouraged to use them anytime. After he left, she had convinced the boys to give her some time. She appreciated them, but she couldn't deal.

That wasn't true. She could. Of course, she could. And she would. She just didn't want to yet.

So the boys had given up on her coming down to eat and had switched to leaving food and drinks outside her door, and though her father had continued to knock on her door and asked if she was ready to let him in once a day, he hadn't pushed more than that. Which meant several days later, she was still hiding out in her room when her eyes glossed over another headline. She started to scroll on but stopped and scrolled back up to run over it again.

FORMER MMA CHAMPION LASHES OUT AT MEDIA
"VULTURES"

MMA icon Veronica Nash lashed out at the media this afternoon when questioned at her home in Montreal about current champion Ava Beckinsale—the woman who beat her for the coveted title. With the controversy surrounding the MMA darling’s nude scandal currently rocking social media, Nash was pressed for comment about how long she expected the fighter to hide and whether Beckinsale’s failure to comment publicly was good form for a world champion.

Under a picture of a fuming Veronica Nash, the caption read:

“She’s not hiding, you idiot. She’s just not operating on your time clock because she doesn’t owe you a quote so you can sell your papers. Have you vultures got nothing better to do?”

The article moved on to other members of the MMA world and how they were reacting to the news. But Ava didn’t read on. She kept her eyes on Veronica’s name and pictured her saying those words with the venom Ava knew all too well. She gently ran her fingers down the screen, whispering, “Thanks.”

She sat up and wiped a tear away. Fuck this. Veronica was right. Ava didn’t owe the media anything. She hadn’t done anything wrong. She was a fighter, and this was a fight. It wasn’t even a new one. She had been fighting it for years.

Scandals. Humiliations. Expectations and judgments.

The world didn’t always care who was right and who was wrong. Anyone with a keyboard and an internet connection could toss their two cents of petrol onto the bonfire of someone else’s pain.

Her mistake had been in letting her guard down.

Leaving her room, she walked down the stairs to find her father had returned and all the men in her life—her support system, her family—were at the table discussing what to do next.

“Hey, babes, you ready for some dinner?” Ruben asked gently.

“I’m ready to talk to the lawyers.”

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do.”

Tanika leaned forward across the desk. “Really, that’s it?”

“I’m sorry, but there’s not any wiggle room in your personal finances.”

“It’s not a personal loan. It’s a business loan,” Tanika replied.

“It’s not your business. And, even if it was, the business itself is struggling. Please understand, it’s not me. It’s the system. I gave it your information, and it made a decision. Unfortunately, it’s denied your request at this time.”

“Is there seriously nothing I can do?”

“Earn more money.” The loan officer gave a quick upturn of her hands, showcasing how unlikely she thought that would be.

“If I earned more money, I wouldn’t need the loan, would I?” Tanika asked, rising without expecting an answer.

She moved out of the office—ignoring the rumbling in her stomach that urged her to get a quick greasy meal at a fast-food chain she passed because, as always, she was in training—and used the crisp air outside to try and cool her anger.

Jonah still refused to let her pay rent or utilities at the gym now that she had moved back to town which meant she didn’t have as many bills, but a huge portion of the income she earned loading and unloading trucks part-time at a nearby warehouse went to pay for medical bills like her hormone therapy and into savings for her surgeries. However, she had hoped being debt-free and having a modest savings account would help her get a loan that would keep the gym running until she could go pro or start making more money in the NHB. Underground fighting might see her earn more in a few months than she had in years, but that wasn’t saying much, and until she had more than one fight under her belt, she couldn’t be sure how much more.

Hurrying around a corner, she bumped into a man holding a newspaper up to his face. He lowered it as they both apologised, but as he stepped away, he raised it once again, and Tanika spotted the lead story. In bold print, the front-page headline shouted, “CALL IN THE LEGAL EAGLES” with a picture underneath it of Ava Beckinsale holding the championship belt over her head.

She moved quickly to the nearest newsagent, but all their papers were sold out. Searching bin after bin along the street, she finally found a barely legible copy that had been tossed away.

“Indecent, personal photos... illegally sourced... distributed online without consent... lawyers already involved... a hefty payout expected,” she mumbled to herself as she read.

Of course, Tanika thought, she has nude pictures taken of her, and she gets a huge payout. She scrunched the filthy, coffee sodden newspaper up and threw it back in the bin. But because she couldn’t afford another smartphone—all she could afford was a shitty flip phone eight years out of date—she had to dig it back out. Yet Beckinsale... No. She shook her head. She knew she shouldn’t compare herself or her situation to anyone else. She wasn’t like Beckinsale in any way except they were both MMA athletes. But even in that, they were different: Beckinsale had been given a shot.

Tanika marched away from the bin—folding the stained pages so she could have a closer look later—and headed to the post office, hoping for some good news. Finally.

Five minutes later, opening the tiny PO Box registered to Jonah, she saw a package inside and her heart leapt. She made short work of wrenching it free and moving to a corner of the room where she tore it open with shaking hands. A dark square shape fell into her open palm, and she closed her eyes for a brief moment as she opened her passport. When she opened her eyes and glanced down, she burst into tears and slumped back against the wall. There, for the first time, was her name, her picture and her gender classification: F.

She couldn't stop looking at it as she made her way to the gym to collect her spare fighting gear from her locker. While there she grabbed a complete change of street clothes and an extra bag too. Her first NHB fight night as a competitor had been bloody—extremely so—even when she hadn't been the one in the Cage. And making her way home in bloody clothes, or carrying them, tended to make anyone she encountered along the way uncomfortable.

“Hey, kid...” Jonah said from behind her, making her jump slightly. “Haven't seen you around much.”

“Yeah, sorry. Just trying to keep busy. Keep saving, you know?”

Jonah wasn't happy with that answer but didn't pursue it. “Why aren't you answering your phone? I've tried to call you a bunch of times.”

Tanika pulled out her cracked flip phone with the hashtag button missing. “Shit reception. Sorry. Anyway, I've gotta hit the road.”

“Oi...” He started, holding up a hand. “You're not doing anything stupid, I hope?”

“I'm doing what I have to. Just like you. Just like everyone,” she replied sadly. His questions were exactly why she had been avoiding him. “I'll see you.”

“Wait... for fuck's sake.” He sighed, reaching into his pocket. He tossed her a rectangular object. A smartphone. “This is a spare I rarely use.”

“I can't accept this.”

“Just until you find something of your own, okay? Your doctor's been trying to reach you. They called the gym today. I told them you would call as soon as you could and programmed their info into that one just in case.”

Tanika didn't know if this was a peace offering or a bribe. But she was grateful. “Thank you... means a lot.”

“You, uh... you better get going.”

“Yah...” she said, holding up the phone as an indication that she’d use it.

But no more words were said as she left the building and boarded a bus into town. To her second NHB match.

Lying in bed, Ava used her forefinger to flick through videos on her phone. Old cartoons were the only things she had found capable of lifting her mood since “the scandal.”

Two weeks after her vagina’s debut as newsworthy and she’d had zoom calls with various Australian and International lawyers, all ready and willing to take her case. She had even had a call from one of the board’s executive assistants. Offering what one might hope was a personal phone call out of the goodness of the woman’s heart to let Ava know the company was thinking of her during this time. But logic said it was a PR move so that the company couldn’t be accused of not caring. Oh well, they had ticked their box by calling her.

She curled her lip in disgust as yet another buzz came from the phone. Probably another private number. Private numbers meant journalists.

“Fuck off and let me watch my Looney Tunes,” she grumbled. Her annoyance hadn’t dissipated at all when a new buzzing erupted. Another call. This time, though, she took a few seconds to see it wasn’t a private number. She didn’t recognise it, but according to her call log it had called her once before, and she had answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Ava,” came a masculine voice on the other end. “It’s Owen Gasnier.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “Um... Hi.”

“I guess you didn’t save my number after our last call,” he said, laughing.

“No. Sorry. Wasn’t sure it was your actual number. And I didn’t know if you wanted to keep in touch or were just being nice.”

“A little of both,” he replied warmly. “Look, I heard about what happened.”

“Really? Something happened? News to me,” she replied with a deep grain of sarcasm.

“I know it’s none of my business, and I figured you could use some time to process the circus the media turned it into. That’s why I didn’t call before now,” he said softly. “But I wanted you to know that I’m here if you ever need anything. Even just a professional courtesy. I’d never try to control what you do in this or any other circumstance; I’d just like to offer support and advice. I’ve had heaps of trouble with the media. For years, despite everything I’ve accomplished.” He chuckled. “I don’t know if you know this, but before my championship fight, I was rocked by a sex scandal. Completely ridiculous and it was the last thing I needed. What I’m saying is, the media will be there for as long as you are in the sport and after. You can fight them—like I used to—or you can make it work to your advantage.”

“How would I do that?”

“Well, since you asked, I’m booking a photoshoot to raise money for charity. Sorry, I am being booked for a photoshoot. It’s for a nude calendar. Posing naked isn’t really my thing—and not my idea—but it’s for a good cause. If you’d like, we could do it together.”

“Together? As in, you and me? Naked? Together?”

“There’s no pressure here. I don’t have to be in the room when you’re shooting, and the photographer is female if that makes you feel better. I thought this might be a chance for you to show the media, and the world, that they don’t control your narrative. Or who sees your body. You do.”

There was a long pause and Owen asked if she was still there.

“Yeah, I’m here,” she said, wiping away a tear. “You know what? I’m sick of crying all the time and feeling sorry for myself. Saying no comment doesn’t help either. Fuck it. I’ll do it. Send me the location and details.”

“Not your management?”

“Oh, no. No, no.” She tried to hold in a giggle. The thought of Owen Gasnier—son of Robert Gasnier, who beat Ruben all those years ago—sending a message like this... “Just send it to my phone. I’ll save your number now.”

“Might help,” he said cheerfully. “I’ll keep you up to date and see you at the shoot.”

Ava hung up and lay back, thinking of what the hell she had just agreed to do. Holy shit. It had sounded like a good idea just thirty seconds before, and now it felt like a hammer pounding on a gong in her mind. With Owen doing it too, maybe it wouldn’t be so terrifying?

One part of her thought it was the last thing she should do. The other part kept repeating “It’s for charity... it’s for charity.” When the first part began repeating “It’s your vag on show, again... it’s your vag on show, again,” she pulled the nearest pillow over her face and screamed into it.

TANIKA TAPPED HER PADDED FISTS TOGETHER AS THE NOISE outside of the supply closet serving as a locker room continued to thunder. The match before hers had ended. She had no idea who had won, but it was clear—like after every fight—some in the crowd had won, some had lost. All wanted more.

The door opened and the promoter walked in. There was no such thing as knocking in these places. “Okay, last match of the night. Main Event, so we need something big to send the people home happy, no matter how much money they lose.”

“And how exactly are we going to do that?”

“You against two,” he said. “At once.”

Tanika sighed. “Are you for real? This is only my fourth fight, and you’re putting me in a handicap match at the last minute? I was supposed to fight that cowboy that was running his mouth two weeks ago.”

“Hey, I warned you that matches come in all shapes, sizes and numbers. Main Event time. Special circumstances. The cowboy never showed and these two requested this match when they found out you were trans. When I balked, they started negotiating. If they win, they’re leaving the prize money on the table. Let’s be clear, they want you in the hospital. Knock them both out? You get ten grand in cash.”

Jesus. That would push her surgery fund over the finish line. In one night. Her dream would finally come true. Well, one of them. What should she do? Say yes, and get the absolute shit beaten out of me? Say no, and probably have to

fight ten more times before I have enough money for my surgeries?

Or she could get over herself—quit letting them fuck with her head before they were even in the Cage—and be her own beacon. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Less than ten minutes later, Tanika found herself opposite two rather burly looking biker types. Hair on their chins, none on their heads. She wore traditional fighter attire—well, as traditional as she could. Here opponents were both shirtless and in jeans. They either weren’t taking this seriously or this was what they wore to pummel someone.

The crowd went insane as the automatic timer started to count down to zero. The fight had begun. Tanika bounced on her feet, her eyes moving between the two men. She expected them to rush her, but they didn’t. They circled around. Smart. And dangerous—for her. They were pincering, cutting off her avenues of movement, and the fight was about to go south quickly.

Fuck this.

If she fought their fight, she’d be slaughtered. She launched herself across the makeshift Cage and slammed her fist against the cheek of the fighter in front of her. The hit was clean, and his feet wobbled. But he remained standing, and before she could strike again, the fighter behind her locked her in a chokehold.

Tanika tried to shift her body, tried to bend quickly to get him off balance but she couldn’t. So while he held her open for attack, his partner launched combinations into her stomach.

“See you’ve got a nice little package still going down there...” he said, switching things up with a punch to her mouth instead of her stomach. “How about my brother and me take care of that for you out in the parking lot?”

“Fuck you...” she breathed.

“I’ve been to Thailand. I’m game. Shut my eyes and you could be anyone.”

Tanika's entire body shook from a quick left, right combination to her jaw, as she growled, "You're not worthy of this cock, you piece of deranged shit."

"Fucking hell, Dane," shouted the man that held her. "You want its phone number or are ya gonna finish the freak?"

Dane smiled as he grabbed her by the side of her head—the opposite side from his previous strike. "You wanna be a woman, huh? You like to dress up? You like to pretend? Well, let's pretend it's that time of the month and show you what it's like to bleed." He kept her head still and struck elbow after elbow directly to the same area each time. Opening her up and causing warm blood to splatter across all three fighters, including himself, and the Cage. "Well, look at that! It bleeds! Guess you are a real woman now, aren't you?"

Her head rocked with an uppercut, and she slumped in the arms of the fighter still holding her from behind. Her vision blurred and her head pounded, but she managed to get out two words. "I am."

"What was that?" Getting ready to throw another punch, he paused.

"I... am... a... woman." Tanika forced out each word with a heaving breath, looking up at him through the only eye she could even partially open.

She saw him sneer in disgust, but his eyes widened and he screamed—grabbing his groin and dropping to his knees—after she unleashed a vicious kick between his legs. Without blinking, her left knee connected with the point of his nose and mouth—breaking both cartilage and teeth—causing his blood to spew before he keeled sideways.

Leaning forward, she cracked her head backwards, breaking the other brother's hold. It was all she needed. She spun around, grit her teeth and shoved him with all her strength into the concrete back wall of the makeshift Cage. As soon as his legs gave way, she was on top of him.

Cheers and abuse alike rained down on her, but she didn't care.

She hurled fists directly at the fucker's head with reckless abandon. Wild. Untamed. Out of control. Screaming four words. Loud and frantic. One word with each punch. She wanted to ingrain it into his head. And into hers.

Wanted everyone to hear who the fuck she was.

“I. Am. A. Woman!” she cried, splitting his face open with her right fist. “I. Am. A. Woman!”

She hit him until she physically couldn't punch anymore. Breaking down and sobbing, she kicked his unconscious form before she crawled away to distance herself from him—and from what she had done. But she couldn't shake the emotions, and she couldn't pretend her knuckles weren't soaked in his blood.

She rose to her feet—off balance—and headed to the back. There was no victory salute. No acknowledgement of the crowd. All she wanted was to collect her money and get out of there.

She found the promoter on the phone in his temporary office, clearly flustered.

“I don't give a shit, just get it done.” Once he had hung up the phone, he tossed it on the desk in front of him and looked directly at her.

“I'd like my money, thanks.”

“Jesus. You're not wasting time tonight. I guess you...” He trailed off as the door to the office burst open.

Tanika was left speechless at the sight of a familiar face contorted with barely contained rage. There in the doorway—having just kicked the door open, his breaths heaving with the effort—stood...

“Jonah?” The question came not from Tanika but from the promoter.

She looked from one to the other, wondering what the hell was going on.

“You're the last person I expected to see here.” He stopped speaking when Jonah rounded his desk without a word and

exploded, grabbing him and flinging him onto it.

Tanika jumped back.

“I should’ve fucking known...” Jonah hissed as he produced a knife from his pocket and held it a centimetre above the promoter’s eye. “That you of all people would get into her head.”

“She agreed. I didn’t force her into anything!”

“Enough. Tony, I’m going to say this only once. I wanna see that money transfer right now. You pay her what she’s owed and then she’s done. You get me?”

Tony scrambled for his phone which sat near his head on the desk.

“How much did you agree to?”

Tanika wasn’t sure who Jonah was asking, but she piped up anyway. “Ten thousand.”

Tony pressed a few buttons on his phone before turning it around to show Jonah.

Seeming satisfied, Jonah’s voice lowered. “If I ever—and I mean ever—see you or even hear about you coming near my place or the people I care about again, I’m going to fucking kill you.” He dug the knife into the desk, bringing a yelp from Tony as the blade nicked his cheek and ear.

“You prick! Who the fuck do you think you—”

Jonah pulled the NHB promoter up by the scruff of the neck, then belted him back down. It was only a jab—and at such close range it shouldn’t have had room to build up much momentum—but the straight shot to the face left him unmoving. Tanika had never seen explosive power like that before. It reminded her of a gun firing. Click. Bang!

She forgot herself for a minute before Jonah grabbed her by the arm and dragged her towards the exit. “How did you find me?” she asked.

There was no immediate answer, but she knew he had heard her. Regardless, she repeated the question.

“Tracked the phone I gave you.”

“You lojacked me?”

“You’re lucky that’s all I did. I have a good mind to send you to the slammer for being so fucking stupid.”

“Get off me!” Mere feet from the exit, Tanika finally gathered enough strength to wrench her arm away. “This is my choice. I told you I would do what I had to do.”

“This?!” Jonah bellowed. “You didn’t have to do this. No one has to do this. You made sick rich people richer. Are you proud of yourself? Do you realise what those fuckers would’ve done to you in there had they won? You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Lucky? I wasn’t lucky. I was amazing. I won. And I got paid.”

Tanika yelped as she was pinned against a wall. “Is that all that matters? Just getting paid? Just getting the W? Fine. Take your shot. Fight me.”

“Get off me! What is wrong with you?” She tried to push back against the man she trusted more than anyone but yelped again as her back hit the wall a second time. It was going to take time to recover from the beating she had just taken. Exhausted, she stopped struggling to softly ask, “How do you know him...?”

“Because No Holds Barred was my life for longer than I care to admit. You think you’re the only one that saw dollar signs when it came to this shit? All I wanted was to be an MMA fighter. Until I heard of NHB. This was the real sport—the real challenge—to me. Not the flashy FCP. This. I wanted it. And I was good. Real good. Or so I thought. Turns out the street fighting mentality only gets you so far before technique and training win.”

“I taught those brothers tonight that lesson.”

“Yeah, well, I still say you got lucky. All the money I ever earned from this fiasco went to a five-month stay in intensive care after my last bout. And now I’m a washed-up—not even pro—fighter with nothing to his name—except, maybe, a few great campfire stories about how many illegal fights I won

decades ago. I was beyond lucky Dave Martin took me under his wing and taught me how to really fight and how to train fighters after I had healed, but I don't even own the building that houses my gym. And I have to hustle to grab and maintain the attention of every fighter we get that can afford to pay our fees so that we can keep the doors open and the water on. Why? So I can keep kids from making the same mistakes I made and ending up in the hospital—or worse. This.” He stopped talking to point down the hall where they could still hear the sounds of a good-sized crowd. “Is exactly what I wanted to keep you away from.”

“Blame me as much as you want,” Tanika said through tears running down her face. “I wanted to do this the right way. I came to you. I begged you. I even tried to go to the bank. But they wouldn't help. And neither would you.”

“I told you why!”

“You lied and said there were no matches I could fight in.”

“I can't get involved in this shit again. It destroyed me the first time.”

“This is me! I'm not trying to destroy you. I'm trying to help you. And me. When my family tossed me out, I had nothing and no one. Except you. You saved my life. The gym and training gave me a purpose. But we need money. Me, you, and the gym.”

“Life is not about fucking money, Tee!”

“I know it's not. It's about knowing and accepting who you are. Loving yourself. I finally have enough money and a date for my surgeries. And wrong or right, I got that money by fighting. It's what I love; it's who I am. And I'm proud of who I am. All I want is your support.”

Jonah sighed. “You've always had it. That's what you don't get. But this... this isn't MMA. It's barbarism.”

“I'm finished with NHB,” she said after a deep breath. “I had already decided before you came charging in on your white horse.” This was followed by a small grin meant to tell him how much she loved that he cared even if she took issue

with the high-handed methods he had employed. “But I’m not finished with MMA. I’ve got a future in the Cage. I know I do. But I have to be true to myself. I need you to train me, but if you refuse, I’m still going to do it. I’m prepared to take any hits that come my way.”

Jonah leaned his back against the wall next to her, closing his eyes as he also leaned his head back. When he finally opened his eyes, he looked down at the floor and said, “Let’s get you to a doctor. Get your injuries from tonight checked out. Then we’ll get something to eat. Tomorrow we’ll discuss the surgeries and how your recovery is going to affect our training schedule.”

“Oh, Jonah...” She wrapped her arms around him and sobbed. Words wouldn’t come.

Her dreams were closer than they had ever been, and she wouldn’t have to make either journey alone.

A MONTH AFTER HER LAST NHB FIGHT, TANIKA WOKE SLOWLY—her vision blurred—to barely make out a shape rising from a chair across the room and walking to her bedside.

“Hey, kiddo,” Jonah said, taking her hand.

“Is it... is it done?” Her entire body felt like concrete.

“The doctor is here.”

Tanika huffed out a few breaths, her emotions running wild.

“Hello, Tanika. Don’t worry if you feel disoriented. It’s natural. Can you hear me okay?”

She tried to nod but had a difficult time moving her head.

“You’ve had a whole heap of procedures. As we discussed, you’ll be out of action for at least six weeks, but everything went beautifully.”

Her face scrunched as tears of joy flowed from her eyes, and she squeezed Jonah’s hand as hard as she could. “It’s over? Really over? I’m me?”

She felt Jonah close his other hand over the top of hers.

“The surgeries are over,” the doctor specified. “You might become impatient or frustrated because while there’s no reason you shouldn’t be up and about in a few days, as I said, you can expect approximately six weeks of recovery, and we recommend you stay here for at least three days so we can

keep an eye on you. Your body has been through an ordeal over the last few hours, and it will take time to heal—”

“No,” Tanika croaked. “My body has been through an ordeal for the last few years. And you’ve helped pull me through it. I can never thank you enough.”

“I’m glad we could help,” the doctor reassured her. “But remember you need to stay in contact with us as well as with your primary care doctor and mental health providers. Your care doesn’t end just because we declare you recovered from the surgeries down the road.”

“Okay... thank you... thank you so much.”

“You’re very welcome. I’ll be back this afternoon,” the doctor said. “You have access to pain medication on your right-hand side, and a rehabilitation specialist will be in soon to have a chat about options.” He gave her and Jonah a nod before turning to leave.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Tanika tugged on Jonah’s hand, and he leaned in for the hug she so desperately wanted to give him. “Thank you. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“I have an idea. Welcome to the world for the first time, Tanika Taniela.”

Not even two months since having her privacy violated by the paps, Ava felt she had taken back control of her life. Her legal team were working on exacting a semblance of justice in the court system—though no amount of money could buy back the hours of mental anguish that asshole had put her through—and she was getting ready to take a very physical form of control for herself.

“Will Ruben be okay?” Ava asked Chris as the car approached the studio.

“Of course. He would’ve come if you had asked him.”

“He would hate it and be uncomfortable, and I’m already nervous enough as it is.”

Chris gripped her hand, making her look at him. “Babes, if you don’t want to do this, we turn around and go back. No questions. No worries.”

“No,” she replied, eyeing the studio as the car stopped. “I’m not going to back out because I’m a chicken shit. I risked my leg to win a fight. This is nothing,” she said with a shrug as she got out of the car. “Except a whole bunch of strangers looking at my minge vase and tits. And my ass.”

“Babes...” Chris said, clearly not much more comfortable than Ruben would have been.

“I’m okay. I’m okay,” she reassured him.

And she kept reassuring herself. Silently. In her head. Repeatedly.

They opened the front door to find the small, private studio already set up. A figure spotted them and moved over to them quickly. Ava recognised him from a plethora of pictures, interviews, video games and the like, but this was her first face-to-face meeting with the smile of Owen Gasnier, and he was clad in nothing but a robe.

“Ava, it’s an absolute pleasure.”

“Hi, Owen,” she replied, taking his offered hand.

“And you’re Chris, right?” Owen asked as he turned to hold out the same hand to him with a smile.

“That’s me,” came the reply as they shook hands.

“Thank you for coming, man. Well, Ava, you have a dressing room to the right over there for your stuff. I’ll get my shoot done, then they’ll call you when they’re ready for you. I had some platters put in the fridge in there if you’re hungry.” He gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder and moved to turn away.

“Hey, uh... Owen? Just thinking, how is this going to be marketed? Is it your shoot but with a guest appearance by me or something?”

“Oh, God, no.” He shook his head. “Totally equal. You’re being just as open and brave as I am. This is not an easy thing for anyone to do; believe me, I understand. The marketing behind this will be something like Owen and Ava: The Real Deal. Real being natural,” he explained.

Ava loved how calm he was, his voice and the way he carried himself chipping away at her fear. It was still there, freezing her movements a little, but Owen was thawing her.

“Well... I was thinking, if this is going to be the both of us, we should do the shoot together?”

“If you’re okay with that, I am,” he said with his eyebrows raised, concern lingering in his eyes.

She smiled and tried to reassure him. “If I’m going to do this, I want to do it right.”

The door behind them burst open and then slammed shut as a brunette woman came in holding a tray of coffee. “Okay, people! Let’s get ready to rumble!” she called out. She looked over at Owen and smiled. “Ah good, you’re ready,” she said before spotting Ava. Her eyes widened, and she placed the coffee tray on the ground to step forward and give Ava a big, tight hug. “You alright, honey?”

Ava looked over the woman’s shoulder at both Owen, who gave a small smile, and Chris, who looked like he’d just been asked what the meaning of life was. “Um... yeah?”

“Ava, this is Fiona. Fiona, Ava,” Owen said.

Finally, it clicked. “Oh,” Ava said. “Fiona, right.”

Fiona backed out of the hug, turned to shake Chris’ hand, then gently brushed her curled fingers down Ava’s cheek. “I forgot you might not know who I am by sight. No biggie. Are you feeling good? You’re comfortable with all this?”

“Yeah. I was just saying to Owen that we might as well pose together if the message is equality. Justice. Fairness. Overcoming adversity.”

“Fantastic idea.” Fiona nodded. “Okay, well, you go and get set up and I’ll take out the trash...” she said, bending to get

the tray of coffee. Before she moved, she turned around to Chris, pointing a finger at him. “Fucking brilliant strategy by the way, for Lynch. The way Ava pinned her to the cage and then got her to the mat—the submission—oh Lord.” Fiona gave a chef’s kiss to the air. “You should be so proud of her.”

“We are,” Chris said evenly.

Ava could tell he was unsure of Fiona, maybe even slightly pissed because knowing him there was a distinct possibility that he was wondering if he was being patronised. But to his credit, he didn’t say anything else. If Fiona got the idea Chris was upset, she didn’t show it. Instead, she moved across to where the lights were set up and the various mirrored shiny boxes were placed. There appeared to be a water effect on the floor and the wall facing them was black.

Fiona placed the coffee down and noticed two workmen having a chat nearby, both their phones out. “Hi, are we all good here?” she asked.

“Yep,” one said. “All set.”

“Fantastic. You can come back around four.”

“Huh?”

“If there’s nothing for you to do, you can come back around four. We’ll be finished then.”

“Can’t leave the site.” One shrugged. “Against regulations. If something goes down and we aren’t here, we’ll get into big shit from the boss.”

Fiona nodded. “Totally understand, but I’m telling you to leave. Go for a walk. Go to the movies. Play hooky. I won’t tell. I’ll make sure you get paid for the full day. I don’t care what your boss says, there will only be five people in this room all day. You make seven. Surplus to requirements. Get me?”

They didn’t like it, but they left.

After watching Fiona, the tigress, protect her cubs, Ava hurried to undress in the room Owen had organised for her. Slipping on the robe that had been provided, she remembered

a day with a similar robe. A day when a simple phrase, innocently uttered, triggered a complete breakdown on her part. She didn't want that to happen again.

She swallowed.

Most days since the trial had been good. She had put a lot of effort into working through the emotional baggage that had come with everything surrounding Dr. Van Gould, her mother and that time in her life. But the mind was a funny thing, and she never knew for sure what it might, or might not, link to past trauma.

She took a deep breath.

She had agreed to do this, and it was for a good cause. Owen and Fiona had gone out of their way to make sure she would feel comfortable and safe. She took a few moments to centre herself, to remind herself that, as Owen had said, she was in control. When she felt grounded once again, she opened the door to find Chris sitting casually behind the lights as a woman that must be the photographer, chatted with Fiona.

“Chris,” Fiona called. “Your input would be great.”

“Me? I dunno about...” He waved his hand. “Any of this stuff.”

Fiona gave a pfft sound. “You think I do? That’s what Mel here is for. I know Owen. And you know Ava. Come on over.” She finished with a smile. Chris returned it and headed over just as Fiona included him in the conversation. “So, this is what I was thinking...”

A smile taking over her face at the encounter, Ava headed over to where Owen sat, running his hand through his hair. Naked. Crossing in front of him, she sat down on the side farthest from where the other three had put their heads together. He didn't appear to be nervous.

She took a breath—if she was going to do this, then she might as well get used to it—and rose. Removing the robe, she quickly sat back down. Naked. Next to an also-naked Owen Gasnier. She had to remind herself of that. Naaaaakeed. Like, naked, naked.

She could actually see his penis. It was like, right there. Seriously. Out for all to see. And he didn't seem to have a care in the world.

He could see her too, if he so desired. But his eyes never left her face.

“So, um...” Ava started, pursing her lips. “Nice weather. Bet you're glad it's not cold in here, huh?”

The smile he gave her would've melted her heart if she swung that way. She could see why he was so adored.

“So, how are you?” he said, his voice lowered to a whisper. “Away from the cameras and the bright lights and the crowds and whatnot. Tell me, how are you?”

Ava gave a small shrug. “Okay, I guess. I don't like the attention I'm getting. I know it's all a part of being me, of being us. I get it. But I just feel so... I don't know, vulnerable? Seen? Judged? Exposed.” The irony was not lost to her.

“It only gets easier once you accept there's only so much defence you can do in the outside world before an offence is absolutely essential. Saying no comment, not going outside, not answering the phone—all of that—is pure defence. It's natural. No one wants to deal with how intrusive the media can be. But this? It's offence. Making a shit situation better. Helping people and showing the world who you are. You're not afraid. You didn't do anything wrong, and you shouldn't have to feel like you're being punished. You've been through hell and won a championship. Imagine what you can do now. The sky is the limit.”

Owen had such conviction in his voice.

“You really think so?”

“Absolutely. You've got your own race to run, and I respect that. But please don't think you can't ever reach out if you need help or advice. I'm always here if you need anything. Hell, Fiona will give it out for free. Whether you want it or not.”

Ava giggled as she glanced over at the woman in question. She hadn't known her long, but she had no doubts she was

looking at a force to be reckoned with. But it wasn't her advice that the fighter wanted at that moment, so she turned back to the man sitting in all his naked glory beside her. "I don't really have an MMA bestie that's not my team. So... with this, the scandal, I mean, what would you suggest I do?"

"I'd give an interview."

"You want me to go to the... the vultures? That's what Veronica called them. You want me to give them what they want?"

"No," he said gently. "A sit-down interview—one on one with a reputable reporter—where you can tell your side. Your narrative and your race, don't forget. It took me a long time, but someone very special to me made me realise that we can make a difference outside the Cage as much as inside. You can help people. You really can. You can start by reaching out to those out there that are also dealing with shit beyond their control by showing them you're not ashamed. You'll have haters no matter what you do. People make up their own minds, always have. But a lot of people love you and will listen to what you say."

Ava couldn't help but smile. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're very easy to talk to?"

"I've heard it once or twice," he said with a smirk before taking her hand and giving it a soft kiss. "You're going to be alright."

"I sure hope so."

"I'm your bestie now. I know so."

"Hey, you two," Fiona called out. "Are you all set?"

Owen looked at Ava, waiting for confirmation, gently running his thumb across the back of her hand.

She gripped his hand and nodded. "Let's do this."

TWO MONTHS LATER

AVA BECKINSALE SUCCESSFUL IN LAWSUIT
AGAINST THE DAILY STAR!
EXPECTED 7-FIGURE PAYOUT!

“HELLO AND GOOD MORNING TO YOU, WHEREVER YOU ARE around the world. We have a very special guest with us. None other than the Undisputed Bantamweight Champion of the world, Ava Beckinsale. Ava, welcome! It’s a loaded question, but let’s start with, how are you?”

“I’m good. Thank you, Nancy.” Ava smiled at the generous applause of the studio audience.

“Let’s go through a bit of your last two years. You go through a crippling injury in Las Vegas. I suppose my first question is, is it true you were clinically dead after your first match with Veronica Nash?”

“They said my heart stopped and I stopped breathing, so, yes that would be right.”

“Good Lord. So, after that, doctors tell you to retire, but you ignore that advice. Instead, you endure horrendous physical therapy and intense training to return to the Cage and face what many say is still the greatest female champion the sport has ever seen. And you win. I guess we shouldn’t listen to doctors, am I right?”

Ava smiled and adjusted herself in her seat. The question was light-hearted, but the answer was serious, even if delivered in the same easy tone. “No, no. Not at all. I wouldn’t recommend anyone ignore sound professional medical advice.” She laughed but went on. “In my circumstance, it worked out. If it hadn’t, it would’ve been my fault entirely. And I got hurt in that championship match against Veronica. Anyone who watched it saw that.”

Nancy nodded and the audience murmured in agreement. “It was a stunning act of bravery, to keep going with that dislocation.”

“Thank you. I’m sure there are some out there who would call it insane. And they’re probably right. I could’ve lost my leg. My trainer told me that just before that last round, word for word. To be clear, I would never tell anyone out there, young or old, to put themselves through that. To risk everything. It’s not for everyone. But I’m a fighter. If I hadn’t finished on my terms, if I hadn’t given it absolutely everything I had—done everything to prove that I could match it with the best in the world—I would have lost more than my leg.”

Nancy gave a big smile as the audience erupted into applause. “So, now you’re an MMA champion, you’ve walked the catwalk—even with a shattered leg, by the way, you rocked that—and you have a calendar coming out, is it next week or so? Do you, or can you, understand how much of an inspiration you are?”

Ava gave a small shrug. “Not really. If people think that what I do or what I say is inspirational, that’s awesome and I’m honoured but I’m just me.”

“Now, let’s talk about something that’s not so great. The pictures. What goes through your mind when you find out about them? How do you react?”

Ava let out a sigh. “What you would imagine. Shock, humiliation. Tears. Anger. Mostly, I couldn’t get over the pointlessness of it. I mean... why? I wasn’t doing anything wrong. I was at home, sunbathing. Sure it sold a bunch of papers. Got a lot of internet clicks. But they were sued and we

won. So I don't know if it was worth it. Guess they will have to tell you."

"They will never be on this show, you can take that to the bank." Nancy smiled and reached out to take Ava's hand in hers, giving it a small squeeze. "You are such an inspiration to young girls, what would you say to those watching today?"

"I'd like to think I appeal to everybody. Not just girls."

"Well, I think the appeal to boys might not always be for your fighting abilities," the host said with a chuckle as she let go of Ava's hand and leaned back in her chair to turn and wink at the crowd.

Ava gave a tiny smile, trying to be polite, but she didn't want to be a hypocrite or take the chance of the conversation sounding like a put-down for either sex. "I don't really mind why people like me. If there are boys out there that think I look nice, that's fine. There might be girls out there that think the same thing. There's nothing wrong with crushes. Hell, my biggest crush kicked my ass twice."

Nancy gave a raise of her eyebrows. "Oh really? You and Veronica Nash?"

The crowd gave an oooooo sound followed by a little cheer and wolf whistles. This was better. Light-hearted. Would get more of her actual personality out there. She was about to reveal something she never had before, but this was what Owen had suggested. To just be herself.

Ava smiled. "Oh man... I was absolutely in love with her. Confident, athletic, unbeaten, never backed down from a challenge. So unbelievably sexy. I used to shadow box in my room with the commentary from her fights playing through my headphones. I wanted to be her. I always liked girls, but she helped me realise I loved women. Hell, I'll say it; I still have a massive crush on her. And I did even when she was punching me in the face. I didn't know if I wanted to block her or beg her for a hug." She laughed and turned to the crowd to give them a shrug of her shoulders.

Everyone in the room joined in with her laughter, including the host. “So tell us about this calendar. Not only is it nude, but none other than Owen Gasnier is in it with you?” A big cheer erupted at that. “Talk me through this. Apparently, he contacted you?”

“He did. After the scandal broke, I was feeling all miserable and sorry for myself, and he called to check on me. Offered me the ear of someone who’s been in my shoes before and then he asked me if I would like to be involved in this calendar that he was putting together for charity.”

“Did you have to think about it?”

“For a minute or two. Well, okay, a second or two. He really put things in perspective for me. I won’t say he twisted my arm, coz that sounds horrible,” she said with a smile. “But he is Owen—freaking—Gasnier, and he convinced me that there’s a lot I can do with even this rubbish situation. Like, turn it into a way to help people. And I’ve seen the prints. I’m very happy with it, by the way. Ecstatic actually.”

“Were the two of you photographed together?”

Ava nodded with a smirk.

“So no photoshopping? When we see you both, there’s like... nothing between you? You’re both in the same room. In your birthday suits.”

Ava tilted her head. “That’s usually what a naked photoshoot means.”

“Of course, but this question is coming from a woman that wouldn’t be caught dead in a two-piece bikini,” the host laughed. “Of course, you have an amazing body, let me say, so all power to you. Actually, wait. Hang on, we have a sample here that got sent to us.” She leaned back and looked towards the back of the set to a huge screen where a picture of Owen and Ava had appeared.

In the picture, Owen was behind Ava, his arms wrapped around her breasts, shielding them from the camera as she cradled those arms with the back of her head against his chest. In it, Ava appeared to be bursting with laughter, and Owen was

placing a kiss on top of her head. The crowd gave a collective “awwwww” and then another “oooooo” as a second picture took its place. Ava in black and white, her own arms crossed over her breasts with the championship belt hooked over her forearms to hang down past her groin. After that came one of Owen, screaming like a warrior, holding his belt aloft as the muscles of his body gleamed under the lights. Lastly, Ava standing face to face with Owen, their noses touching, their faces scrunched up with cheeky smiles.

“Now that looks like one happy girl.”

“I was,” Ava said. “It was an amazing experience. I was really nervous beforehand, but he made me feel so comfortable and at ease...” She trailed off for a moment as her voice got thick and glanced down at her lap. “Sorry... he was just unbelievable. I can’t believe how easy it was to open up and trust someone like that. Never, not once, did I feel anything but safe and comfortable.” She looked back up and ran her gaze over the studio audience and then—totally against the advice she had been given before taping had begun—looked directly into one of the cameras. “After everything I’ve been through, I want everyone out there that has been through hell to know that there is warmth and beauty and love out there. Don’t let the past control your present or destroy your future. I took a chance and trusted someone I had never met in person. And we ended up doing something special for charity but also special for me. I never thought I’d be so at ease with it, but I think I laughed more on that day than I have in years. I didn’t realise how much I needed it, and I think I made a lifelong friend out of it.”

“That’s so beautiful,” Nancy said, giving her face a brief wave. “Now, before we let Ava go. She has a surprise for our studio audience.” She reached behind her chair and pulled out a box. “She’s going to sign a few copies for us right now.” Opening the box, she pulled out a collection of calendars—which the audience cheered—and handed them one by one to Ava who gladly signed them with a thick silver pen.

By the time Ava stood to move closer to the audience, its members were also standing, trying to get her attention for a

copy, so she smiled and threw them carefully to random people, trying to spread the love as it were. When she tossed the last one to a woman a few rows back, the audience member beside her shoved her out of the way to catch it. The act itself didn't appear violent. It could have been attributed to overexuberance. But the mask of fury the second woman wore and the way she moved from her seat to the aisle screamed that all was not well if the words from the unknown woman's mouth hadn't almost immediately made that clear.

"Is this what a champion does?" the woman asked loudly, causing all conversation in the room to die down.

Ava looked around the room. Was this a prank? "I'm sorry, what?"

"You're going to be," the woman replied. "The face of FCP—of MMA—and here you are on talk shows with cute stories. You might impress the normies out there but those of us in the women's division—that you stand over with all your privilege—know exactly what you are. You're a joke."

Ava was stunned. She didn't want to appear frazzled but it was clear the show hadn't set this up. Whoever she was had come here specifically to call her out. "I truly have no idea who you even are."

"Tanika Taniela," the woman replied. "Represented by Jonah Dutch out of Fit to Fight Gym in New Zealand. And you're looking at the only woman in my weight range with an unbeaten record. Not that you would know."

"If you're that good, rise up the ranks and earn your shot."

"Fuck you," Tanika snapped, bringing a gasp from the crowd. "Because of people like you, transwomen aren't even allowed in the pros. The company won't give me a shot because I was born in the wrong body. But it's time for me to get what I'm owed. I won't be held down anymore."

"I don't know you or your circumstances," Ava said, watching security guards come in behind Tanika. "Maybe it's not that you're trans. Did you ever think that no one is holding you down, and you're just not that good?"

Tanika made to jump over the railing separating her from the set, but three guards grabbed her. “Not that good?” she screamed, holding up one finger. “One match, peaches and cream! Just one! You think you’re the best, fight me! Are you a champion or a pussy? C’mon, Beckinsale. C’mon!”

Tanika was dragged away, cursing and screaming, leaving Ava standing there gobsmacked.

Ava retreated to the backstage area where both boys waited for her, unsure of what she had just experienced. “What the hell was that?” she asked.

“My sentiments exactly,” Chris answered.

“Brush it off,” Ruben said. “We gotta prepare for your second defence.”

“Do you guys know who she is?”

“Never heard of her. And believe me, we scoured the women’s division looking for prospects for your first defence. We even looked at fighters that had recently retired because they had the records to earn them a shot. There’s a reason we haven’t heard of her.” Chris tried to appease her curiosity.

“And that is?” Ava asked as she walked with them to the car.

“She’s not in the fighting pool. She’s nobody.” Chris put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed as they walked.

“For a nobody, she’s really pissed at me.”

“Stop,” Ruben replied rather sharply. “Don’t do this to yourself. That was a stunt for attention. She may not be a fighter at all. She dropped her full name on an internationally televised interview. People all over the world will be putting her name in a search bar right now. You were used, babes. A means to an end. Forget that and forget her. We are moving on to things that are worthy of our time. Got it?” he finished with a venom that was unlike him.

Something about Tanika had gotten under his skin.
Ava gave a slight nod and whispered, “Got it.”

TANIKA CAUGHT A CAB FROM THE AIRPORT STRAIGHT TO THE gym and walked in with a purpose—past a few fighters at the heavy bags paying extra attention to her. She had never felt more alive. More confident. She found Jonah in his office pacing frantically.

As soon as he saw her, he stopped. “Oh, great. Great. Just fucking great. Well, have you fucking kicked the hornet’s nest now, or what!”

“Calm down.”

“Calm down?” he screamed. “I haven’t even started! Where do I fucking start? First of all, how the fuck did you even get to Sydney and back?”

“Flew there before the sun was even up this morning. Got a deal on airfare from this new app that helps find mistakes in airline fares. I used my spare cash. So, technically this is your fault,” she said with a cheeky grin.

“What. The. Fuck?”

“I wanted to help pay bills here ages ago, remember? But you refused. I got a passport a while back—something that finally recognised me as a female—and I still have some savings. So, I went to Sydney, did what I had to do and came back.”

“That flight is three hours! So, you just went over there, made a fool of yourself and hopped back on a plane?”

“Made a fool of myself?”

“Yes! You’ve only just recovered from your surgeries! You aren’t even in full training yet, and you call out the champion? You gave your name! Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Exposed yourself—and me and this gym—to millions of people.”

“Good. That’s the idea.”

“For what?”

“Now the board will know my name. They’ll have to listen to us, now.”

“Listen to us?” Jonah repeated. “Have you tuned out everything I told you? We were going to try easing you in, weren’t we?”

“We don’t have time. That’s the whole reason I fought in NHB. To try to speed things up. You could lose the gym before we can ease me in. You said they recognise money. Marketability. I just challenged Beckinsale—to her face—and millions of people saw it.”

“You admitted you’re trans! Game over. You crucified yourself. What was the point of your surgery, besides your own confidence?”

“I’m not ashamed of being trans. I was, for too long. Not anymore. I told you I shouldn’t have to hide. I changed my face, my chest, my voice and my groin—everything I can physically change—for myself. Not for anyone else. For me. But even if I hadn’t, I would still be a woman. Let them dig up dirt about me. Let them say what they want. I know who I am and now so will they.”

“They won’t care, Tee!”

“They will. I shook her cage.”

Jonah ran an exasperated hand through his hair. “You just don’t get it, kid. That’s not the way the world works.” He paused as the phone on his desk rang. “Let it ring. Probably the water company.”

“They don’t ring this late in the day,” Tanika said softly.

“Fuck it.” He reached back and ripped it from the handle and hissed, “Yeah?”

Tanika studied his face throughout the conversation.

He barely said anything. A “yes” and an “okay” here and there. When he hung up, he stared at the floor.

“Well?” she asked.

He answered slowly, never looking up. “That was an assistant at FCP. They asked if I’m your management and asked me to make sure you were here because the board will be calling in thirty minutes.”

Tanika swallowed as the handset on the desk rang. This time they were expecting it. She pressed the answer button, putting the caller on speakerphone before Jonah could even flinch.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Tanika, we presume?” a male voice said.

“That’s right. Jonah is here too.”

“Well, Tanika, if your intention was to make a statement, you appear to have succeeded. Social media has run with it. Are you happy about that?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t seen anything.”

“Tell us, what were you thinking, making a challenge like that?”

“That there was a chance I could get you to notice me.”

“And you thought mocking our world champion would somehow get you an instant title shot?”

Tanika and Jonah exchanged glances. “No, that’s not what I was trying to do. I don’t want to be controversial or confrontational but...” Tanika looked behind her, through the dusty window to the kids trying to work out. “But I’ll do what I have to do.”

“Tanika, you don’t strike us as a fool. We cannot, and will not, reward fighters for simply stomping their feet for attention.”

“No, wait.” Tanika looked at Jonah who pressed his hands together against his nose. “I understand that. I know that might be what it looks like, but that’s not what I was doing. I... Yes, I wanted to call her out, and I was very selective with when and how. Of course, I want the title—it’s the benchmark for excellence—but I know I can’t expect a title shot.

“What I want is a chance. Just one chance where what gender I was born doesn’t matter. Where I’m only an athlete trying to prove myself against another athlete. I can take the insults and the bigotry. I have for years. But in the end, I’m like everyone else. I just...” Her voice got thicker. “I just want to matter.” When she started to tap her fingers against the top of the desk, Jonah grabbed her hands and held them. “Please.”

There were muffled voices on the other end of the line—what sounded like debating if you wanted to put it nicely, arguing if you didn’t. Jonah didn’t release her hands, and Tanika closed her eyes and prayed silently.

“Okay, Tanika. Here’s what we are going to do. While we are not amused by the chest-beating antics, we do admire initiative and a take-no-prisoners mentality. Jonah, can she be ready for the next title defence?”

Jonah’s mouth fell open. “You’re... you’re giving her a title shot?”

“Absolutely not,” came the stern reply. “But if you believe she can be fit, we will put her on the undercard.”

Both Tanika and Jonah looked at each other with wide eyes.

“This is a sink or swim scenario which presents a unique opportunity to keep the light on our women’s division. So we must warn you, Tanika, that controversy creates dialogue, and you are putting yourself in the firing line of very harsh critics.”

Jonah nodded sadly, and Tanika understood.

This was a test—for her and for their marketing strategy. Well, Jonah did say they were only interested in numbers. Money. At least they were being honest.

There were people on the net talking about her—and once the news got out that she would finally be involved in a professional match, the fire of public opinion would grow—they were being proactive in harnessing that debate somewhere specific.

It was all going to be on Tanika's shoulders.

“Understood. You open the Cage door for me. Then get outta my way.”

MMA TODAY LIVE PANEL:

RECORDED BEFORE A STUDIO AUDIENCE.

“HELLO, EVERYONE. PAUL AUSTIN HERE AND WELCOME TO another panel of MMA Today. We have a lot of things to cover in the show, but let’s get to the issue of the day. We have a new competitor in the women’s division, hunting for Ava Beckinsale’s title. But shall we say it’s a... unique circumstance. We have our trusty panel on hand to share their thoughts. What say you, George?”

“Yes, it’s a unique circumstance. I’m not sure I like the way she announced herself to the world, but be that as it may, here we are. Tanika has a chance next week to showcase herself on the world stage. Second match on the card. I don’t really know the board’s reasoning for this. Maybe it’s a publicity stunt... I dunno. I have mixed feelings about it.”

“John, thoughts?”

“I’m mixed as well. But as long as she makes weight and passes any other parameters FCP sets for her, I don’t think we can stop it.”

“I suppose now we have the ‘main event’ of our evening. Sam, let’s hear it.”

Sam sat stone-faced and didn’t move until a wave of his hand dismissed the question and he shook his head.

Paul pressed. “C’mon, Sam, it’s a panel and you’ve never been shy about expressing your thoughts before.”

“What’s the point?” Sam asked with a shrug of his shoulders. “We are talking insanity and not calling it exactly that. Insanity. Even you lot are too afraid to call this bullshit out because you don’t want to piss off the politically correct loonies out there.”

“Sam.”

“No. You wanted my thoughts. This selection—made because someone threw a tantrum on national television—has made a mockery of the sport.”

“Now, to be fair, the board said that this decision wasn’t a kneejerk reaction to Taniela’s accusations during the Beckinsale interview but that it was time to find ways to promote inclusion.”

“What complete and utter horseshit. You lot won’t say it? Fine. I will. This is a man—suffering a mental illness—pretending to be a woman. And everyone is just enabling this ridiculous crap. Did you know—I did my research before coming on here—did you know there are people out there that say they identify as animals? There are universities, universities mind you, that not only have nonbinary toilets but also have trays with cat litter in them for people who identify as cats. Seriously.”

“What’s that got to do with anything, Sam?”

“It’s the same thing. This man suddenly says, ‘I’m a woman,’ makes a scene on national television and suddenly the company says, ‘Let’s put you on pay-per-view’.”

“But hang on, Sam. Doesn’t Taniela have an amateur background?”

“Yes, he does. I have it right here.” Sam pulled out a piece of folded paper from his breast pocket. “This wasn’t easy to come by, by the way. Let’s see. Yes... last three opponents spent time in the hospital. Various injuries. Torn rotator cuff, for example. And this is the type of person we want to welcome into the sport?”

“Sam, injuries happen to fighters all the time.”

“Don’t give me that. When we are talking about an even contest, fine. This isn’t even.”

“What is an even contest, then?”

“Women’s division means female against female. Men’s division is male on male. This is not a difficult concept, gents.”

“Sam, you may have certain points—others are very, very askew—but research shows that there are people born in the wrong body. And, in this case, as long as Tanika Taniela makes weight—and whatever other parameters FCP sets out—by all measures she is considered a woman. I don’t know what other parameters there might be, but I believe one of them would be hormone therapy to level out the testosterone. There’s nothing else she can do to make it an ‘even contest’ as you say. Keeping her out of the Cage based on your perception of her mental state isn’t right.”

“I’m not saying keep him out of the Cage. I’m saying put him against men. I mean, what’s next? Are we going to get Owen Gasnier to fight Beckinsale? There was a rumour Veronica Nash wanted to fight Gasnier but that never happened. Gee whiz, wonder why? Because a man should never fight a woman in one-on-one combat. That’s not the sport we want. We want the best of the best striving for excellence. The women of MMA were pioneers. At a time when the world said female fighting shouldn’t be taken seriously—that the sport was patriarchal and misogynistic and all other such rubbish—the ladies of MMA were taking over the world. Taniela’s sudden inclusion, thrusting himself into the limelight, spits in the face of the division and all those women that helped get it to where it is today.” Sam then turned to face the camera directly. “Congratulations, feminist lefties. You’ve got your ‘inclusion at any cost’ and it’s a man that’s taken a rightful spot away from a woman. This is the world we live in folks. Strap in.”

TANIKA TANIELA – PROFESSIONAL DEBUT

TANIKA PACED THE SPACIOUS LOCKER ROOM, THOUGH “spacious” was a strange term. It was bigger than she was used to, but everything was when you were used to getting changed in a janitor’s closet.

She had been throwing her body around for chump change for a decade, give or take, and now she had her chance. She wasn’t in a gym with a makeshift Cage. She would be in front of a crowd of around twenty thousand people in the arena and untold millions watching on pay-per-view television.

Her one shot was here.

She looked down at her fightwear. It was the one thing she’d bought for herself with the small advance Jonah had negotiated. It had been a necessity with the fight looming and the changes her body had gone through since her last time in a legal MMA match. She had worked hard to get down to the bantamweight division once Jonah had pointed out her size might keep her from ever meeting Beckinsale in the Cage. On top of that, her gender affirmation surgeries had changed the way clothes fit her.

The rest of the advance, however, had gone towards the gym’s overdue bills. Well, once Jonah—not at all happy about it—had relented when the reality of how close he was to being forced to shut the doors was laid out via a letter from his landlord. Now he—they—had breathing space.

A knock on the door indicated it was time.

Jonah beat her to the door and glanced back, asking with his eyes if she was ready, but before she answered the unspoken question, she looked down to where he had already started to turn the knob. His hand was trembling. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders from behind, she stopped him before he could open the door. “It’ll be okay,” she whispered.

He gave a short chuckle. “I’m supposed to be telling you that.”

“What’s wrong?”

He let go of the knob. “I never wanted this for you.”

“I told you, it’s my dream.”

“No,” he said, tapping her arms before wrapping his hands around them to gently squeeze. “The things they’re saying about you. I wanted you to have less of what your family dished out, not more.”

“I know,” she replied, resting her head against his. “You took me in, sheltered me, protected me. You believed in me. You were there the day I physically became a woman. But now... now you gotta let me go. I gotta know I belong here. This is my chance, and I’m not going to blow it. You with me?”

Jonah let out a deep breath. “I’m with you.”

“And we are back, fight fans. That first fight was a surprise. Lorde absolutely flattened Jenkins! But now we come to the event that has certainly sparked a barrage of opinions lately. Tanika Taniela—the athlete born a man—will make her professional debut at FCP 234—right here, right now—against Angela Hughes. Here she comes!”

“I don’t want to make much of a deal about this, but look at her size. 6’1” and barely an ounce of body fat.”

“Listen to this crowd. To say the reaction is mixed would be an understatement.”

“Rather disappointing to see this, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Anyway... there she is—in the Cage—ready to make her professional debut. Hopefully, in about two minutes all this noise will die down and we can see what she has to show.”

“Wait a minute, we appear to have an official approaching the Cage, and yes, they are talking to the announcer. Something is obviously happening. Let’s go down to the Cage and see what the announcement is...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been advised that this match has been cancelled. Angela Hughes has protested the match and forfeited due to what she sees as an unfair advantage.”

“Well, how’s about that, folks? Hughes forfeits the match! Look at Taniela. She’s stunned. I don’t think she’s moved for at least thirty seconds.”

“This crowd is going insane. What a turn of events! Taniela has to clear the Cage. Yes, Tanika Taniela is being asked to leave. I mean does this count as a win for her?”

“I have no idea. But my God, what a scene. We have a world title defence later tonight as well, by the way! Can you believe this?”

Tanika moved back along the walkway, surrounded by cheers and insults—the insults were easier to hear, they always were. Everything was a blur. Her dream hadn’t been shot down. It hadn’t even taken flight.

She and Jonah were ushered back to the locker room and left alone to wait for an official statement. First, the officials—who appeared to be scrambling for answers—had to figure out what that statement would be.

Tanika moved slowly to the wall with the sinks and mirrors, placing both hands on either side of the nearest porcelain as she heard Jonah let out a big breath.

“Okay, well, let’s not let the night go to waste. Let’s hang out and watch the other matches. Soak up the atmosphere with no pressure and...” He stopped as Tanika punched the mirror directly in front of her, and after a few seconds, sank to her knees, still holding the sink as tears wracked her. Approaching slowly, he lowered himself to her level and wrapped an arm around her. “How’s about we just go?”

Tanika nodded through her tears. What more was there to say?

**TANIKA TANIELA MMA DEBUT CALLED OFF DUE TO
OPPONENT PROTEST!**

**PAGE 2: OFFICIALS SAY NEW OPPONENT TO BE
DETERMINED AT A LATER DATE!**

PAGE 3: WHAT OTHER FIGHTERS ARE SAYING!

**ALSO ON PAGE 3: BECKINSALE’S SUCCESSFUL
SECOND DEFENCE**

—Front Page of The Daily Telegram

AVA SMILED AND USED HER INDEX AND MIDDLE FINGERS TO throw a V for victory to a fan who asked could they take a picture of her as she walked out of the arena to a mob of fans standing along the barricade. She signed as many pictures, action figure boxes and copies of the calendar as she could before security ushered her away—directly to the VIP entrance of the hotel that was located across from the fight venue.

The boys carried her bag as she walked with ice taped to her ribs. Sore, yet still carrying the championship belt over her shoulder. Still hers. Two chances to have it taken away and she had mowed them both down. Her pride—her confidence—was growing. Directly after the match, her boys had told her how proud they were and ran through everything she had executed correctly—followed quickly by a list of things she had to work on,

But when they were finished, they reminded her that with the fight over, she had one month to let her hair down and relax. Way too wired to sleep, she decided there was no time like the present to start.

Dropping her belt—and her exhausted boys who wanted nothing more than to bunk down for the night—off at her hotel suite, she headed back to the elevator and up to the private bar on top of the roof. It was always open to fighters after a big event, but she had never been. She glanced down at the tracksuit she wore and hoped it was okay. Thankfully, she had showered at the arena.

Exiting the lift, she exchanged smiles with the hostess stationed in front of it and received a nod in the direction of the bar situated across from a small pool. The entire area—lit by twinkle lights—was gorgeous, the path to the bar surrounded on both sides by a rooftop garden.

As she rounded the last corner of the path, she spotted a group of three people chatting. Two men in suits and a woman Ava had only seen in pictures and interviews. Lindsay Lourde.

At the bar, curiosity getting the better of her, she glanced back at the trio before turning to the barman to say, “Bundy and coke, please.” She stretched her neck, then jumped when she realised she was no longer alone.

“Hey there, I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” Lindsay Lourde said, offering a bandaged hand to shake.

Ava shook it gently as the suited men walked behind them to the elevator. When they were out of earshot, Ava nodded her head towards them and said, “That looked important.”

Lindsay shrugged her shoulders with a brief scrunch of her face. “They want me to fight that trans chick.”

“Really?”

“Yup. They don’t want the embarrassment of tonight to ever happen again.”

“Are you doing it?”

“Told them I’d think about it. Let’s just say it’s in my best interests to say yes.”

Ava took a sip of her drink. “Don’t tell me this is one of those dodgy deals I keep hearing about?”

“No, not at all.” Lindsay smiled. “They wanted to speak to me directly—make sure I wouldn’t pussy out—before they got the media involved like last time.”

“Doesn’t seem like your style,” Ava replied. “I’ve seen your fights.”

“Wow, champion keeping her eyes on me. I’m flattered.”

Ava knew better than to confirm or deny but couldn't stop a light laugh.

“Did you want to get your eyes on someone... tonight?”

Ava spilled a bit of her drink as both the words and the look in Lourde's eyes struck her. “What?”

“I'm headed back to Oregon for training camp tomorrow—as soon as they finish getting my likeness for the latest video game—but if you're up for some post-title defence fun, I'm sure I can find someone for you. Now's the time to take advantage.”

Ava swallowed the gulp she had managed to take from her drink. “I'm not really the uh... take advantage type—” She stopped talking as Lindsay pressed their lips together, and several seconds passed before she pulled away. “You're um... direct, aren't you?”

“Always,” Lindsay whispered as Ava ran her eyes over the fighter's face and lips. “Full disclosure: if I fight the trans chick, I get a shot at your title. That was the deal I made. Otherwise, I'd proposition you myself. And believe me... you'd love it. Let me know if you want the room number of someone to get you off. I'm off to shower.”

Ava watched the fighter leave and sucked in her lips a bit. The offer for meaningless sex was tempting. She knew this was how fighters worked. You trained hard. You fucked hard. You moved on—unless you had someone special, and even then for some fighters.

Ava had no one special—her last sexual experience had been a magnificent one-night stand—and was free to do as she pleased. As she contemplated the choice between ordering another drink and taking Lindsay up on her offer, she felt someone else sit down in the seat next to her. Turning her head, her eyes widened.

“I told you being the champion was lonely,” Veronica Nash said.

“What are you doing here?” Ava asked but couldn't help smiling.

“Your team said you might be here.”

“My team? When did you talk to my team?”

“I went to your suite.”

“My suite?” She knew she sounded like an idiot, but her mind was having trouble wrapping itself around the idea that Veronica—fucking—Nash had searched her out. “How did you know what suite?”

“It’s the one they always gave me.” Veronica grinned as she winked at her.

“Of course,” Ava replied. “Let me guess, you’re here for a video game?”

“Yes! Apparently, I’m one of their extra downloadable ‘legend’ characters. Finally. It’s awesome.”

Ava’s jaw dropped at the excitement rolling off of Nash. “Are you a gamer?”

“Huge,” the legend replied, holding her hand up to signal the bartender. “It was one of the few things I allowed myself to use to wind down. Games where I could play as myself, of course. Racing ones too. That surprise you?”

“Yeah.” Ava smiled. “I had no idea. I thought I knew everything about you.”

“Oh really?” Veronica asked. “You think you know me that well?”

“I thought so.” Ava shrugged.

“What’s my favourite drink?” the older woman asked as the bartender stood waiting.

“Long Island iced tea with a squeeze of lime.”

Veronica was silent for a few seconds, eyeing Ava before turning to the bartender and nodding. “Full marks.”

“I really did study you,” Ava said as Veronica’s drink arrived.

“So I heard.”

“You saw that interview, I take it?” Ava squeezed both eyes shut before peeking with the right one.

“I did,” Veronica said as she looked at Ava over the top of the glass.

Hiding in embarrassment wasn't going to get her anywhere so Ava asked, “How did I do?”

“Are you looking for a critique?” Ava's crush asked as she used her tongue to find the straw and put it into her mouth to suck on. “Or a score?”

“Either one,” Ava said as she took a gulp.

“Wouldn't have been my choice on how to handle the situation. The calendar. The interview. But I can see why you did it.”

“I just wanted to get on the front foot.”

“And how do you feel now?” Veronica asked as the last of her tea disappeared.

“Like you have at least one drink to catch up on,” Ava replied as she jiggled her glass at the bartender. Within a minute both drinks were refreshed. Ava thanked the bartender, but after one more swallow, she began thinking that maybe she should slow down as there was a slight tingling feeling in her skull.

“Trying to get me drunk?” Veronica asked, again doing that tongue thing with the straw.

Ava laughed, unable to stop herself from being jealous of that straw. “I have to admit it's great to see you again. Especially since there's no cage surrounding us, and you're not pummeling me.”

“I haven't ruled it out,” Veronica muttered, pointing a mock finger. “Drunk or not, I could still take you. Your two defences have been sloppy as fuck.”

“Hey, come on.” Ava gave a little hiccup. “I got the job done.”

“I’ve seen your best. I’ve felt it and had surgery to recover from it—twice. This isn’t it. You were telegraphing your left fake way too much tonight. You’ll always have someone kissing your ass, but I’ll always keep it real with you.”

“You also stood up for me when you didn’t need to. It meant a lot—what you said to the press when the scandal broke. I really appreciated it.”

“If you know me so well, you should’ve known what I would say.”

“I know the champion very well. But I don’t know the person behind all that.”

“How many dogs have I owned—in my whole life?” Veronica asked as she motioned for another drink.

“Six,” Ava answered. “All bull terriers except for your current one, a golden retriever you rescued from a flood while hiking five years ago. You named him Lee.”

“What’s my favourite movie?”

“Trick question. You don’t have one. You have a favourite movie series. Rocky. You say that one is a better movie, but your favourites in order are three, two, six, four, then one. You hate five.”

“What’s my bra size?”

“Easy. 32B.”

“Dammit.” Veronica smiled. “I thought that would trip you up for sure.”

Ava gave a pfft sound. “I’m gay and have been infatuated with you for years. Your underwear preferences were one of the first things I memorised.”

“Really...” Veronica said softly, looking down at her drink as she stirred it slowly.

“Yup,” Ava replied, blinking quickly. “With the posters of you on my wall, it was a wonder I didn’t get carpal tunnel in my wrist from...” Ava cleared her throat. “Okay, wow. I’m going to stop drinking, like right now.”

Veronica's mouth went from a smirk to a full-blown smile after nipping at her bottom lip. "It's okay."

Ava glanced at the woman she had admitted to still having a crush on—on national television—at her dark hair done up with a few strands falling down the sides of her face and her glossy lips illuminated from the lights of the bar. Ava shook her head. Wow, this was not good. "I'd better be going."

"You don't have to."

"Yah, I do. This is already embarrassing enough."

Veronica regarded her carefully, running the tip of her finger around and around the top of her glass, asking softly, "How could it get even more embarrassing, then? What would you do?"

Ava scoffed. "Oh, I don't know, fall face-first into those perfect 32B tits and break my nose. That would top the night off real well."

"But your face would still be in between my tits, so, hooray for small mercies, right?"

"No, a small mercy would be putting my face in between—oh my God... Ava, shut up." She gave herself a slight smack on the cheek. "Why are we talking about this again?"

"Because for the last twenty minutes you've been getting more and more relaxed—thanks to the drinks—and we established that some time during your teenage years you began frequently masturbating over my posters."

Ava put her elbows on the bar and her head down on her fist. "I wanna go die in a hole."

Veronica gave her calf a gentle tap with her foot. "Why? Alcohol makes you honest. Good to know."

"I really should be getting back to my room."

"If you want to," Veronica replied, taking an ice cube in her mouth and sucking it.

"I think I better," Ava said, slapping her thighs. "Are you waiting for someone up here?"

“No, I just came to see you.”

“Me?” Ava asked, before clicking her fingers and giggling. “Oh, right. You came to tell me my defences sucked.”

“No. We were finally on the same continent—in the same hotel—and I wanted to see if you were okay after everything,” Veronica said. “And your team said you were up here alone.”

“I wasn’t though. I had just been weirdly propositioned by Lindsay Lohan... Lourde. Whoops. She was going to eat me. Or point me in the right direction of someone who would eat me. I think? I dunno. I was definitely propositioned.”

Veronica grinned. “I’ll bet you were. Post-victory sex is the best. Months of training is out of your system and you get this adrenaline rush... Actually, you know the only thing better than post-fight sex?”

“No.”

“Championship defence sex.”

“Oh...” Ava swallowed. “I can see that. Is that why you always had that glow whenever you’d do an interview or photoshoot after your matches? I always thought it was that moisturiser you were plugging for a while.”

“Nope. So... are you going to take her up on the offer?”

Ava felt her eyes widen and quickly glanced away. Unfortunately, her gaze landed on the mirror behind the bar and she realised that not only was she wearing a dopey look on her face, it was turning red. And despite her earlier assertion, she found herself grabbing her glass and taking another gulp before answering, “Nah. I dunno if that’s me. Fucking for the sake of fucking.”

“You don’t get horny?”

Letting out a shocked giggle, Ava said, “I think we’ve established that I do. And the best experience I’ve ever had was a one-nighter. That went like all night. But, as good as it was, I want something more substantial. Someone I connect with, have fun with. Someone that knows me. Someone that, I dunno, cares about me.”

“You’ve never had that.”

Ava shook her head.

“That wasn’t a question.”

“Oh. So you know me too, is that it?”

Veronica nodded. “I know you left home early. I know your parents hated you being gay, though your dad was at the court case, so I’d say he’s come around. I know what the doctor did to you, and I know he’s now dead, so you’re bound to be feeling all messed up. I know your boys love you to pieces and would do anything to protect you. I know—thanks to the interview—you’ve had a crush on me for years. And, thanks to the alcohol tonight, I know that I’ve been helping you get off for years without a thank you.”

Ava sucked in her lips. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“Don’t be,” Veronica said, draining the last bit of alcohol from her glass. “I’m not. I like knowing it.”

“Why?” Ava gulped.

Veronica played with her empty glass for a few seconds before answering. “Here’s something you might not know about me. I gave everything to this business. There was never any room for anything else when I wanted to be the best. Especially when I had to live up to my own legend. It consumed me. And then you came along. This blonde upstart.” She gave a small smile before continuing. “There was never any hope for you in that first match. I gave you the respect you deserved for stepping into the Cage with me. That took a lot of guts. But then you fought me. Not the champion. Not the legend. Me. You stood toe-to-toe with me. Looked me in the eyes. I wasn’t prepared for that. For you. It had been so long since anyone fought me that I didn’t know what to do. I panicked. I did things I never had—and never should have done.” Veronica leaned back and ran her hand through her hair. “I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Done what?”

“Those kicks that ended the first fight.”

Ava frowned. “You did what it took to win.”

“Doing what it takes is one thing. I’m fine with that. I’ve always done what it took. I was ruthless and made no apologies. Ever. But what I did to you. I went too far. I could have killed you. And I’m not okay with that,” Veronica’s eyes shone with tears as she slowly said the one thing she had never said out loud to anyone. “Ava, I am so sorry.”

Even in Ava’s alcohol-induced brain, the moment struck a chord. “Where is this coming from?”

Veronica dabbed at her eyes with a napkin from the bar before answering. “I saw the interview, and coupled with all I know of your past, it hit me. You’ve been through hell. And it’s easy for me to say the paps and the rest of the media are vultures or whatever. But it doesn’t take much to realise that if you go searching for villains in your story, then I’m one too.”

Ava leaned in and placed her hand on Veronica’s. “No, you’re not. Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. I’ve never apologised for being who I am. For doing what I needed to do. But I never realised—until I saw the interview—what I actually did to you. When I heard you say that you stopped breathing after our first and that you risked losing your leg in the second fight, I mean...” Veronica shook her head.

“It was my choice,” Ava replied. “To be the best... you have to beat the best.”

“So that’s why? You just had to win?” Veronica asked.

“I had to know.”

“Know what?”

“That I was somebody. That I belonged in there with you. That I mattered.”

“And that was when you chose to find out?”

“You don’t know when the moment that can shape the rest of your life going forward will come around. You can’t plan for it. You can’t wait for it. All you can do is make a choice when it’s upon you. I made it. I was tired of being a victim. I

was tired of feeling helpless and held down. I was sick of it. You were still standing. No matter the struggle. I looked across at you and I didn't see a villain. I saw the same inspiration I did the first time I watched you fight. Maybe it's hard for you to hear this but it was you more than anything that made me stand. You tried to warn me. You told me to quit. And even then I knew that was an act of mercy. I've never asked you why you did that?"

Veronica pulled her hand back slowly and cleared her throat. "I should get back to my room. Are you done?"

Ava nodded. Clearly, alcohol made Veronica emotional and helped open her up. But just not open up that much. Veronica stood and waited for Ava to do the same, obviously wanting to walk her to the elevator. Ava thanked the bartender and left, slightly wobbly on her feet but okay. Tippy was not drunk, which was good. She enjoyed the buzz, not the BANG of a hangover.

Once the doors to the elevator closed, Ava felt okay to continue. "Thank you for coming to see me."

"It's no big deal. I know what it's like to be a champion and feel disconnected from almost everybody. It was nice to talk to you without cameras and paparazzi trying to beat down a door. And thank you for being my number one fan... clearly."

Ava laughed as the elevator stopped at her floor, "It's not every day you get to geek out for your hero. So, thank you for letting me, and for not freaking out that I know you so well."

Ava held out her arms, silently asking if a hug was okay. Veronica moved forward and wrapped her arms around her.

Ava closed her eyes and relaxed a touch as the athletic figure of Veronica Nash pressed itself against her, with no cage and no striking to worry about. Damn, she just... felt strong.

"Hmmm? What?" Ava asked with a lazy tone. She was sure Veronica had asked something while hugging, but Ava was a little lost in the moment.

“I said... what is my sexual preference?”

Ava opened her eyes and leaned back slowly. Neither woman blinked, but Ava shifted her gaze, moving from Veronica’s eyes to her lips. It was ages before Ava answered, and only the repeated ding of the elevator door roused her from the haze she had fallen into. “I don’t know.”

Veronica gave a tiny nod of her head like she expected that answer. “Might want to read up on that.”

Veronica let her go and walked out of the elevator with a quick, march-like movement. Leaving Ava stunned and confused.

AVA SLOWLY STEPPED OUT OF THE ELEVATOR AT HER FLOOR.
Her mind whirling.

What the hell just happened?

Had Veronica been sending her a message? She had to be,
right?

But why not just say she wants me?

Was it the alcohol?

Am I wrong?

Before the elevator could close, Ava slapped her hand
between the doors and stepped back inside.

Fuck this.

Maybe it was the alcohol, but she had no idea when she
would see Veronica again.

She thinks she can leave that out there and just walk off?
Telling me to read up on it.

Ava hiccupped as the doors opened, and she marched—
exactly as Veronica had—out into the hall. But as she heard
the doors slide closed behind her, she remembered she had no
idea which door to knock on.

There were four to choose from.

One of them had Veronica behind it. She would have
walked into it only moments before. The occupants of the
other three were probably sleeping.

Ava looked at her phone and saw the time.

Fuck.

She let out a breath, shrugged to herself and knocked on the first door. Waited for a few seconds and knocked again.

Nothing.

She knocked a third time before a croaky male voice shrieked from the other side, “Fuck off! It’s 1:00 am!”

Shit.

“Sorry...” she said, cringing but moving to the next door. She let out a breath and knocked again. This time she heard feet moving on the other side, and the door opened to reveal Veronica—half-dressed with her shirt unbuttoned well past her bra.

“What’s up?” Veronica asked, leaning against the door.

“I’ll tell you what’s up...” Ava said as softly as she could. “You can’t just... just say those things and walk off. I might have some things to say too, you know.”

“So,” Veronica said, standing straighter. “Say them.”

“Okay... yeah. I will.” Ava nodded. “You are... you—” she started, pointing a finger at Veronica who stared at her with those hazel eyes that had once looked at her like she was a mouse and Veronica was a rattlesnake.

Now? They stared at her in a very different way.

“Ava, what are you doing here?” Veronica said, ever so slowly.

Everything Ava had in her mind to say—all the anger, frustration, everything—went out of her mind as she found her eyes running over Veronica’s neck and chest. She let out a helpless sigh. “I don’t know.”

Veronica bit her lower lip before reaching out to grab Ava by the jacket of her tracksuit and bring her not just inside the room but to her mouth. Veronica’s tongue found its way through Ava’s eager-to-part lips as the door slammed shut and Ava’s back hit a wall. Pinned, Ava barely made a sound but

couldn't get her mouth to close when Veronica moved from it to her neck.

She tried to take her jacket off but Veronica stopped her, lowering it to hold it around Ava's arms and keep her in place while she continued to kiss her neck. Letting out a tiny groan Ava shoved the more experienced fighter back against the opposite wall and tossed the jacket to the side.

Their mouths met again as Ava fisted Veronica's hair, pulling her head to a better angle, but Veronica pulled back to grip Ava's jaw, grinning before their tongues engaged in a new assault. Within moments, Ava found herself flipped around and pushed chest first into the wall—Veronica behind her, biting her ear lobe. Closing her eyes, she felt her hair pulled back as lips trailed kisses from her neck to between her shoulder blades and a hand worked its way up her stomach and under her bra.

Ava pushed backwards, and Veronica hit the opposite wall with a thump before Ava spun around to claim her mouth once more, and with a quick burst, ripped the other fighter's shirt from her torso. As Ava heard buttons dropping all around the room, she also heard Veronica chuckle.

Even in this, whatever this was, they were trying to exert dominance. Fighting. Neither one willing to back down.

And they liked it.

Veronica cupped Ava's ass, picking her up to carry her to the bed and slamming them both down. Ava raised her hips and her pants and underwear were pulled off before she could reach for them herself. A tongue traversed from her belly to her chest—luckily for them both, Ava's bra clasped in the front and was quickly opened, freeing her tits to be claimed by Veronica's waiting mouth.

Now that it seemed she had Ava where she wanted her—under her—Veronica slowed down. Taking a nipple in her mouth, she bit down until Ava closed her eyes and whimpered, then began to move lower, leaving a trail of kisses and licks from chest to groin.

One of those delicate kisses was placed just above Ava's clit before she felt her legs spread wider by more experienced hands. She groaned as a tongue snaked along her thigh, down to her knee.

"Did you mean what you said in the interview—that you could've lost your leg?" Veronica whispered—the words breathed onto Ava's skin.

Ava didn't know if it was the feel of Veronica's breath or the words that excited her most, but her head rocked back into the bed and her back arched off of it. Her breasts were heaving when she lowered herself back down and it took a moment before she remembered that Veronica had asked a question. "What?"

Veronica repeated herself, and Ava nodded.

"The title meant that much to you?"

"You meant that much to me."

Running her fingertips up and down Ava's outer thigh, Veronica's brow furrowed. "Huh?"

"My respect for you made me keep going. I wanted to win, but more than that, I wanted to earn your respect. I had to know that I had given you my all."

Veronica stared into her eyes for quite some time, then lowered her lips to gently run a series of kisses along the length of Ava's scar. "Do you have another naked shoot anytime soon?"

Ava giggled. "No... why?"

Veronica smiled and dropped back down to Ava's inner thigh, taking a sharp bite of the soft flesh. Ava's eyes widened and she yelped as she pulled Veronica's hair.

Veronica let her go and leaned back, surveying what she had done. At the bruise forming. Then crawled up to flick the tip of her tongue up Ava's lips. "You said you wanted to get to know me. I don't stop dominating in or out of the cage. And... I like knowing where I've been," she whispered. Kissing Ava's neck, her fingers gently brushed the tender bruise. "Think you

can handle that?” She ran her tongue along Ava’s jaw and gave a gentle nip of her chin.

“Fuck, no.” Ava lowered her gaze to Veronica’s. “I’m not going to let you dominate me without retaliating...”

Veronica grinned and gave a raise of her eyebrows and an mmmm purred from her throat as she lowered herself between Ava’s legs again and planted her mouth alongside her clit. When she bit down, Ava gritted her teeth. It hurt, but she was expecting it. And—fisting the sheets with one hand and holding the back of Veronica’s head with the other—she liked it.

Moving her mouth to Ava’s clit, teeth were replaced by tongue. Aggression replaced by tenderness. When Ava looked down, Veronica’s eyes were closed, her face filled with bliss—the licks deliberately slow as she reached between her own legs. The pain of the bite, mixed with the agonisingly glorious tongue work and the moans Veronica made as she sucked on Ava’s saturated clit was too much. Ava’s thighs quaked as her orgasm hit like a whip crack. But even then Veronica didn’t stop.

It was both painful and amazing, and as Ava grabbed Veronica’s head with both hands, she felt the other woman’s shoulders shaking—much like Ava’s legs had. Ava not only heard her cum, she felt it. “Holy fuck...” Ava moaned.

Veronica pushed herself up to grab a pillow and place it under Ava’s ass. Holding one of Ava’s legs in the crook of her arm, she straddled the other, positioning herself between them.

“Seriously?” Ava whispered.

“Trust me. It’s epic after you’ve just cum,” Veronica replied, her hair now all over the place. Dishevelled. Frantic. She moved just a touch—until their groins pressed together. But had to adjust once more to achieve the desired effect of their pulsing clits finding each other.

Ava gasped and arched her back again.

Veronica rolled her eyes into the back of her head and groaned, “Fucking hell...”

Ava held the pillow underneath her tight with one hand as she pinched her nipple with the other as Veronica began to thrust against her harder. She could feel the slickness between them increasing as Veronica moved her hips faster. Ava mumbled everything from curses to “Oh my God!” and Veronica grabbed the breast Ava wasn’t pinching.

They opened their eyes and looked directly at each other as they came again, then finally spent, Veronica fell on top of Ava, breathing like she had just run a marathon—or gone the final round in a fight.

Ava was stunned. An earthquake couldn’t have made her move and she could barely think. Fitness was one thing. Sex like this—where your body gives up entirely and there’s nothing else to do except give your lover everything—was something else.

THE MORNING AFTER HER FAILED DEBUT, TANIKA WALKED through the hotel suite she had shared with Jonah to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything while packing. She found Jonah standing in the living area.

He had his suitcase in one hand and his phone pressed against his ear with the other. "Yeah, okay... So what does that mean? What if Tanika wins?"

This made her turn around.

Jonah placed the phone down on a nearby table and pressed loudspeaker. "It will be a stunning debut victory..."

"Sure, but forgive me. It sounds like you're hanging her out to dry a bit here. You're telling me if Lourde wins she gets a title shot?"

"Correct. We wanted to inform you before it gets released to the media."

Jonah looked down at the phone and then at Tanika before saying, "Thanks for the heads up. We appreciate it."

The phone clicked dead.

"What's that look for?" Tanika asked.

"They're using you."

"We knew they would."

"This is worse. Now they want to virtue signal that they are 'progressive.' To save face from last night."

“Hey... as long as I get to fight, it’s one step closer to Beckinsale.”

“Tee, forget about Beckinsale.”

“Fuck that,” Tanika waved a hand. “Fighting, earning money, that’s business. To be one of those that make a living—and supports those they care about—doing something they love, would mean a lot. But beating Beckinsale? That’s not business. That’s personal. I’ll do whatever it takes to get that fight. I don’t care.”

“I do care. We have to be careful here, Tee. It’s you and me against the world. The interest—good or bad—in you after last night has already skyrocketed. This is the lightning in a bottle you wanted. But the thing about lightning is after the bright flash, it’s all gone. Lourde wins: she gets Beckinsale. You lose: it’s all over. Interest gone. Marketability gone.”

“I’ll win,” she growled. “I didn’t get this far by playing nice. I can’t wait for opportunities. I have to make them. Kick down doors. Break down walls. Grab life. Losing isn’t an option. There’s more at stake here than me and you.”

“Tee, if you lose...”

“I won’t lose. I’m done losing,” Tanika said as her mind drifted to ten years in the past.

Thomas took a deep breath and opened the door to the Moina Bar. His home away from home even though it was against the law for him to be in there at his age. But he didn’t care and neither did the patrons.

It was supposed to be his destiny.

The Moinas were the local gang, one with family ties as it were. But more than that, they were a way out for the kids of the surrounding neighbourhoods. It wasn’t much, but it was something to hold on to. People that would have your back as long as you had theirs—and you proved you had what it took.

He moved past the front of the bar, where the hustle and bustle drowned out the jukebox. To the back. Where another

sound could be heard. Shouts. Screams. Frantic and aggressive. To the untrained ear, it might sound as if trouble waited on the other side of the door at the end of a short hall. But to Thomas, it sounded inspirational.

He opened the door to find the back warehouse filled with men and boys of various ages. Half crouching, elbows bent sideways, their tongues flared out, their eyes focused forward, wide and angry.

The leader of the New Zealand Haka, Thomas' uncle, had led many Hakas in his life and expected every one to be perfect. Moving as one—slapping their thighs and looking up at the sky—the group followed the Maori instructions screamed at the top of his lungs. Their own screams and the pounding of their feet echoed around the warehouse, adding to the foreboding violence of the war cry. Dust from the ground rose to give the area a foglike quality, and the walls trembled. The Haka finished with many of them cutting their throats with their thumbs.

Thomas shivered slightly as he felt the prickles of goosebumps and the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The Haka was a time-honoured tradition. The highest form of respect one could hope for. The faces and actions of the group were designed to both intimidate opponents and provide adrenaline for themselves. It was said very few could stare down the Haka and none could do it standing completely still.

It was then that Teni turned to face Thomas. He had obviously known Thomas was there, but Teni wouldn't stop the Haka for anything.

“What you doin' here?” Teni scoffed.

None of the men left.

“I wanted to see you.”

“You've seen me.”

“Uncle, please—”

“Please what?” Teni replied. “You don't think your father told me what happened?”

“Did he tell you he kicked me out?”

“You bet your ass he told me. So I’m gonna ask again. What the fuck are you doin’ here?”

Thomas looked around from face to face. “Can we talk privately?”

“You should know better than anyone I don’t hide. Whatever you got to say can be said in front of others, or it doesn’t get said.”

Thomas swallowed. “I wanna know if I can come back.”

Teni glared at him. “You made your choice.”

“I was kicked out.”

“And you left. You left the house. Your family. Your brothers. Everything.”

“Uncle, I’ve got nowhere else to go.”

“You want a position here? You earn it like everyone else.”

Thomas looked again around at the faces staring at him.

Initiation.

He had seen it before. A select few members would beat the ever-loving shit out of those who felt they deserved a place among them. Those who could take the beating had a Haka done in their honour. Thomas set his shoulders. “I’m ready.”

Teni bent his neck and glared at Thomas—with a look that would have chilled a hardened criminal—before launching himself forward. Thomas tried to cover up too late and was hit with a one-two straight punch and right hook combo that connected with his chin. Within seconds, his knees crumbled and he fell to the dust.

“Ready, huh?” Teni said as he kicked Thomas in the ribs. “I don’t give a fuck what you want to be called. What you think you’re owed. It don’t mean shit. The world doesn’t give a fuck about you. It won’t give you anything. You gotta take it. Don’t you ever come to my door again, telling me you’re ready.”

When he finished speaking, Thomas' uncle stepped back with a look of disdain and spat at the ground before stepping over his nephew and leaving. Thomas hugged his chest as he choked and spluttered from the dirt and the pain, trying to hide his tear-stained face as every member followed Teni out. Leaving Thomas humiliated and alone.

AVA WOKE TO EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT AND THE SIGHT OF Veronica Nash's naked back, nothing but a sheet separating them. She was blinking away the blurred vision of just waking when Veronica slowly rolled over with the most relaxed look Ava had ever seen on her face.

The fighter ran her fingertips along Ava's arm. "Hi."

"Hi." Ava smiled. "Best night's sleep I've had in months. And I don't want to be 'that girl' but... what do we do here?"

"I don't know," Veronica replied. "We had quite a bit to drink last night."

Ava began to run her fingertips down Veronica's arm. "Are you saying alcohol made you want to fuck me?"

"No," Veronica said softly. "It made me feel less guilty about it."

Ava moved her fingers lower, down to Veronica's hip, to the scar just under her belly. "Saw this last night but I got a bit distracted. Where did it come from?"

Veronica moved the hand away from her stomach, shaking her head. The message clear: don't ask.

Ava nodded. "So. This... us?"

"I don't know," Veronica said. "Our night was great. Amazing. But things are more complicated in the morning light. Life is different for us. We're on the road so much, and there's the press—tabloids. You know that as well as anyone."

“I know,” Ava replied. “You’re right. They would have a field day with this.”

“And that could seriously derail you. To be fair, I don’t know what I’m doing yet. I haven’t officially retired. I’m relaxing and enjoying myself, but that doesn’t mean I won’t come for you.”

“Clearly,” Ava smiled. “Four times by my count.”

Veronica couldn’t hide her own smile, shaking her head, her voice serious. “Things are different between us now, but they don’t have to be extra complicated. Can this just be between us?”

“You think I’m going to shout about this to everyone?”

“Well, the entire floor heard you last night.”

Ava blinked slowly, but couldn’t suppress a laugh and gave Veronica’s shoulder a nudge. “You know what I mean. I’m happy for this to be just us. But do we ghost each other, not mention it again?”

“I just don’t want anyone else to know. I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Neither do I. So.” Ava fell down onto her back. “This will be our dirty little secret.”

“I can live with that if you can.”

Ava could feel the older woman’s gaze and let out a breath. “So we just... or I’ll... just go? You won’t be mad?”

“I would only be pissed if I woke up and you’d gone.”

“I couldn’t do that.”

“Goes against your values, does it?”

“Well that, and my legs have only just started getting some feeling back.” She gave a playful shrug at Veronica’s chuckle, then climbed out of the bed. “I have an early flight, so I’ll get out of here. Can I have your number?”

“Of course.” Reaching for her phone, Veronica opened it and tossed it to Ava. “Put yourself in there.” When it was

tossed back, she clicked the screen. “There you go. Now you know it’s my real number.”

Ava felt her mobile buzz quickly and then stop as she looked left and right all over the floor. “I appreciate that.”

“Looking for this?” Veronica said, holding up a familiar-looking bra.

“That would be it,” Ava said, walking over, hand out, but Veronica pulled it away. They stared each other down for several seconds before Ava asked, “You want me to beg?”

“Yes.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

“Well, this is mine then, isn’t it?”

Ava stared in her eyes again before grabbing her by the throat to give her a long, fierce kiss. “I guess it is.” She grabbed her jacket and zipped it up, smiling as she headed out.

In the elevator, it hit her. She had slept with Veronica Nash—the woman of her dreams—yet she felt completely calm. There was no embarrassment. And absolutely no regret. She just had to figure out what in the hell to tell the boys.

She didn’t want to lie. But Veronica was hers. Or at least what they had shared was. She didn’t want to share it. Even with her boys.

She opened the door to find them dressed and sitting at the table.

“Well, well.” Chris grinned. “Look what the cat dragged in. Guess we weren’t the only ones who got laid last night.”

“Morning,” she said, unsuccessfully trying to keep a laugh in.

“Hey, babes,” Ruben called, saving her. “Pancakes are still warm if you’re hungry.”

“I’m starving, but I need a quick shower before we leave.”

“Don’t worry. I moved our flight to tomorrow. I figured you were... otherwise occupied.” Ruben smiled. “Relax and

pack later.”

Ava gave him a thumbs-up but made a beeline for the bathroom anyway. She turned the water on and looked at herself in the mirror, checking her neck and face. At a knock, she turned to the bathroom door before Ruben poked his head around it.

“Everything okay?”

“Yah. Fine,” she said.

“You sure?” he said, tilting his head.

He knew. He didn’t know who, but he knew, and he was asking if she was okay with everything that had happened. She might not be a delicate little flower, but she was still his girl. And Ava couldn’t help but smile as she nodded. “Mmmhmm.”

Ruben caught the smile and nodded. “Okay then. The pool is ready when you are.”

“Thanks, Rubes,” she said as the door closed. Undressing, she put her foot on the toilet to check the bruise on her thigh. “Bloody hell...” The thing was almost black. She grabbed her phone to take a picture of the damage and captioned it with “SERIOUSLY? FUCKING OW!”

By the time she had taken her hairpins out, her phone buzzed with a two-picture reply. “Poor Baby,” in white words on a black screen, was the caption of the first. When Ava swiped across, she found herself staring at a reflection of Veronica still in bed. Still naked. Captioned “Better?”

Taking a selfie in the mirror from the shoulders up, she got cheeky with the text.

B: Can’t see anything. THIS is called a close-up.

She didn’t have to wait long for a response. Veronica had moved her phone to above her vagina, held it open and snapped a picture. A text message quickly followed.

N: A little something for the plane ride home.

Ava bit the tip of her tongue. Veronica was either still turned on from last night or from these exchanges. More

importantly, these exchanges told her Veronica trusted her, which meant a lot. They also reinforced her recent lesson. They were in control of their own bodies. What they showed, who they showed, when and where. No one had that right but them.

B: Actually my plane got moved to tomorrow.

N: What are you going to do for the rest of the day?

B: Figured I'd go down to the pool. Go sightseeing. Definitely do some shopping. You?

N: I'm going to unlock my door.

B: On my way.

Ava scrubbed up using what she considered her best smelling body gel but dressed in a shirt and jeans. Barefoot. No make-up. Ponytail. Veronica had seen her flushed, sweaty, hair mussed. And that was before seeing her naked.

Heading out to the living area where the boys watched the highlights and replays of last night, she said, "Hey. I'm gonna step out for a while."

They looked at her for a moment. Curious. But Ruben nodded. "Okey-doke. We'll have notes ready for you."

"Guys, take a break."

"We will," Chris promised—as he held the pen and pad in his hand. "You up for going out to dinner tonight?"

"Sounds good." She smiled as she kissed them and headed out.

As the door was closing, she heard Chris chuckle and say, "She ain't coming back anytime soon."

"Just hope she's careful," Ruben replied.

"Ah, love. She's just doing what you told her to do."

"I know. I just don't want her heart to get broken. Okay... so which round is this?"

Ava smiled and stuck her head back in to yell, "Love you guys, too."

Six hours later, Ava made dinner with the boys and they all made their flight the next day. She had to hide a slight cringe and limp from yet another dark bruise on the opposite thigh. Evidence of where Veronica had been. Marking her. Making sure Ava remembered.

She remembered alright. She would never forget. But she also wouldn't forget that she had left bite marks of her own, just as hard, on Veronica's ass.

Ava might "go down," but she would always go down swinging—as it were. Same as in the Cage.

TWO MONTHS AFTER HER ABORTED PROFESSIONAL DEBUT, Tanika paced another locker room. The sound of the massive crowd barely dulled by the walls despite how thick they were. She wasn't the main event, but all reports indicated she was the most anticipated match on the card.

Everyone was watching.

Jonah checked his watch. "It's time."

Tanika nodded and stepped towards the door.

But Jonah stopped her with his hands on her arms. "Remember what happens if she wins. You wanted the big leagues. You wanted to live your dream. What happens from here, is up to you. Make your mark. Carve your name."

"Alrighty then, sports fans! Welcome back to our live broadcast. Here we go. Tanika Taniela in her Cage debut. Take 2 as it were, John."

"Indeed. The company, and most importantly Lindsay herself, has said there will be no protest. This match—wrong or right—WILL go ahead. Strap yourself in folks."

"How do you see this one?"

"I have to go with Lourde. Purely on the fact, I've never seen Taniela in action, and there's a lot on the line tonight for Lourde."

“Quickly on that, John—as Taniela makes her way to the cage. What are your thoughts on dangling the number one contender spot in front of Lourde for this match? Is it because her record rightfully deserves a shot at Beckinsale? Or was it the only way to ensure this match took place?”

“I’d say it’s both.”

“Well. We will have our answer in just a few. Lourde is now in the Cage and it is being cleared of all nonessentials. Ladies and gentlemen, the referee raises his hand and down it goes! This historic match is underway! Lourde lunges for the bigger challenger! Wow, that punch glanced off of Taniela, OH BOY! Taniela swung and connected Lourde right at the side of the head! Lourde staggers sideways but Taniela lunges for her! SHOVES LOURDE TO THE CAGE! Hammering away with lefts and rights! Lourde’s hands are up! But her body IS SWAYING AGAINST THOSE BLOWS. Taniela is chopping away at Lourde’s forearms. Not stopping! Eyes lit up! Face contorted with rage! She’s relentless. It’s an onslaught! Oh my! Lourde sinks to her knees! She’s crumbled! That’s it! It’s over! Ref has stopped it!

“Taniela steps away! Raising her hands in victory as Lourde’s trainers make it inside the Cage. Lourde is still on her knees, her arms upturned and straight out in front of her. I don’t think she can move them...”

“Lourde is trying to hide her face. She’s sobbing. Congratulations on a well-deserved debut victory to Tanika Taniela—who’s only just realised Lourde’s condition, I think. Gee, you hate to see this...”

POWERHOUSE DISPLAY FROM TRANS MMA DEBUTANT

Tanika Taniela’s MMA career is off to a brutal start. The sport’s first openly transsexual fighter defeated Lindsay Lourde via TKO in the first round. Taniela, who outright challenged champion Ava Beckinsale live on a TV interview, proved too much for Lourde, who figuratively and literally crumbled under the debutant’s power. Lourde, who was promised the

number one contender spot should she defeat Taniela, will instead have scans on her arms to determine the extent of suspected fractures sustained during the match.

—Front Page of The Daily Telegram

MMA GLORY PODCAST:

“GOOD MORNING AND WELCOME TO ANOTHER EDITION OF MMA GLORY. Your weekly podcast going over all the happenings in the MMA world. Lots of things to cover, but let’s start off with the Taniela result. It’s the fight everyone is talking about, and I personally think it’s for the wrong reasons. First of all, regardless of your opinion on the match taking place, it’s congratulations to Taniela. It was her debut, and she won it emphatically. For Lindsay Lourde, though, the news is not so good. Her right forearm has been broken, and her left elbow tendon, I believe, has been ruptured. She’ll be out for quite a number of months.

“Now, as you can imagine, news of the win—but also the injuries—has sparked conversation. And with conversation comes questions. Should Taniela face sanctions? Is this simply the result of a tough encounter, or has Taniela got an unfair advantage? Tough questions. No easy answers. But my guest believes they do have answers. Head of the Trans activist group TransMe, Grant Dowd. How are you, Grant?”

“Doing well. Thank you for having me.”

“It’s a pleasure. So now, Grant, let’s get right into it. What are your thoughts on the first openly trans fighter in MMA?”

“This may come as no surprise, but I believe it’s fantastic.”

“Even amongst all the controversy?”

“It’s MMA. When isn’t it controversial? It took decades for the sport itself to be considered legitimate. Longer for

sponsors to come on board, broadcasters, merchandise, etc. When the women's division was created? More controversy. More outcry. But the sport pushed on. Now, look at it! Two divisions. Both flourishing. Weight classes. Rules. Refs. Titles. All of it equal. All of the fighters respected. Tanika Taniela deserves the same."

"Taniela hasn't been disrespected—more so questioned regarding her origins, and now I suppose, feared."

"Oh, I disagree, wholeheartedly."

"Explain it to me because I don't see it."

"Tanika has been in the business as long as any one of the bigger names—longer in the case of Beckinsale. But because of fear of rejection—humiliation and what have you—had to hide away. She had to hijack that interview in order to get noticed. Can you imagine how much courage that took? Putting herself out there like that. The company gave her a match—all well and good—only for Angela Hughes to forfeit on the night of the fight! And Hughes has faced no sanctions and will be featured on their next PPV event. But, moving on, Lindsay Lourde was given the incentive of a title match should she beat Tanika. She lost."

"Sorry, I still don't see where you think Taniela has been disrespected?"

"Where is Tanika's title shot?"

"Again, you've lost me. This was Taniela's first match."

"Which she won. And she beat the company appointed number one contender. So, guess who the number one contender is now?"

"That's not the way it works, Grant."

"Isn't it? The company made a rod for its own back when they plucked Ava Beckinsale from obscurity. And let's get this straight. Beckinsale is partially to blame for the backlash against Tanika as well. Just like Nash before her, she has the power to name her opponents. It's a power that's frowned upon when it's used to pick weak opponents, sure. But she has it, and the fact Beckinsale hasn't said anything at all proves

one of two things. She's either intimidated by Taniela or she doesn't believe Taniela deserves to be in the Cage. You'll have to ask her which it is."

"That's an oversimplification. But, just before we finish here, the injuries sustained to Lindsay Lourde are the latest in a string of injuries Taniela has dealt out to her opponents. Is this not cause for concern?"

"No one likes to see anyone injured. But this is a full-contact sport."

"Of course, but my meaning here—"

"I know your meaning. Because Tanika is trans, does this mean she's dangerous and hurts people because of an unfair advantage? And no it doesn't. Veronica Nash and Ava Beckinsale are perfect examples. Their first fight, not only did both end up in the hospital, Beckinsale stopped breathing. Were there any calls for Nash to be kicked out of the competition?"

"She faced an intense barrage of criticism and I think you'll find there were calls for her to be sanctioned."

"But she wasn't. Once you get through the outrage and whatnot, you are left with the fact that this is a brutal sport. Anyone that steps into that Cage is putting their body, and in some tragic cases, their life on the line. The best of the best in one-on-one combat. By defeating Lourde, Tanika Taniela has put herself right in the frame for a title shot. And no one can say it hasn't been done before. With the very woman that currently holds the belt. Picked from nothing and put in an exhibition match against Veronica Nash. And it all snowballed from there. The company has no excuse to not give Tanika a shot."

"So if you're correct—or rather, if you get your wish—what do you think the outcome would be of a Beckinsale vs Taniela match up?"

"You're looking at the next women's champion."

AVA SLOWED TO A JOG, THEN A WALK. HER CHEST HEAVING IN and out, she stopped and tried to slow her breathing as she hunched over for a few seconds with her hands on her knees before straightening to place them behind her head. She didn't need the sweat running down her face as she made her way to her front door to know she definitely needed a shower.

Once inside, she found her boys sitting in the living room stone-faced. "Who died?"

Ruben gestured to the couch opposite from where he and Chris sat. "Sit down, babes. Just got off the phone with Max Stanmore. He'll be calling again in a few minutes."

"Okay..." Ava waved her hand in a "come on and get to the point" circle. "And?"

"He wouldn't say without you." The frustration was palpable in Ruben's voice, and Chris placed his hand on his leg to calm him. "But we can pretty much bet he wants to give that trans fighter a shot at the title."

"Oh..." Ava replied. "Really? It's not my choice anymore?"

"Of course, it's your choice. You say no."

Obviously, the hand on his leg wasn't helping to calm him and she looked between the guys with a frown. "I... I do?"

"The fact this is even being discussed is insane. Whatever hullabaloo they are trying to generate from this matchup, we don't want a bar of it."

“But isn’t she technically the number one contender?”

“Where did you hear that? How many times have I told you to stop listening to damn social media? Most of it’s just marketing speak. Listen to that voice inside you.”

“That voice inside me,” Ava repeated, glancing down at her lap. “Must be as confused as I am.”

“Then listen to my voice. You are the best, and you should only ever fight the best. Not some random they think is good for lining pockets.”

“Like I was?” Ava asked softly.

“Babes—” Chris began.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” She raised her eyes again—to look at Ruben, not Chris—but never received an answer because his phone rang.

They all three shared glances before he clicked answer and put it on speaker, holding it in the palm of his hand. “Go ahead, Max. We’re all here.”

“Hi, guys. Hope you’re doing well but straight to the point. I’m here with the board. We have an offer for a match. You versus Tanika Taniela.”

Ruben gave a slight roll of his eyes and shook his head.

“This thing is crazy right now, and we want to take advantage of it. Capitalise on the controversy and strike while the iron is hot. Answer all the things she’s been saying about you.”

“What things?” Ava asked.

“That you’re a corporate-created champion. A made entity. A product. The face of the company because you’re beautiful, not talented. You know, the usual stuff to get under your skin.”

“I haven’t seen anything like that,” Ava replied.

“There have been interviews and all that going on, but they won’t be released until after we make the announcement. You know, to hype the fight up. Not that it needs it. This thing is bubbling nicely.”

“Well, it can bubble, bubble, toil and trouble, we aren’t interested,” Ruben said.

“What?”

Ava leaned over and pressed Ruben’s arm, her brow furrowed.

“Hang on,” Ruben said into the phone before placing it on mute. “What? You aren’t actually considering this, are you?”

“You said it’s my choice.”

“Babes, don’t listen to this bullshit.”

“What bullshit? As champion, I have to beat the best there is, right?”

“This is not the best there is! They’re hyping up a fight you haven’t agreed to!”

“Isn’t this what they do, though? They are in business to make money. She wants a chance to prove herself. I’m just caught in the middle.”

“Exactly where you don’t belong! This has nothing to do with you. They’re using you to ramp up a fight that isn’t deserved. Treating you like some can-can chick that dances when told. Fuck that.” Ruben tapped the phone. “Sorry, we’re back. Thanks. But no thanks. When you have a legitimate challenger for us instead of a freak show, we’ll consider it. And you can quote me on that.” Ruben hung up without another word and tossed his phone towards the couch, walking away.

“What was that?” Ava said, following him. “Wait! We need to talk about this.”

“What’s there to talk about? We need to focus on real challengers. Not waste time worrying about Mickey Mouse matchups that don’t mean anything,” he said, heading into the kitchen and grabbing a water bottle out of the refrigerator.

“Like me you mean?”

“Stop saying that,” he said finally turning around. “That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is! I remember sitting in there on that same couch,” Ava said, pointing back towards the living room. “After hearing the proposal from the board. I said there was no way I was ready. You specifically said to me that they knew I wasn’t. But you sold me on it. You didn’t lie. You told me it had nothing to do with my skill and they didn’t care who I was, that they thought I was pretty enough to have on a poster. But you believed in me. That’s how I started. I didn’t deserve that first match against Veronica. What sort of person would I be if I scoffed at this? Veronica didn’t.”

“You aren’t Veronica Nash.”

Ava swallowed. “Thanks?”

“I mean the two scenarios are not the same.”

“Convince me.”

“They’re making a mockery of the title. It’s the most prestigious thing an athlete can hope to attain, and it shouldn’t be dangled around like a carrot. It’s wrong.”

Ava crossed her arms and bounced on the balls of her feet. “I think I’ve shown that I have benefited from this strategy in the past.”

“Again, it’s not the same. Your opportunity came about through a lack of opponents for Nash—a ten-year veteran. And you didn’t ask for that exhibition—especially by creating drama. You worked your ass off to prove you deserved it. You’re just getting started, and you have opponents lining up for you. Don’t let this distract you.”

“I’m not distracted. I’m confused. And kinda pissed that you’re easily dismissing this. There has to be more to it. What’s your real problem?”

“I told you. It’s not in the spirit of the MMA I came from.”

“Things change, Ruben.”

“They do. But there’s right and there’s wrong. This is wrong.”

“It’s just another fight.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s agenda-driven. Not skill-driven. And it’s pathetic.”

“Does that mean you won’t train me?”

Ruben took a deep breath. “This is your journey. Not mine.”

“Doesn’t sound like it at the moment.”

“I have to tell you when I see a trap,” he said as he placed his hands on his hips, then nodded his head towards her. “But I know you make the final decision.”

“You sure? Because if I’m serious about being the best I can be, I have to know I can beat anyone, and I need to know—if I pick up that phone and say I’m taking the fight—that I can count on your support.”

Ruben let out a sigh. “You’re our girl. I’ll always support you, but that doesn’t change my opinion. I believe it’s a very big mistake.”

Ava nodded, looking down for a moment. “Thank you for the honesty. Are you going to pick the phone up, or do I?”

Over the next few weeks, based on the headlines, Ava didn’t know if trying to do the right thing went any better than if she had listened to Ruben.

BECKINSALE ACCEPTS CHALLENGE! BECKINSALE VS TANIELA MADE OFFICIAL —MMA Today Website
Headline

BECKINSALE PRAISED FOR DEVOTION TO
INCLUSION

—The Daily Telegram Front Page

BECKINSALE UNDER FIRE TO APOLOGISE AS
MANAGER'S LEAKED AUDIO LABELS TANIELA A
"FREAK SHOW"

—MMA Weekly Blog

"IT WAS TAKEN OUT OF CONTEXT."

—Beckinsale statement on manager's transphobic rant.

IS AVA BECKINSALE SECRETLY TRANSPHOBIC?

—MMA Weekly Blog Headline

"WHY WOULD I AGREE TO A MATCH IF I WAS
TRANSPHOBIC? I WANT HER TO GET THE SAME
OPPORTUNITY THAT I HAD."

—Quote given to Michelle Heussner, our journalist on the
street.

“SAME OPPORTUNITY?” TANIKA SAID BENEATH HER BREATH AS she studied the paper Jonah had thrust in front of her face as she did arm curls.

There was more noise than usual as the uptake in new clients that had begun after her confrontation with Beckinsale had doubled once the announcement of her title shot went public. And with the influx, Jonah had started making some updates that had been needed for a while so workmen were a daily sight and sound.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? She’s doing me a favour?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Jonah suggested.

“What do you mean?”

“Do an interview,” Jonah replied. “With a moderator. Let people see who you are. Get your point across. Maybe that lady from the show you confronted her on.”

“Yeah,” Tanika nodded. “There are a few more things I’d like to say to that woman.”

“You’re taking this a bit personal, Tee.”

“It is personal. Very personal.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“That’s not the point. It’s what she stands for. What she represents. It’s the principle.”

“Hello, everyone, wherever you are watching from around the world. Welcome to a special event indeed. We are a week away from a historical fight in mainstream sports.” Clapping echoed around the studio. “Here with me is Tanika Taniela and Ava Beckinsale. Ladies, welcome.”

Both women nodded their greeting.

“Well, Tanika, let’s start with you. How’s the lead-up been to this fight?”

“Surreal. Scary. Amazing.”

“Did you think this would ever happen?”

“Given the way the world is now? No, but all I’ve ever wanted, Nancy, was a chance to do what I love.”

“Is it difficult being a trans fighter with all the added scrutiny?”

“It’s difficult being a trans athlete period. Comes with the territory, so you have to get used to it. Especially if you want a chance to beat the best there is.”

“And you get that chance now.”

“No. But I get the chance to beat the one who did.”

“You don’t consider Ava Beckinsale the best there is?”

“Absolutely not. Veronica Nash is the best there is, the best there ever will be. Beckinsale isn’t fit to wear her belt. I’ll show her that in a week.”

There was a collective “oooo” from the audience and Nancy said, “Some strong words there,” before turning. “Ava, what were your thoughts on the headlines making the rounds saying you were transphobic?”

“They were ridiculous,” Ava replied. “I’m here and this fight is going ahea—”

“People hide behind a façade all the time,” Tanika interrupted.

“It’s not a façade,” Ava replied with a glare at the other fighter. “What the hell is wrong with you? I’m giving you the shot you say you’ve earned. Others would be glad to be in your place.”

“Don’t you dare tell me you’re doing me a favour. I don’t need anything from some blonde poster girl—except what you have around your waist.”

“You can certainly try to take it,” Ava replied. “You’ve got three rounds.”

Tanika leaned forward in her chair to meet Ava’s gaze head-on. “I won’t need them.”

The interviewer sat back and crossed her legs. “Tanika, where is this hostility coming from? It feels like it goes beyond the expected athletic rivalry.”

Tanika glared at Ava, then turned back to the host. “Ava Beckinsale is everything that is wrong with the world. Hard work, skill and fairness don’t enter into the equation. If you don’t fit a certain mould or you don’t look a certain way, you’re not even given a shot. Unless you stand up and make people take notice.

“Beckinsale is blonde, gorgeous, and everyone loves her—she could be anything. Look at what happened when she got into MMA. She had a few amateur bouts and was thrust into the limelight.” The fighter looked out at the audience. “Or what about when those pictures were released. There are women all over the world that get their nudes shared illegally, and they get nothing but insults. She got a huge payout. Check that privilege.

“She may be the MMA darling,” she said, turning back to the host. “But I tell you what, Nancy, there are more regular people in the world than ‘elite beauties.’ That’s who I fight for. Those who work just as hard, if not harder, but will never get past the gatekeepers of the world. Because we don’t look a certain way, and we don’t screw our way to the top.”

“Excuse me?” Ava asked, moving in her seat for the first time during the interview—right to the edge.

Tanika acted as if Ava hadn’t said anything. “I worked my way around the indie circuit for ten years. Never lost. But was constantly overlooked. Someone close to me said I would never be accepted no matter how hard I worked. Do you know how deflating that is to hear? And they were right.

“Yet, I look at you.” The fighter finally did look back at Ava. “And there you sit with the most prestigious prize in our business and haven’t even been in it for three years.” Tanika leaned over and glared at Ava. “I don’t want to beat you. I need to beat you.”

Nancy tried to take control of the interview back but Ava spoke over her. “Whine. Whine. Complain. You think I don’t know what it feels like to not be accepted? Check your own self. I was the one that insisted on giving you this fight. I did what I could when I had the power to do it. Now, I’m transphobic? I’m somehow holding you back? Gimme a break.”

“You stood by your management when they made those comments. You didn’t take the front foot and give back to a suicide hotline, make a donation to a trans charity. Nothing. You did nothing.”

“I explained it was taken out of context, but I’m not responsible for anyone else’s words or actions.”

“Tell that to the percentage of trans people that commit suicide every day. What you look past, you accept.”

“Don’t try to put a guilt trip on me for trans suicide. People kill themselves every day—”

“Oh, so we shouldn’t worry then? Just another dead body?”

“Would you shut up?” Ava replied, her voice rising. “What I was trying to say is my heart breaks for anyone that is suffering. Gay or straight. Man or woman. This may come as a surprise to you, but I don’t care who a person identifies as or who they sleep with. People are people. I’m sorry you think of

me as the bad guy, but there's so much hate in you. Here's some free advice. Spend less time bitching about what you deserve and actually focus on what you have."

"You fake piece of stuck-up, entitled, paper champion, white trash..."

Ava stood up and set her shoulders and Tanika did the same. The interviewer remained sitting as she looked back and forth between the two women and called a quick end to the interview. The two fighters didn't venture any closer but their eyes never left each other even as security ushered both away via different exits.

The stage was set. Neither would see the other until fight night.

VERONICA NASH STEPPED OUT OF THE LIMO AND WALKED INTO the lobby after thanking the driver. She removed her sunglasses and made her way to the front desk as a random fan shouted, “Hey, champ!” She turned and gave them a smile.

“Ms Nash, welcome. Your room is all ready. Here are your keys. The lift is just to the right. Did you have any bags you’d like us to take up for you?”

“Nah.” Veronica swung her gym bag full of clothes over her shoulder. “I have two legs that work just fine. Thanks anyway.” She moved towards the elevator but was stopped by two young boys—maybe ten years old.

“Excuse me, could we get your autograph, please?” they said, almost in unison.

“With manners like that, how could I say no?” she asked playfully as she took their signature books.

“Are you fighting tomorrow?” one asked, wide-eyed.

“No, buddy, I’m doing a guest commentary. Makes for a nice change. Don’t get hit in the face if you don’t have to. Remember that.” She gave him a “boop” on his nose, bringing a big grin to his face. She looked closer at both of their shirts. “I can give two guesses as to who you’re going for tomorrow.”

“We can’t wait to see her,” the tallest one replied. “We’ve been here for hours.”

“Here? In the lobby?”

Both boys nodded.

“We heard someone say this was the fighters’ hotel when our parents checked in. So, we’re hoping to see her walk through.”

Veronica looked from face to face. VIPs didn’t come through the lobby. Vanguard policy. The boys had no chance of seeing Ava while waiting here. Four hours or forty, it didn’t matter. Veronica had been treated to many a VIP entrance at this particular hotel, and they were always in an exclusive loading dock underground. Veronica looked behind her, making sure no one was within earshot as she handed them back their books. “Come with me.”

Veronica ushered them into the elevator and pressed a floor she knew well but hadn’t planned to visit this trip. When the trio got out and stood in the huge space of the premium floor lobby, the boys looked around them in awe. They didn’t see her texting a certain someone from behind them. She heard the door open around the corner, and that certain someone appeared wearing a white shirt, denim shorts and sandals.

Only then did the boys understand what was happening. Both stood with their mouths wide open. One dropped his signature book. The other had to cover his face as he started to cry. Ava approached slowly, sniffing herself as she lowered herself to her knees and asked the boys if she could hug them. Neither used words, but they both nodded and let her wrap her arms around them as they placed their heads down on either side of hers.

They spent several minutes together right there. Ava signed their books and chatted with them, thanking them for their support. Veronica even took a picture of all three with both of the boys’ phones. Ava kissed them both before sending them back downstairs in the elevator. Eyes wide. Grins sheepish as they carefully dared to touch the spots on their faces Ava’s lips had graced.

When they were alone, Ava spoke first. “That was a really sweet thing you did.”

“I couldn’t let them stand there all day.”

“And here I thought you were trying another tactic.”

“Oh?”

“You don’t have to think of ways to meet up and have fun with me. Just ask,” Ava said.

“Fun with you is the last thing on my mind.”

“I’ve got videos of you on my phone that prove otherwise.”

“There’s no sex before a fight. If you don’t know that you should,” Veronica replied, her tone serious as she planted her feet.

“Got any advice for me?”

“Don’t lose,” she said, coming closer to wrap her arms around Ava. She held on for a long time, not sure if she had the strength to let go. When she did manage to ease back, their bodies parted, but their hands stayed where they were, and their faces were only an inch apart with Veronica’s eyes glued to Ava’s mouth.

“There’s no sex before a fight,” Ava whispered. “If you don’t know that... you should.”

“Yeah,” Veronica breathed before clearing her throat. “I gotta get going.” She moved to reach for the call button but Ava halted her by the hand. “I’ve got to go,” Veronica said slowly and clearly.

“You don’t want to, though.”

“Were you this relaxed before our fights?”

“No, I wasn’t,” Ava replied. “But I wasn’t this happy, either.”

Her tone, the way she looked at Veronica, the way she looked in general. No make-up. Hair down. Casual as you like. Her skin. Her eyes. Those lips. She’d never had trouble compartmentalising anything in the past. Ava was still a competitor. Her toughest opponent. But now... now Ava took a step closer, bridging the gap so their bodies pressed against each other. “Ava...” Veronica whispered.

“Kiss me.”

Veronica gave her a look,

Ava matched the look. “For luck...?”

Ava didn't give her a chance to respond. Their mouths met and Veronica found herself accepting Ava's tongue as it eased its way past her lips while she held the back of Ava's head as the softest moan escaped the younger woman's mouth.

The elevator dinged its arrival and Veronica wrenched herself away fast. Ava looked shocked and tried not to look nonplussed as an elderly couple appeared in the lift but realised it was the wrong floor and apologised.

Once the door closed, Ava appeared to want Veronica to say something. But she didn't.

“Well shit, I'm glad grandma and grandpa didn't catch us. It's not every day someone I kiss recoils from me.”

“Don't be like that.”

“Be like what? I'm not the one who's embarrassed. Clearly.”

“It's not like that. I told you I have to go. You've got to concentrate; you don't need this distraction.”

“You realise I've done this before, right? I can make my own decisions.”

“We'll talk about this later. After the fight. You need to focus.”

“Right,” Ava nodded slowly. “This is for my own good. I get it.”

Ava turned and walked away, disappearing around the corner, leaving Veronica alone.

AVA BECKINSALE VS TANIKA TANIELA

Championship Fight

“WELCOME BACK TO ALL YOU FIGHT FANS AROUND THE world. Well, it’s time. The undercard is done. The ads have been seen and paid for. We are commercial-free from this point on until a winner is declared. It’s Beckinsale vs Taniela, the match few people thought we would ever see. Good evening, John.”

“Good evening, to you and to everyone.”

“Thoughts on the match, John?”

“It’s a bit of an odd feeling, isn’t it? The company chose a ‘safe’ location for this fight: the Altos Building, where they have sold out the last four pay-per-view events they’ve had here. And the atmosphere is buzzing, but we are a few thousand short tonight. More people have been arriving as the main event approaches. So there are, in fact, people that bought tickets just for the main event. But we’ve also seen people leaving—people that bought tickets with every intention of walking out before the main event. We find ourselves at a very strange moment in time. Historical for many reasons.”

“Indeed, John. Say what you will about right and wrong, how or why, the fight is ultimately what matters. And it is for the big prize. Can you see Taniela overcoming Beckinsale?”

“It’s a struggle for me to see anything other than a Beckinsale win. Anyone who faced Veronica Nash and not

only lasted the distance but also came out victorious, I find it hard to back against them.”

“Speaking of Veronica Nash, we have the pleasure of welcoming her to Cage side in her very first colour commentary role. Good evening, Veronica!”

Veronica placed a finger to her earpiece and positioned the microphone under her mouth. “Hey, guys. Thanks for having me!”

“How do you see this one going?”

“I’d be foolish to bet against Beckinsale. I know how hard she can hit.” Veronica shrugged and smiled.

“John just mentioned that the crowd isn’t as large as we expect out of a Main Event Title Fight. One might wonder if that would affect the energy Cage side—and in turn the fighters. But you look a bit nervous down there. Have we got it wrong all the way up here? How is the crowd and the buzz?”

Veronica chuckled. “Nervous being around you guys. The best in the business. The crowd numbers won’t matter when the fighters make their entrance. The sound is always amplified but you have to drown it out.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Madam MMA, we will do our best to honour that. And now, we go live to the betting app to see the last prices...”

Ava heard the crowd erupt as the main event was announced. Letting out a breath, she looked up at herself in the mirror. She heard the commentators on the TV in the corner of the room, then Veronica’s voice. And yes, Veronica would know how hard she could hit, but other actions could hurt more.

Veronica’s rejection of her still stung.

It shouldn’t. Deep inside she knew where Veronica was coming from, and Ava wasn’t usually a clingy person—she was a fighter—but she had found something besides the

championship that she wanted to cling to. Found someone she wanted to cling to. Someone that understood what it was like to be a fighter.

It was what she was born to do. Why she was here, now. Fighting someone who was told they didn't belong—and never would. No one should ever have to feel that way. And Ava would prove that tonight, showing everyone out there that they mattered.

Yes, it was strange to think that hitting someone in the face was the best way to show they belonged somewhere. But that was the MMA world. You earned respect inside the Cage.

Ava would never back down from a challenge. From anyone. Woman. Man. Or a woman trapped in a man's body. She looked beside her at the title belt folded neatly over the bench. She was the champion. And she would defend it against anyone that tried to take it from her. She didn't know if Tanika deserved a chance to try to take it. Or if all of this truly was some advertising or virtue-signalling stunt.

Either way, they would have to pry that belt from her cold, dead hands.

“And out comes Tanika Taniela, flanked by her sole trainer, Jonah. The crowd absolutely hounding her as she makes her way to the cage. Oh boy, you'd hope both of them worked on tuning out techniques. And now the champ is here! The crowd erupts for her as she makes her way down the ramp, belt over her shoulder. Clearly no protest tonight, John. How's she looking to you, Veronica?”

How was she looking? What a question. “She's looking...” Loose. Pacing. Bouncing on her feet but not looking at her opponent. Ava was looking around the crowd, acknowledging them. She didn't look comfortable at all. “Like she's holding my belt.” The line brought the commentary team apart with laughter, which was good. But it didn't loosen the knot that tightened in Veronica's stomach.

“The Cage clears quickly. And the ref gets ready to drop his arm. And we’re on! Beckinsale backs up and raises her fists in defence mode, eyeing off Taniela who... looks like she’s planting her feet?”

“Bold strategy, there.”

“Indeed! Taniela has barely moved, save for holding her fists up and eyeing Beckinsale off like a tiger. There is no lateral movement whatsoever. She is simply using her feet to turn slightly to keep facing Beckinsale. This has to be a ploy, surely?”

Yes, it was. Don’t fall for it, Veronica thought. “She’s making Beckinsale make the first move. Silently daring her to come forward. Hopefully, Ava doesn’t take the bait.”

“Well, here Beckinsale comes and Taniela THUNDERS a straight right directly into Beckinsale’s face! Her head rocks back! She stumbles back! Beckinsale staggers! Now Taniela moves! One step in one direction! Forward! BANG! BANG to the head! Left. Right. Goodnight! Beckinsale is down! OH MY GOD. She’s out! It’s over!”

“Tanika roars and leaps into the air! Throwing her hands high as Beckinsale’s people rush to her. Oh, hang on! Hang on! There’s a bit of push and shove here... Yes! Tanika nose to nose with Ava’s head trainer it looks like! The trainer pushed past Tanika to get to Beckinsale, and Tanika didn’t take kindly to that, shoving him in the back! I think some words were muttered there. The trainer is livid! Taniela is screaming! Now they break it up, but my God, it was on there for a second. Veronica, what do you make of this? ...Veronica?”

Veronica heard the question as if from far away. Muffled. She was watching everything unfold in front of her without a word. Stunned. A colour commentator with no words. Unable to take her eyes off of the scene in front of her: Ava, unconscious—her trainers and the event doctor checking her over.

The question came again. Words still wouldn’t come.

Veronica rose to her feet, walking away from the Cage and all the carnage. Away from the silence and shock of the crowd. Anger, confusion and guilt weighed her every step.

As she removed her headset and threw it to the ground, she heard Paul say, “Apologies, ladies and gentlemen, it appears we have lost Veronica Nash.”

AVA SNAPPED AWAKE AS THE SCENT OF AMMONIA FILLED HER head and made her jolt in partial revulsion. She blinked heavily, seeing Chris place the smelling salts away and finding herself lying on a folded table in the locker room.

“Wha—what happened?” she squeaked.

“It was a knockout,” Ruben said from behind her.

The voice he used was enough to tell Ava why she couldn’t remember. She was the one knocked out. She was no longer the champion.

She had lost.

She sat up slowly, but Chris slowed her even more, making sure she was okay. Once she had straightened, she tried to wipe her face, but her hand shook—and the memory of a fist coming directly towards her face slammed into her brain.

As the memory flowed, so did the tears which she tried unsuccessfully to hide. Chris held her close without saying a word, and she felt Ruben’s warm hand on her back, trying to offer comfort.

“I’m so sorry,” he muttered. “This is all my fault. You should have never been in this match. I knew it. I should have pushed harder.”

Ava tried to stop sobbing but to no avail. Her mind kept hoping it was a dream—a mistake. She couldn’t remember the fight. She remembered walking in.

That was it.

She wanted the official to come in and apologise, say they had discovered some rule in a long-thought-forgotten book that said she didn't lose after all.

But nobody came.

The room was as quiet as a church. The crowd outside had either dispersed quickly or was silent.

Ava, the hometown girl, had lost.

"I don't think I could feel any worse," Ava whispered.

Ruben let out a sigh. "Don't be so sure. There was an incident—"

"Rubes," Chris interrupted. "Not now."

"No," Ava sniffed. "What happened?"

"After the result, we rushed to you. We broke rules by not waiting for the ref to signal the end by like, half a second. I brushed into Taniela and got shoved for it. So I..."

"You what?"

"I got up in her face. Shoved her around and said some things I probably shouldn't have. Ref heard them and so did the trainer. Ref has made an official complaint. We'll likely see a strike against me, I'd say. I don't know."

"What did you say?"

"It was in the heat of the moment. It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. What did you say?"

"I called her a trans fuck and asked if she got off beating up women. Or maybe it was the other way around. I don't know," he replied quickly, downcast.

"I should go say something. Congratulate her, I guess."

There was a bustle from behind the entrance door. A scrum of photographers appeared to have gathered outside her door.

Ava sighed and ran both hands through her hair bun. If the media and activists hated her before, they would most definitely hate her now. "Can we just get out of here?"

“For fuck’s sake, let’s,” Chris said. “I’ve got your towel ready.”

“No. I’ll shower later,” she sniffed. “I just want to go home.”

Tanika held the championship belt in her hands, but her vision was so blurred from the tears she hadn’t been able to stop shedding for the last thirty minutes that she could barely make it out.

Jonah sat opposite her on the floor, both cross-legged. Neither had spoken for a while, content to stare at the belt in her lap.

“Wow,” Tanika said, gazing lovingly at the gold.

“Tell me about it,” Jonah said. “You did it.”

Tanika’s lips trembled as the words he had said, repeated in her mind. “I did.”

Jonah got to his knees and moved towards her to give her a hug, letting her sob for a few more seconds. She knew that he knew how much this meant to her. Not holding the belt. Not having others declare her the best in the world.

She had proved something to herself. That she belonged here. She was good enough. She meant something.

She picked herself up and handed the belt to Jonah. “Keep this safe for me.”

“Where are you going?”

“Going to go see her.”

“Beckinsale?”

“Yeah. I want to check on her, try to smooth things over with her trainer. My back was turned when he smashed into me, and I overreacted in the heat of the moment. I thought he was trying to rough me up. I didn’t know she was unconscious,” she sighed. “Tempers were high and so were

emotions. She might not want to see me, but I owe it to her to try.”

“I thought you hated her?”

“I never said I hated her. I hate what she represents. But that’s not entirely her fault. And, though I hate to admit it, she did give me a shot when she didn’t have to. I won’t forget that.”

Making her way to the door, Tanika opened it to reveal a pack of media that sprang to life at her emergence. Her way cut off completely, she was faced with a wall of humans, all jostling for the first word from her.

Microphones and recorders were shoved into her face, a million questions shouted at once:

“Tanika! Do you feel like you’re a legitimate champion?”

“Who are you going to fight next?”

“Will you take the confrontation with Beckinsale’s team further?”

She excused herself—or tried to—saying that she had to go see Beckinsale.

But the pack wouldn’t move, and the flash of camera lights blinded her.

“Beckinsale already left!”

“How does that make you feel, Tanika?”

“She didn’t congratulate you. Did her team’s claim that you are a freak show, make you more determined?”

Tanika backed up and slammed the door.

Veronica held the phone in her hand, Ava’s name on the screen. Her thumb hovered over the green circle, but she couldn’t bring herself to press it. She paced the floor of her hotel room, wracked with indecision.

She wanted to call her, to see her. Offer her something, anything.

But what good would it do? She knew the pain Ava was no doubt going through. She also felt responsible.

That amazing night and day all those months ago—while Veronica would never regret it, she wondered if it had inadvertently caused Ava's downfall.

There was a reason Veronica had spent her entire career with nothing in her life except her accolades and achievements. Her first coach—seeing greatness in her—had warned her to be mindful because the path she was set on wouldn't be easy. Had told her to allow no distractions because she had to remain single-minded. Focused. To. Be. The. Best.

And she had. For ten years, despite a fling here and there between defences. Until Ava Beckinsale “rode into town.” Ava put her in hospital. Beat her. Then gave her the greatest sex she had ever had.

And now Ava was no longer champion because she hadn't practised the same focus.

What a mess.

Veronica closed her eyes and flung the phone onto the bed. She knew that Ava was her greatest weakness. And she would have to do the most difficult thing in the world: stay away from Ava to keep from being hers.

MMA FIGHT ME PODCAST:

“HELLO, EVERYONE, AND WELCOME BACK TO ANOTHER EPISODE of Fight Me. Lots to talk about today, so let’s get to the big news. We have a new champion in the women’s division! It happens to be a guy. Yes, folks, you heard right. For all the politically correct loonies out there, ‘a woman trapped in a man’s body.’ But let’s face it, if you were born with a cock, you’re a fucking man. Whether you choose to lose it later is irrelevant. So, ladies and gentlemen, we have men as champions in both divisions, can you believe it?

“The FCP board has said it’s a win for inclusion. Oh, really? While we’re opening the flood gates, how’s about we go the other way too? Trans men fighting Owen Gasnier. Hell yeah! Let’s see that. The man, the myth, the legend—the all-round good guy—beating up a woman in the Cage. Oh, whoops! Sorry. Gotta correct myself. ‘Man trapped in a woman’s body.’ Here’s the thing, if you’re born with a gash, you’re a fucking woman.

“Why have divisions at all now? What’s the point? Just make everyone fight everyone! No rules. No weight classes. Make Vale Tudo the premium sport. Gotta get those inclusion and pandering points, eh?

“In all seriousness, folks, this has thrown a huge spanner in the MMA world. And I for one am horrified that it’s come to this—but also a little glad. The FCP board can suck the massive dick that Tanika Taniela no longer has. They made a rod for themselves, bowing down to this. And their poster girl,

Ava Beckinsale—that they made by the way—has now embarrassed herself and the company. Going toe-to-toe with a man. I am woman, hear me roar? More like I am woman, hear me snore. Three punches! That’s all it took for her lights to go out. And now we are supposed to herald this as a new age for MMA? Yahoo, progress! Yahoo for inclusion! RIP the careers of anyone who comes up against our newest ‘Women’s’ Bantamweight Champion. Yahoo!

“Veronica Nash—one of the only women in this division that I had both a massive hard-on for AND respect for as a fighter—was the best I have ever seen. The GOAT. Beckinsale went the distance with her, and with one—fluke or not—kick, put her down. Taniela beat the woman who did that, in eleven seconds.

“If this doesn’t piss you off, you’re not a real MMA fan. Beckinsale could’ve stood up. She could’ve said no to this bullshit. But she didn’t. She could’ve been known for all time as the one that climbed the mountain. That beat the GOAT. Look where left-wing thinking got her. Her rep is tarnished. Congrats MMA on your newest champion. Fuck the board. Fuck Tanika Taniela and fuck Ava Beckinsale.”

Tanika stood and stretched as the fasten seatbelt sign switched off. To say it was good to be home was an understatement. But even after taking several days in Sydney to rest, the whirlwind of her victory still hadn’t sunk in.

There had been an influx of money into her bank account, the paparazzi had followed her everywhere—including from the hotel to the airport where she’d been gawked at by everyone near their gate before boarding—and the gleaming gold and black belt lay on her lap. There it was. Hers. She had won it. Earned it. Worked hard, fought every inch of the way and now stood tall on top of the mountain. But she still had an irrational fear that an official would show up to take it back, saying there had been a mistake.

She wondered if all champions felt like imposters after their first win. Maybe she could find a self-help book on how to deal with success. She laughed at herself—because first-world problems—but did wonder if the next couple of weeks would convince her mind that it was all real.

She had told everyone—especially Jonah and herself—that she was ready, willing and able. That she would do whatever it took to win. What she hadn't told anyone but Jonah, was that she wanted a title defence immediately.

The next pay-per-view event was less than two weeks away, and she wanted to defend the title there. No one had ever fought a defence so quickly, much less won it.

And she wanted to make history.

She held the belt tight in her hand as she and Jonah made their way, via the escalator, down to the baggage claim area packed with people. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one head turn. Then another. And another. A muted, slow clap began with one set of hands before she stepped off of the escalator. By the time her feet hit the floor, the hands had multiplied, the sound coming faster and more enthusiastically.

It took her several seconds to realise the clapping was for her.

She slowed as she approached the front line of the crowd, uncertain. There was a jostling of positions as space was made for the people in the back—what was revealed to be every member of Jonah's gym. Boys. Girls. Young and old.

Right there, they engaged in a Haka, the sound bouncing off of the walls of the spacious area.

Tanika covered her mouth and tried to hold back tears as the war dance concluded. The onlooking crowd with phones out, and journalists with cameras, had caught the whole thing. And suddenly microphones were in her face.

“Tanika! How does it feel to be home as the first-ever trans champion?”

“What's next for you?”

“What did you make of Beckinsale’s trainer’s words to you after the fight?”

“Have you got any ideas on your next opponent?”

Tanika held up her hand and swallowed her emotions. “You guys—and fight fans all around the world—can call me whatever you want. I just feel great being a champion. I hope it’s a message to everyone that if you’re willing to put in the work, dreams can come true. I don’t know whether Beckinsale’s trainer meant what he said. Emotions were high at the time. I didn’t take it personally. If he did mean it, that’s on him. As for my next move and my next opponent, I can address both. I’d like to say to the board, if they’re watching, thank you for the opportunity. You must be seething right now. Seeing me with this belt is probably extremely embarrassing for you. But look, I don’t believe in back-alley deals or sly manoeuvring. I’ll come right out and say it: I’ll give you the opportunity you gave me—to take this belt. I want a match at Fight Night.”

“Which Fight Night?”

“Next week’s.”

“The company won’t have the time to add another match to a locked-in card.”

“They’ll make time if they want to put history being made on pay-per-view. If not, I’ll go one better. Everything I’ve been through was always worth it to me because I knew I was a champion and just needed one shot. And I got it. I want that for everyone. I want opportunities for everyone. I don’t care about your age, your rank, how many victories you’ve had or if the company views you as marketable. I’m telling the company, here and now, that I’ll take on all challengers, and I’ll put the belt on the line. Day or night.

“The catch? Come to New Zealand. Sydney got two championship matches in one year. There are a lot of passionate fans over here that love MMA, and they haven’t had a live, professional match in years. This is an open call to anyone who doesn’t have a match and thinks they deserve the title. Or thinks I don’t deserve it. There’s no doubt more than a

few fighters on the roster who are really pissed at me at the moment. Or hate me. You don't have to wait to call me out during an interview. Call me direct. Call me collect. You want it? Come and get it."

MMA TODAY LIVE PANEL:

RECORDED BEFORE A STUDIO AUDIENCE.

“HELLO AND WELCOME BACK TO MMA TODAY, I’M YOUR host Paul Austin and with me as always my esteemed panel members—minus John Hang who has a touch of the flu. Get well soon, pal. But we have George and Sam with us. Welcome, gents. Let’s get started. George, no reason to sugarcoat anything, your thoughts on the new women’s champion?”

“I’m a bit shocked, to be honest. I thought Beckinsale would put up more of a fight. But I suppose it goes to show the power of Taniela.”

“Sam, we know your thoughts on Taniela. No real reason to go over that again. Instead, let me ask your thoughts on her makeshift press conference yesterday. She will fight anyone, anytime, but she wants matches in New Zealand. She’s been getting a lot of positive press about that. Seems to be a very forthright champion, if nothing else.”

“Can you honestly look me in the eye, and tell me you found that a positive little display yesterday? ‘I want to make history. I want a match next week!’ Really? I want. I want. Do you have any idea what it would take to add a match onto an already established card, a week out from the event? Contracts have been signed. The length of the event has been organised and signed off on with the venue and broadcasters. If the company doesn’t meet those agreements, do you know what

that's called? Breach of freaking contract. All of a sudden, this person—who's living in fantasy land—thinks they have the power to pluck things out of the air. That the company will just make them happen. Then we got the swerve with 'Come to New Zealand and I'll fight you.' So you want someone to collect their teams—their family, some of them—and training camp gear, just uproot everything to fly to YOUR home and challenge you. And the media? Praising this as stunning and brave. And of course we got the 'poor New Zealand hasn't had a live match in years.' New Zealand hasn't had anyone in the top 100 fighters in any professional division in over fifteen years."

"With respect, they do now."

"Yes, they do now. And God help us if this is the reign we are in for."

"But, Sam, I have to ask. Seeing the footage captured yesterday—the war dance, the cheering—Tanika Taniela might be controversial, but she's obviously appreciated over there. I saw it on the news, and there were reactions posted online. It was really stirring stuff. Don't you believe that type of thing is good for the sport?"

"Look, I love New Zealand. My wife and I did a Lord of the Rings tour over there several years ago, and you'll never see me say a bad word about the beauty and richness over there. It's a gorgeous place. The New Zealand Haka is one of the most awe-inspiring and intimidating forms of respect or challenge you can have. I'm not diminishing that. My point is, as it always has been, I look at Taniela and all I see is fake. Fake face, fake breasts, transsexual surgery and now we get the big grand statements that not only do not make a lick of sense, they don't stand up to a hint of scrutiny."

"Do you think Ava Beckinsale will take up the challenge and try to win the belt back?"

"I sincerely hope she and her team are smarter than that. Beckinsale doesn't have to jump at this. That would play into Taniela's hands. But I have no doubts there will be a rematch. And good luck to Beckinsale. I hope she comes up with a

better strategy than last time. Any strategy would be better. It's a shame the one person that could've fixed all this is no longer fighting."

"You think Veronica Nash could beat Taniela?"

"Let me use an old, crude cliché my dear father used to say when asked to compare sporting people—be they fighters or football. Veronica Nash would piss on Tanika Taniela from a great height. No posturing. No bullshit."

"I hate to tell you what you already know, but the woman who did beat Nash only lasted eleven seconds with Taniela."

"George, if you can look at the replay of the fight and honestly say Beckinsale was ready for it, you need your head read. She was all over the place. That was not the fighter we saw take on Veronica Nash in Vegas or in Sydney. She didn't look like the champion. She looked like the last place on Earth she wanted to be was there. Don't get me wrong. You win the belt. You defend the belt. Having an off day doesn't cut it at this level, and no matter what anyone thinks, Beckinsale lost. Though I did like that she didn't offer any excuses. I don't know Beckinsale but—even though I think she'd be hurting after that—I have no doubt that she'll fight Taniela again. I just hope, for her sake, it's on neutral ground. Because make no mistake, Beckinsale is fighting a man, and she'll need all the advantages she can get."

"I'm taking it you haven't seen the rumours that Deanna Jean—only recently returned from injury after training for six straight months and thought to be Veronica Nash's opponent after Ava Beckinsale—is preparing to travel to New Zealand."

"Very capable fighter before she had her motorbike accident. I don't know whether this is the right fight for her after her recovery, but that gold is a funny thing. Makes people crazy. The allure is addictive, some say worse than a gambling addiction. Good luck to Deanna if this is what she wants to do, but I'd be cautioning her against it. She'll be running into a media frenzy in Taniela's hometown where the odds are stacked against any opponent he faces."

MORE MMA HISTORY MADE!

TANIKA TANIELA vs DEANNA JEAN IN EIGHT DAYS!

First transsexual champion of any division

Officially quickest first defence match in history.

First title match held in New Zealand

Company hoped for the “Graveyard” 60,000 seat stadium
rocked by Keith James concert.

Reverted to Mutal Arena 10,000 seats because of short notice.

—Cover of My MMA Magazine

ONLY A FEW DAYS AFTER HER FAILED TITLE DEFENCE, RUBEN was having to explain to Ava why he had warned her not to be so sure she couldn't feel any worse. And he was kicking himself in the ass all over again for letting his fear and temper rule his mouth after her fight.

"I don't understand..." Ava said, clearly confused.

Ruben let out a breath as he held onto the paper he had printed and tried to explain again. "The board has given their verdict on what happened at the fight. I've been suspended for six months."

"But you're not a fighter, so what does that even mean?"

"It means I can't train you for six months. My license has been suspended." Ruben looked from Ava to Chris who looked as despondent as he felt.

"Okay, six months." She nodded. "So I stay in shape. I stay focused. Gear up for the next fight. I want my title back."

"Babes, I need you to listen to me. There's more. Your contract has a rematch clause. It's up to you whether you choose to enforce it. Neither Taniela nor the company have a say in it either way."

"What if she loses to Deanna Jean?"

"I have no idea. There's never been a title fight so quickly after the previous one. I would guess that it's the timeframe that matters, not the opponent. But, babes. Listen to me. Per the contract, the rematch has to happen within four months of

your loss. There are some stipulations that could have extended it but thankfully you weren't injured badly enough to make them relevant. I won't be able to train you for it."

"We live together. How are they going to know?"

Ruben shook his head. "You would need to move out."

Ava stood wide-eyed. "They can't force me to move out of my home for a fight. That's ridiculous."

"No. But I would," he replied. "We'll rent you an apartment, away from here. If you want this match, I don't want anyone having a way to come after you."

"Why can't we just wait? I won't invoke the clause. I'll go after the title again later."

"Who knows what the division will look like later? We know the board caves to media pressure and activists. Or how long it will be before you get another shot. This loss shocked and embarrassed the board. That's not your fault, but they could make it your problem later. If you invoke the clause today, they can book it eleven weeks out, and no one will be able to stop it. I won't be able to train you. But it's one fight. Not forever. I can live with that because I refuse to be responsible for any more losses."

"Rubes, you've not been responsible!"

"I have," he replied gravely. "You weren't ready for that fight. I knew it, and I didn't do enough to get you ready or stop it. That's on me. This." He held up the paper in his hand. "On me too. I don't hate trans people. I don't hate anyone. Who the hell am I to judge anyone on who they are? I shouldn't have said it. I flashed back to your first Nash fight and I snapped. I love you so much, and I want you to be happy. I just want you to be safe too."

"Okay, call Max. Book it," Ava began softly. "But how can I fight without you?"

Ruben's face scrunched before she finished speaking. Ava walked forward, and he clung to her as he lowered his head to her shoulder, gripping her as well. "I'm so sorry, babes. I'm so sorry."

Chris moved closer and rubbed both of their backs, but Ava only remained for a few moments before retreating to her room, content to leave the boys downstairs. As much as she needed a shoulder to cry on, so did Ruben. Chris could help with that better than Ava could.

But who could Ava turn to? The only person she wanted to see had ghosted her.

Pulling out her phone, she hoped—like she always hoped—for a message from her but there wasn't one. No messages. No missed calls. Nothing.

But there was a message she had seen but hadn't yet responded to.

Gaz: I'm here if you need anything.

Ava walked down the stairs in the dark, leaving a note for the boys so they wouldn't worry. Meeting at a park in the dead of night seemed very cloak-and-dagger, but when both parties were high-profile names, you did what you needed to do to lessen the chance of being seen if you wanted to protect your privacy.

The park was in between where they each lived, and she found only one car in the parking lot and spotted a single figure sitting on top of a picnic table. She needed to talk to someone, and she was tired of hemming and hawing over whether or not to call Veronica.

Owen had actually made the effort to contact her.

He stood and opened his arms when he saw her approaching, and she found herself running into them. When she felt his arms wrap around her, one hand gently stroking the back of her head, she found herself clinging to him—much as Ruben had to her earlier the evening—as her tears flowed. He

let her cry until she let him go and wiped her eyes, then led her to the picnic table.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffled.

“Nothing to apologise for. I’m glad you called and agreed to come out. I know it’s not easy.”

They sat next to each other, her hand in his as his thumb stroked it. Watching that thumb where their hands rested on her thigh, she said, “I have never felt so lost, not in fighting terms. I’ve lost before, but this was...”

“Unexpected?”

“Is that the word? I don’t know. Maybe. I knew I was going to win. There was never any doubt in my mind. But I don’t think I was overconfident, you know? Arrogant? I just... I knew I was going to win. I believed in myself. And to lose like that? I...” Ava shook her head. “Like I said, I’m lost.”

“So, it’s not that you lost. More like, how and why?”

“Both I guess. All. I prepared as well as I ever have... but I never saw those punches coming. I’ve taken beatings before...”

“I remember.”

“But to be knocked out... I can barely remember the fight. I don’t know what happened.”

“Don’t try and remember. It’s good that you don’t. It allows you to focus on what is, not what was. So the question has to be asked... are you going for a rematch?”

“I have to. I can’t just let it slide, but that opens up another can of worms. My trainer has been suspended for what happened after the fight.”

“Six or twelve months?”

“Six,” she replied.

“And the rematch clause states four.” Owen nodded. “They certainly are crafty bastards, the board. Anything to create controversy.”

“Ruben said it’s his fault. That he regrets saying it. That he shouldn’t have said it.”

“No, but others in the business have done and said a lot worse and gotten away with it. Don’t ever forget that the board doesn’t really ever believe in the punishments they hand out. They’re all for show. They don’t care about Taniela’s mental health any more than they do your physical health. You care more about her than they do. And now you’ve got to enact your rematch clause without your trainer.”

“Did Diaz ever try to put in his right?”

“Nope. His most definitely expired. After his manager was put in jail, he disappeared from public view. No one knows what happened to him.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“You don’t need me for that decision. You’ve already made your choice. You need help with how you’re going to go about it.”

Ava sighed. “The all-knowing Gaz strikes again. It’s weird but besides my boys, you’re the only friend I have in this business.”

“The only one?” Owen said with an eyebrow raised as he looked over at her, calling her on her bullshit.

“Well, the only other one I had, I was kind of seeing—which is weird given our history— but she hasn’t contacted me since the fight, so I guess we’ve broken up. But we weren’t dating, so much as—”

“Fucking.”

“Yeah.” Ava glanced away from his too observant eyes.

Owen gave a hmm of surprise. “I didn’t know Veronica was gay.”

Ava looked back at him. “I didn’t say her name.”

Owen grinned. “And that told me all I needed to know. Plus, you said you had history.”

“You probably think I’m insane, hooking up with her after everything.”

“Not at all. Your fights and rivalry changed the shape of the women’s division. She’s a titan of the sport, and you’ve always looked up to her. Just... look, I’ve never known her. Only seen her in passing. Like I said, I didn’t even know she was gay. If you don’t mind me asking, did she make the first move?”

“Yeah. But we had both been drinking.”

Owen shook his head. “If you’ve been together more than once, it’s not just an alcohol thing.”

“Zero contact since the fight, Gaz. None.”

“When was the last time you saw each other?”

“Night before the fight.”

“Anything happen?”

“No. I was keen and she seemed to be, then she retreated. Said we’d talk after the match.”

“There you go. That’s why she’s not contacting you.”

“Gaz, I’m not talking about wanting my vagina licked as solace after the loss. It would be awesome, but I’m talking about an ‘I’m sorry you lost.’ That’s it. Maybe an ‘I’m thinking of you.’ I don’t need to hear wedding bells, but something wouldn’t be too much to ask, surely?”

“Maybe not, but you’re asking the wrong person. You have a phone that works too, you know,” he said gently, squeezing her hand.

Ava gave a hmmph sound. “Last time we saw each other, I made my feelings very clear. When I see something I want, I go for it. Why shouldn’t I? It’s how I got this far. But now I’m second-guessing myself. Maybe I came off too strong, too needy?”

“You know you better than I ever will. But just hearing you, do you really have to wonder why you lost?”

“I refuse to believe that my love life, or lack thereof, caused my loss. I’m a professional. I’m a cha...” Ava swallowed. “I was a champion. I have always managed to separate personal and business.”

“Fighting isn’t just business. You know that. And Veronica isn’t as simple as just personal. She’s more. And I think you know that too.”

“Gaz, what does this have to do with anything? Don’t tell me it’s why I lost. My trainer is blaming himself and that seems just as dumb as this.”

“Maybe it is dumb. But the reason you lost is staring at you right in the face.”

“And that is?”

“Pride,” Owen said. “It can be a powerful weapon or an Achilles heel. It might be both for you. You can’t get your belt back, much less keep it, if this isn’t working well,” he said, pointing at her head. Then he tapped his forefinger on the left side of her chest—or rather what lay inside it. “But if this isn’t in it, then nothing you do will matter.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“You have to decide what you really want.”

Ava released his hand and stood up. Walked a few steps, before turning around. “I don’t want to have to choose.”

“I didn’t say you had to.”

“How did you do it? You’re still with your partner?”

“Tegan.” He smiled. “Yes, I am.”

“And you’re still undefeated.”

“Yes, I am.”

“How?”

“Ava, we are both completely different people with completely different lives and circumstances...”

“Please? I need help. I need advice. I need... a friend.”

Owen sighed and beckoned her closer. She closed the gap and let him place his large warm hands on either side of her neck, his fingers massaging her sore spots as if he knew exactly where the tension was. Her head fell forward as she closed her eyes to enjoy the sensation of it leaving her body.

But he didn't say anything until she opened them and looked up at him again. "Don't choose. You want both, you can have both. There's an old saying about juggling balls. We all juggle balls. Glass balls and plastic balls. The plastic ones are the superficial things in life. The glass ones are the important things. You can't juggle all of them. The key is to make sure that when balls fall—and they will—it's the plastic ones that drop, not the glass. But you have to be willing to work hard. Harder than most have to."

"So it's hard? Being a lover, a partner and also a champion?"

"It is. But I hope that being good at one helps me be better at the other. I never thought love would be for me. Not the romance novel kind, anyway. The belt was all I wanted. To be the best. Then she came along and everything changed. And it was scary, but I went for it. Because I had to."

"Exactly! That's what I did. Or what I tried to do. It was scary and weird—and hot—and I didn't understand it but I went for it. And it blew up in my face. I don't want to be needy, but I thought of all people she would understand. Now, I don't have either. The girl or the belt. The MMA world thinks I'm a joke or a sell-out, or whatever, and my trainer couldn't get me ready for a rematch even if I was mentally ready."

Owen was silent for a few seconds, but he kept massaging her. "Glad you got that out? Now, it's my turn. Stop. Stop thinking. Stop complaining. Stop wishing. Stop wondering. Be. Do. Be yourself. Be logical. Be smart. Do make a choice and stick with it. If you want both, go after both. Just be prepared to work harder than you ever have. Forget about what the world says about you. Who gives a shit? Look at what they say about me? Or what they said for a long while. I'm a

champion, and soon, I hope I'm going to be a fiancé," he said. "If she says yes."

"Oh, my God, Gaz?" Ava grabbed him in a quick hug, then pulled back. "Really?"

Owen reached into his pocket and pulled out a ring box, opening it with a snap. The move revealed the most gorgeous, sparkling diamonds Ava had ever seen. Three stones on a white gold band.

"I have to carry this around with me everywhere, coz knowing me, I'll hide it somewhere completely innocuous, and she'll find it within an hour while looking for batteries or something. But listen. I'm not showing you this to brag. I'm showing you to let you know it's possible. I'm scared, but I'm going to do it. There's a chance she could say no, that she's not ready. But I am. And I want to take a chance. I need her. I love her. And I want to show her. Anything else is up to her."

Ava gently touched his fingers with hers, her eyes welling. "I am so happy for you. Of course, she'll say yes. How could she not?"

Owen brought her closer and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Remember that confidence tomorrow. And the day after. You want the girl? You gotta be prepared for her to say she's not ready. And that's okay. But make your intentions clear. Don't die wondering."

Ava nodded. "And as for the belt?"

Owen's face turned hard, and Ava saw the champion emerge.

Calculating. Uncompromising. Bold.

"Simple. Go and fucking get it back. Make a statement."

The power and confidence in his tone were infectious. But she still had a nagging terror. "My trainer, Gaz. What the hell am I supposed to do without a trainer?"

Owen set his shoulders and stared at her. "I may have someone that can help."

TANIKA TANIELA VS DEANNA JEAN

1st Defence of the Bantamweight Championship of the World.

“Hi, fight fans, and welcome to the Main Event of the evening! Please, forgive the rather poor sound quality. As your usual hosts are in Canada setting up for Fight Night, you’ll have to endure a guy in a podcast booth commentating on this one. As you can see here, the arena is about 75% full I’d say. Not bad for a title match cobbled together in just a few days. Deanna Jean is making her way to the cage now, and she’s absolutely getting booed out of the building. It might not be a big crowd here in New Zealand, but my word, are they loud.

“She heads into the Cage and does a mini warm-up, keeping the crowd out. Man, she looks determined. The lights in the arena have gone out. Not sure what’s going on. No, wait. We have show lights highlighting a section of the crowd. A big section. They are standing up, almost as one. Someone in front is barking orders to the rest, and the collective answer him. Is this a song? It’s a dance! It’s the Haka! Yes, hundreds upon hundreds are directing the war cry towards Deanna Jean, who looks thoroughly confused. This section of the crowd is screaming at her, slitting their throats and their tongues are out, eyes wide. The crowd goes nuts! Everyone is buzzing! Well, everyone except Deanna Jean. You see her there? Looks like she’s complaining to the official. She doesn’t look happy. Frazzled is the word I’d use. Well, you’re going to have to look past it, Deanna, because here comes the champion!

“Down the ramp she goes, looking very focused indeed. Hard to believe this is her first defence so soon after dispatching Ava Beckinsale. Here we go. History-making first title defence about to begin. And there goes the bell! Deanna psychs herself up, facing off with Tanika Taniela who sets her feet and raises her fists, ready to unload. Waiting. This is the strangest strategy I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen it before this fighter. Unheard of, really. BUT IT’S EFFECTIVE! HOLY SHIT! Sorry for the cursing, folks, but DID YOU SEE THAT

PUNCH? Deanna Jean came forward and got sent straight back! One straight shot, leaned forward and BANG! Right on the chin! Jean FLEW BACK into the cage! Jean tries to shake it off and dodges that hook from Taniela BUT CAN'T DODGE THE NEXT HOOK! BANG! Right against the side of her head! Deanna Jean is down! It's over! Listen to the crowd! History has indeed been made! Tanika salutes the cheering crowd and holds up her hands. Hands that have just been presented with the belt that she now undisputedly owns. Amazing scene here... Umm, sorry viewers, please excuse me. There appears to be a bit of commotion in the crowd. Let's see if our cameras can pick up something. Looks like the crowd around one of the exits is getting animated. Our cameras have closed in a bit more. Oh! Looks like the crowd spotted someone leaving the fight. Yes! Whoever it is, even has Tanika Taniela's attention. She's looking over through the steel. She's seen who it is! Tanika herself is getting animated, screaming something... What the... Oh my God. Ladies and gentlemen, it's AVA BECKINSALE IN THE CROWD! She was clearly just watching the fight and went to leave, but she was spotted! Now Beckinsale turns around, surrounded by hundreds of fans—or haters you'd imagine, by the jeers echoing around the room.

“Tanika is still screaming from the cage, and she's held up the belt for all to see. But you know she's directing that move to one person only. All eyes are now on Beckinsale WHO POINTS TO TANIELA! HER FACE IS SET! EYES LOCKED ON HER OPPONENT. Does this mean what I think it means? Beckinsale has now left, but I truly think it does. What a night.”

TANIELA VS BECKINSALE 2! IT'S ON!

“SHE HAS A DEATH WISH.” —LEADING BRAIN SURGEON.

Page 2: Beckinsale's trainer **BENCHED!** Six months. No official contact. All the details inside.

Page 3: New Zealand to host the match at Graveyard Stadium! Expected sell-out.

—The Daily Telegram

Veronica paced her living room, Long Island Iced Tea in hand. Her third in an hour. The TV was on, but she was barely listening. She hadn't been able to focus on anything since she'd walked into the room earlier to hear the sports show start off with the hot topic in MMA.

“Beckinsale takes on Taniela **AGAIN!** Oh man, this will be the shortest championship fight in history for Ava ‘2 seconds sale’.”

Scrunching her face, she switched it off as she held the tip of the glass to her mouth, her mind racing. She moved across the room to her small library and along to the middle section of a display case. Inside were leatherbound, hand-stitched tomes that she had turned into scrapbooks. She pulled out the last one and turned to almost the end. On the page, in bold black ink, she had written: Beckinsale 2. Are you sure you want to do this?

At the time, she hadn't been sure why she was doing it. Had been struggling to figure out if it was about her ego or

because it was warranted? That was why the next several pages were filled with all of the clippings she could find at the time about Ava Beckinsale.

Newspapers. Magazines. Hell, even printed out pages from the internet. Facts. Interviews. Opinions. And Veronica's own notes. She looked at her scrawls as she sipped her drink.

Traumatic past. Tenacious. Doesn't know when to quit—finish it early. Hit her hard and often. Fight shouldn't last more than one round.

She thought back to the fight, and her notes had been completely correct. Ava hadn't known when to quit. And yet Veronica had gotten it completely wrong. She had done almost everything she could to win and had failed. She had never, and would never, blame anyone for that. It happened.

But she had learned from it. She understood her failings and could accept them. She should've put Ava away instead of begging her to quit and save herself further agony.

Ava had been so stubborn she wouldn't see sense, and it appeared she still wouldn't.

Veronica's mind was so up and down about this one fucking girl. Her mind was telling her to stay out of it. It wasn't her belt. It wasn't her challenge. And she worried Ava would think she was using the fight the same way Ava had thought she had used her young fans—as an excuse to see or talk to her.

This isn't about the belt anymore, and you fucking know it.

She also feared Ava would think she was gloating about being right. Because Ava hadn't been ready for the championship defence. And the reason she hadn't been ready was Veronica.

Was she being arrogant and full of herself? Was she overthinking this? Clearly. But why was she so tense? Why was she so concerned?

Don't say it. You didn't tell her to quit in your fight because you had feelings for her. You said it because it was

logical. This is the same thing. Don't be stupid. And don't call her...

Veronica shook her head and drained the glass. But she held something in her other hand. Her phone. She wasn't a big phone user, but she hadn't been without it much lately. Staring at the screen, she swiped across to her contacts and found the name she wanted. She had changed that name three times since their first night together. It had been "Snacky Snack" and "NSFW" for obvious reasons, but now it was simply "Ava."

"Oh, my God," Veronica sighed. "Just press the call button you fucking pussy."

You're the reason she's not in the right frame of mind.

Veronica looked from her phone to the scrapbook to the title and asked herself the same question: are you sure you want to do this?

You're the reason she's going to get hurt. Again...

A week after her late-night meeting with Owen, Ava lay on her bed, the very early morning chill making her bring her covers up higher. She would usually get up to run. But she hadn't spoken with her trainer, whoever it was, yet.

Owen had set her up with accommodations and organised the trainer. But he hadn't told her who yet. Being a very un-Owenlike shifty about the whole thing and laughing every time she asked. Thankfully, he had arranged a meeting with them later today because not knowing was driving her insane.

She wasn't exactly nervous, more so terrified.

Her phone buzzed and she found herself blinking at the number that came up, and the name she had put down for that contact after her loss to Taniela: GOAT

Ava pressed answer and sat up quickly. "Hello..."

"Hi," came Veronica's soft voice.

“Hi,” Ava repeated. She waited for a few seconds before continuing. “Did you... I dunno, are you okay?”

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

“I’m fine, thanks. Question is about a month late though, don’t you think?”

Veronica gave an audible sigh. “I’m sorry about that. I guess I just didn’t know what to say.”

“You had quite a few options. You could’ve just picked one.” Ava shrugged, trying to keep her tone light. But there was venom in it.

“The last time we saw each other... there was... I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m over it. So. How’re things with you?” Ava rattled off.

“I’m... I saw that you are doing the rematch. Are you really sure that’s wise?”

“Ain’t got a choice if I want to prove people wrong.”

“That’s the wrong mentality to take in.”

“Well, it’s all I’ve got. I don’t even have a trainer at the moment. Dunno if you saw that. I’ll work on my mental game when I do.”

“That’s part of why I called. Do you... do you want help?”

Ava held her breath. Veronica Nash, offering to train her. “Oh, my God,” she said. “Are you serious? You’d really train me?”

“No,” Veronica said sharply. “Not me. I can make some calls if you want. Good people that—”

“No, that’s okay.” Ava cut her off. The snappy rejection of even the idea of training her had stung. Jesus, Ava knew she couldn’t afford to be this prickly, but she couldn’t help it. “Thanks anyway, but don’t worry.”

“It’s no trouble,” Veronica replied. “I’m happy to help.”

“But you don’t think I should fight.”

There was a pause on the other end. “I don’t think the fight should go ahead, no.”

Ava nodded. Veronica didn’t think she could win. “I see. Well, thanks for calling. It’s early morning here, and I’ve got to get up. Very busy day, trying to prove all those people wrong. Take care.”

Ava hung up and slammed herself back down to the bed, fighting with everything she had not to cry.

“I don’t like this,” Ruben said.

“I know you don’t,” Ava replied, closing the boot to the car. “I don’t either. But I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“You’ve always got a choice, babes.”

“Not in this instance. I have to do this.”

“We could... we could do it another way. We could gear up for six months and then we—”

“Rubes, I want the belt back. I have to know if that loss was a fluke or if she is just plain better. I can handle the result as long as I know 100%. And you said it yourself. The board is pissed at me for losing. Letting someone they didn’t want to even give a match take the belt. Who knows if they’ll give me another shot at it in six months. This is my chance. I either want it, or I don’t.”

“But you don’t even know who you’re meeting!”

“I get it. It’s weird. But—and I know you hate hearing this—I trust him. He’s never steered me wrong. And.” Ava paused, thinking about the morning’s early phone call. “I have no other options.”

Ava moved to the back seat but Ruben clasped his arms around her. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“I know,” she sniffed. “It’s okay.”

“Please keep me updated.”

“You know I’m not allowed.”

“Just... a figure of speech I guess.”

Ava held on a few more seconds before getting into the car and setting off for the unknown.

Which turned out to not be that far away. Pulling up to a spacious-looking apartment building not long after her trip began, she realised she was still in her own neighbourhood. The edges of it anyway.

Entering the elevator, she realised the apartment she was looking for was on the top floor. It felt like the ride up took longer than the car trip as her nerves started to heighten the tension running through her body. She had never trained with anyone other than her boys.

Taking a deep breath she knocked on the door of her new apartment. But she wasn’t prepared for the woman standing next to Owen when it opened. A woman Ava recognised, having recently met her at the photoshoot.

“Ava, welcome. May I introduce you to your trainer, Fiona,” Owen said, placing a hand on Fiona’s shoulder.

Fiona, in turn, smiled brightly and crossed her arms, saying gleefully, “You’re mine, maggot.”

AFTER GIVING AVA A QUICK TOUR OF THE APARTMENT, OWEN headed for the kitchen but directed her and Fiona back into the living area where Fiona promptly curled up on one of two couches, tapping the seat next to her for Ava.

When Owen returned to the room, he set a tray of tea down in front of them and said, “Ava, I asked Fiona if she would take on the task of training you, and she said yes.”

“Actually, I said, ‘Fuck yes, give it to me, daddy’.”

Ava looked from Owen to Fiona. Unsure of what to say or make of that.

“Just making sure we’re getting the full story,” Fiona said with a smirk.

Ava accepted the tea that Owen delivered, thanking him softly. “Thank you for accepting, but... do you mind me asking about your experience?”

“I train him,” Fiona said, gesturing with her chin towards Owen.

“Yeah, I saw the Diaz prefight press conference. But I thought you were an advisor or PR person.” Ava again looked from one to the other. “I thought Owen’s dad was his trainer?”

“He is,” Owen confirmed. “But in the lead-up to my first championship, my dad and I realised we needed something more. And believe me when I say, no one develops strategy like Fiona. We’ve been a team ever since.”

“Hottest threesome a girl could hope for,” Fiona agreed, blowing Owen a playful kiss. “But seriously, I want you to know this is a huge honour for me. This is a bitch of a situation; I get that. You already have a trainer you love; I get that too. But if you can learn to trust me, you’ll stand a good chance of winning.”

“A good chance? You’re not going to guarantee success?”

“Only an idiot guarantees success in the Cage. You can put all the hard work in, do the best you’ve ever done and still lose. And that’s very possible here.”

“So, what is your strategy for the match?”

Fiona’s eyes lit up and she sat forward. “I thought you’d never ask! Okay, so first—the thing you already know—Taniela’s power is ridiculously tough. Don’t bother going toe-to-toe with her. I watched your fight, and the way she planted her feet, she was conserving herself for an almighty wallop—which she delivered. Standing still in the middle of the Cage like that took balls. Figure of speech,” she said, holding up her hands briefly. “But we can counter that. Before we do, though, I need to get inside here,” she said, pointing towards Ava’s head. “Tell me, why do you think you lost?”

Ava leaned back into the couch. If not for the photoshoot, Ava probably wouldn’t have been as relaxed as she was. But Fiona had shown her willingness to look out for and protect Ava in a short space of time, and here she was trying to help her again.

“I don’t know,” Ava said, looking at her knees. “I trained as hard as I ever have. I don’t think I took it lightly. But I didn’t see those punches coming. They floored me in more ways than one.”

Fiona nodded. “You didn’t see them because your head wasn’t in the game.”

“No.” Ava shook her head. “I was focussed. I was prepared ___”

“You were focussed on doing the right thing, not offending anyone—prepared for the fact that the fight was taking place.

What you weren't focussed on, was the belt."

"I don't understand."

"Look at all the hullabaloo that went on before that match. The comments about you, her and fairness. All that. You went to such great lengths to show you'd accept a challenge from everyone that you forgot the most important part. Fighting. You let her tell you what she deserved. You are a sweetheart, through and through. And I would never try and change you for the world." Fiona pressed a hand to her chest as if to emphasise her words. "But, fuck me, if you don't clear that out of your head, it'll be the same result. Someone comes up to you and says, 'you've been holding me back,' you say, 'fuck you and the horse you rode in on.' You don't owe anyone anything. You fell into the trap of being all things to all people when you only ever need to be one. You. I need you to please, fuck all that shit off. Does she deserve a shot? Does she deserve to be here? Is she oppressed, and how did I contribute to that? Stop. You made such an effort to make sure you showed her all the respect in the world that you forgot to respect the belt. And now it's gone."

Ava swallowed hard. These words hit hard. "Yeah..."

Fiona pointed. "The belt. Your belt. Is gone. I can't do much more with your fighting skill—some tuning and definitely new tactics. But what we need to work on is your dial tone."

"My what?"

Fiona held her hand up like she was holding a dial, fingers pointing towards Ava. "This is you. Normal. Happy. Gorgeous. Approachable." She turned her hand slowly to her right as if she was turning the volume up. "And this needs to be you when someone dares to think their ass is hairy enough to step off, trying to take something you love away."

Fiona's hand was "turned" almost completely the other way now. And it clicked. Ava realised that that—the very thing Ava told Ruben she did not want to be—was what it would take to win. Fiona wanted her to be a machine in the Cage. An animal.

TANIKA WALKED INTO THE MOINA BAR. NOTHING HAD REALLY changed in the years since she had last been there.

Hell, if she didn't know any better, she would have said the patrons on her last day there hadn't left. She recognised most but they didn't give her a second glance, and she had mixed feelings about the fact that some of the men and women that had been there for her first drink at this establishment didn't recognise her. Didn't even notice the new her.

She wasn't new, yet she was. But today wasn't about a trip down memory lane. Today was about reclaiming herself. And as she passed into the back room—spotting Teni as he noticed her entrance—she admitted it was about one last thing.

Earning her uncle's respect.

Teni placed a cigarette to his mouth and took a long drag—looking her up and down along with everyone else.

“You might not recognise me...” Tanika began.

He blew the smoke out slowly. “I know who you are, boy.”

“I'm not a boy,” she replied, pulling her shoulders back and straightening her spine.

“You think a pair of tits makes you a woman? We've got brothers here well over a hundred kilos that would beg to differ, boy.”

Tanika took a deep breath and pulled the championship belt from the gym bag over her shoulder. It glinted in the dull light of the warehouse.

Teni glanced at it. “What do you want me to do? Cartwheels?”

Tanika held the championship belt with both hands, close to her. “I want you to love me.”

Teni gave a slight scoff. “You’ve shown off your strap. That all?”

“No. I want to rejoin the family.”

“That strap isn’t the key to unlock that door, boy.”

“I’m ready for initiation.”

“What did I tell you last time? You aren’t ready for shit, boy. Still walking in here like you fucking own the place. Telling me that you’re ready, parading around that strap you got for pounding a white girl on TV. I’m not impressed.”

So he had watched the match.

“What do you want from me?” she yelled, arms open. “I’m not saying what I deserve. I’m trying to earn my place just like you all did, and yet you curse me for trying!”

“You want the initiation?” Teni seethed, standing.

“I do.”

He walked forward quickly, and Tanika set her shoulders but still snapped forward at the waist as his fist sank into her stomach. Yet she still stood. Gritting her teeth, she held on to her belt and slowly rose to look her uncle in the eye. Then two more punches, left and right, crunched into her stomach. Her knees buckled, and she had to steady herself with a hand on the floor.

“Quit, boy.”

“My name is Tanika.” She coughed.

“What was that?” he muttered, looking down at her.

Tanika breathed heavily, trying to get up twice before finally doing so on the third try. “My name is Tanika. I’m a woman.”

Teni walked backwards slowly, and he was replaced by five others. Tanika's face was rocked with fists. Her already aching stomach pummelled. No one outside this group would understand this. Why on earth would you put yourself through something like this, willingly. But it was what every single member of this group had endured. It was a piece of her past she didn't want to let go of, a key piece that she could connect to who she was now. She just had to pass the test.

Teni called a halt and walked over to where Tanika lay on the ground. Her blood stained the dirt and yet she still held fast to the belt. But it wasn't a shield. It was a reminder. A reminder that she was the best.

"You still want this, boy?"

Her face scrunched. "I'm a woman," she croaked.

"Prove it."

The words weren't surprising, but the tone was. As soft and vicious as ever, but Tanika heard a slight difference in it, a difference that for a moment she hoped was encouragement. The record for an initiation beating was four men. She had now endured six and could barely move. It wasn't an encouragement. It was a challenge. This whole thing was.

She grunted as she moved her palms under her chest and pushed up as hard as she could to her knees. She felt the blood seep from her nose, down past her mouth. "I'm... a... woman," she said, standing to her feet to eye off Teni.

He didn't move and his expression as he continued to look at her was difficult to ascertain.

"You wanted me to own who I am. To prove my worth. Well, I'm here! I've taken all you've got. I've taken all the world has to throw at me. And I'm still standing. My name is Tanika Taniela, and I'm not afraid of you! I'm not afraid of anyone anymore," she said, spitting blood on the ground just as her uncle broke into a smile and walked forward.

He opened his arms and embraced her, whispering, "It was my job to make you strong."

The words caused her knees to buckle, and she sucked back a sob as her arms tightened around his shoulders.

When he let go of her, he turned to the rest of the group. “Welcome our new member...” He looked back at her. “Tanika Taniela.”

ICING HER SHOULDERS IN HER NEW APARTMENT, AVA WASN'T sure which was worse, the brutal workouts with Fiona and Owen or being alone when they were over. Their first week had been tough, but she knew they would only get tougher.

She thought about calling Owen but didn't want to interrupt his time with Tegan. And searching her phone for "Fifi," she hesitated. It was almost 8:00 pm. Not late, but would Fiona appreciate a new fighter needing downtime? "Getting to know you" time?

Fiona was flirty and funny, but intense, and Ava liked her, but she didn't trust her yet. Not as a trainer. That was understandable, right?

She hoped to one day though.

So no. A phone call was not a good idea.

Swiping through her phone, she realised how few people were in her contact list. It had never been a problem before, and it wasn't one now. Just evidence of what happened when you kept your circle small.

She ran her fingers over Ruben's name, wishing above all else that he and Chris could be here. But they couldn't. Unfair, but done.

She had to harden up. Move past it.

She scrolled straight past Veronica's name, but her mind screamed at her, and she found her fingers scrolling back to

her name. Clicking it, she opened up her messages and tried to figure out what to type.

Hi? No. Hey? No.

She let out a big sigh as she typed, I can't believe how much I miss you. She stared at the words, shortened them to just I miss you but ultimately deleted them one by one. This was pointless. She had made it clear she had no desire to be by Ava's side.

Don't do this to yourself, just let it go.

Catching sight of her dad's keys in her peripheral vision, she remembered he had told her to drop in whenever. Well, tonight was whenever. She hadn't seen him properly in ages and this might just be a night where a girl needed a cuddle from her dad.

The drive over wasn't long, and there were lights on when she arrived. She hoped the surprise visit would give him just as much of a lift as she needed, but she was quiet unlocking the door and heading inside just in case he had fallen asleep with the lights on while watching a rugby match as he had been known to do.

She knew that wasn't the case when she heard him in the kitchen, and she rounded the corner with a smile on her face that immediately turned to a frown. He had his back to the kitchen counter, both hands resting on it, eyes closed, mouth open. Had he hurt his back? Immediately worried, she moved around the kitchen island then squealed, "Oh, my God!" before she could stop herself, covering her mouth and spinning away from the sight of a woman on her knees in front of him.

Her dad stuttered and tried to speak, and she could hear him haphazardly trying to zip himself up while helping the woman get to her feet.

"I am... so, so sorry for not knocking."

"Honey, that's okay... um... I'd like you to meet Ruth."

Ruth wasn't exactly bright red but she was flushed as she tried to smile politely. "Hi, Ava. It's lovely to meet you," she said as she reached out to shake hands.

But when Ava stared at the proffered hand for a moment, obviously thinking about where that hand had just been, the older woman quickly dropped it. What could be said? It was as awkward as hell.

“Really nice to meet you too. Look, guys. I’m sorry I didn’t call. I thought I’d surprise you, just not like... I’ll... I’ll head off—”

Both her dad and Ruth moved forward with their hands up, shaking their heads no. But it was Ruth who said, “Ava, please don’t go. This is not at all how I wanted to meet you, but I care about your father, and he talks nonstop about you. I know he’d much rather have you here than me.”

“Well,” Ava said, looking from her father to Ruth, then to the scene of the assault on her eyes. “I wouldn’t necessarily say that...”

Ruth snorted. Right there in the kitchen. Which caused both women to burst out laughing and led to a big smile on her dad’s face.

Ice broken. Which was a relief. But still awkward as hell.

“You two catch up, I’ll be upstairs.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to go,” Ava said. “I just stopped for a quick hello, really.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ruth said as she patted Ava on the shoulder. “Big fight coming up. You want to talk to your dad. I completely understand. I’ll be upstairs if either of you need anything.”

And she left, just like that.

Ava looked at her dad and winced. “I am so sorry...”

He shrugged with a dopey grin. “Don’t be. What are you gonna do? Sit down.” As she did, opposite him, he reached over and gripped her hand. “It’s great to see you.”

She took his hand with both of hers. “So... Ruth seems really nice. How long has this been going on?”

“About a month. We met online and it... just sort of blossomed. She’s divorced too. Got two sons that I haven’t met yet.”

“Make sure they call first.”

He smiled and so did she. “Everything okay?”

“Yah.” She nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, really good.”

“Baby...”

God. The way he said it. That soft tone pleading for her to tell the truth. No matter what, she could never lie to her father. “I am so lost.”

“Why?” he asked, stroking her hand. “Training going bad?”

“I am surrounded by some of the best people in the business. Current undefeated champion and his trainer. And I’ve never felt more isolated and alone... Dad, there’s a pair of handcuffs on the dining room table.”

His eyes widened as his head swung around to look over at the shiny metal to his right. “Oh... Uh... Sorry.”

“She really had a big night planned for you, huh?” Ava said, unable to take her eyes off of them.

“Well, no actually. I got these...” He stopped himself, his eyes opening wider, if that were possible.

“Daddy!” Ava squealed for the second time that night. Her mouth hanging open but her eyes no longer looking at the handcuffs.

“Anyway, go on,” he said, waving his hand in a rotating motion to indicate he wanted to move past the sex toy issue. “Why are you feeling alone?”

“Well, there’s this girl...” Ava wondered how far she should get into this with him. He was her dad, but she had just walked in on him getting his dick sucked. Was anything off limits now? “Veronica Nash. We were sort of seeing each other, but not. It was intense and passionate, and I have genuine feelings for her. But now we’re nothing. And it’s shit.

I hate it. I know I have to focus on the belt, but it's never been harder. These new guys are great, they know what they are doing but Ruben and Chris are gone—and Veronica—and I'm not happy. With myself. With the training.

“I was afraid after I'd won the belt that I'd be consumed by greed to keep it, the way Veronica said she was. That I'd turn into a machine. Fight. Win. Conquer. I mean, I had to have the drive, the fire to compete. To win. And I did. I wanted to win. But when I was with her... I can't tell you how happy I was. As much as—if not more than—being champion. And I thought it would be that simple. Then she pushed me away before the Taniela fight, and when I lost I had never felt smaller. Like a microbe. I lost my title. And it turns out I never really had the girl.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She ghosted me. I didn't hear from her—nothing, nada—until recently, asking if I needed her to get someone to train me.”

“Does she know how you feel?”

“Yes. Absolutely. And I know how she feels which is what makes this so hard.”

“Speaking as someone that has definitely struggled until recently with emotions and feelings, has she said she doesn't want to be with you?”

“Her actions have. And you always told me to define people not by what they say but by what they do.”

“I did. And I do believe that. But you've had several, shall we say dalliances?”

“We shall.”

“Okay. So, everything was fine until right before your loss, am I right?”

“I thought it was.”

“Maybe she doesn't agree with you fighting the trans fighter.”

“No, she said I wasn’t focused because I wanted to sleep with her before the fight.”

“Well, wasn’t that true? I would have thought sex would have been the last thing on your mind.”

“So did I. But seeing her again, right there...” Ava shook her head. “Dad, I’ve listened to her stories about doing what it takes to be the best. She had no relationships, no close friends. Then I look at Owen Gasnier, undefeated and about to get engaged. He says it’s possible to have it all. I just have to work hard. Well, I am working hard.

“Meanwhile, I’m told by my new trainer that I basically have to live up to the nickname the media gave me after my first amateur fight, I have to be Ava “The Animal” Beckinsale to win the belt back. And I believe her, but that’s not what I want to be. Owen isn’t an animal. He doesn’t even hit people when they’re down. Dad, I want that belt. That fire in the belly still rages. I hate that I lost. I hate that I wasn’t ready or she was just better on fight night. But I don’t want to have to come home to an empty house in order to be successful.”

“I understand that.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Look, you know I don’t understand fighting or why you or anyone would willingly put their body through that. But you do. You’ve always wanted to be a fighter, and I know how much losing that belt hurt you. But love, family, friends. Those are the things we live for. Why shouldn’t you be able to find your happy medium?”

“Because I can train and work as hard as I can, and win or lose, I’ll know I gave it my all. Hell, I was willing to lose my leg against Veronica. But how can I give my all to someone that won’t give me the time of day? What if, for her, I’m not enough? And honestly, what does it say about me that I can’t function without a partner?”

“You can function very well without a partner; you simply don’t want to. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Denying yourself something that makes you happy, especially when

you might not have to, is bound to have negative effects. Let's jump off that bridge when we come to it."

He took her hand and kissed it as she stared at the table. "So... you must've cooked up a helluva dinner, huh?"

They both smiled at that.

"Surprised myself. Your mother always hated my cooking."

Ava swallowed. "Is there any news on... what I mean is... have you heard from her?"

"Not a peep. And I think that's for the best. There's enough ugliness in the world. The bridge between us isn't burnt; it's in the water thousands of meters deep."

"I haven't tried to contact her either. There are days when I really want to—I dunno if that feeling will ever go away—but I don't. I put the phone down and walk out of the room." She took a deep breath. "It's so stupid. After everything she's done to me, I still have a little part that wants her to hold me. Wants her to tell me she loves me. Oh, my God... I just figured out my relationship dramas. I have mummy issues..." At the look her father gave her, Ava couldn't keep a straight face. "Oh, come on, I can't joke about this stuff?"

"You can joke about anything you like as long as you really do find it funny. What is weird, is you never realise how miserable you are, or how much you let go, until you are with someone that actually makes you smile. Little things like..." His face fell as he realised who he was talking to and what he was talking about. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

"No, no! Please, it's okay. I'm so happy for you. Don't ever think you have to suppress what you're feeling to spare me. Go ahead. Tell me."

"Well, little things. Like messaging me and asking me how my day is going. She sends me flowers and chocolates. She holds my hand when we walk down the street. It's nice. Cosy."

"And she really likes your chicken tikka masala... clearly..."

He smiled, then chuckled when she continued.

“Like, REALLY likes it.” She joined in on the laughter for a minute before they both settled.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked.

“Eventually. I have to figure it all out. Me. The girl. The fight. The title.”

“If it means anything, I’ll be watching the fight.”

Ava couldn’t help but smile. “You will?”

“Already ordered on pay-per-view. I’ve got all your matches on DVD. Well, except that last one because who needs to be reminded?” He reached across to caress her cheek and Ava smiled. “I love you so much. You’ve been through hurdle after hurdle and come out on top. All this? Just one more hurdle.”

“Thank you,” she said, standing and giving him a hug. “I’ll leave you to your geriatric kinky sex.”

“Hey!” he said, giving her a playful smack on the behind.

She paused as she headed out the door. “Don’t forget to stretch. Getting a cramp when she’s riding you like Seabiscuit and you’re handcuffed is a real bitch.”

“You are shameless, Ava Beckinsale!”

“NICE TO MEET YOU, RUTH!” Ava called out before blowing her father a kiss and making a quick getaway.

Ava gasped as a punch whizzed over her head and she stumbled back.

“C’mon, you gotta know they are coming! Where are your feet?” Owen said just before her legs were swept out from under her.

It was only a training run for both, but the ease with which Owen took her down, the fluidity of his movements, astounded

her. And pissed her off. She gritted her teeth through her mouthguard and spotted Fiona blowing out a frustrated sigh of her own.

Two days after her eye-opening visit with her dad and training was still not going well.

“Okay, from the top,” Fiona said. “You get what the strategy is here, right? There’s no point going toe-to-toe with her, and I’ll bet my left and right tit that she will do exactly the same thing this fight as the last. Plant her feet. She won’t move. You’ll have to make her.”

“Attack the legs,” Ava said, chest heaving.

“Attack the legs,” Fiona repeated. “She wants to plant her feet? Fine. You punish her for it. Make her change tactics on the fly. Come on, let’s try again.”

Ava got into position and faced off with Owen, his shoulders glistening with sweat as he prepped for the start of the bout. When Fiona gave the signal, Ava tried to crack his leg with a snap kick but missed completely. He dodged out of the way and planted a punch directly in the middle of her skull. It was less than half his legendary power, but it stung. She stumbled again, dazed, swearing loudly.

Owen straightened himself. “She’s not going to just let you hit her, even if she’s just standing there. She’s still got two hands. Keep your hands up.”

“I know... I know,” Ava cringed, both hands on the back of her head.

Fiona blew her whistle. “Take five. Ava,” she said, leading the way to the other side of the practice ring and handing her a water bottle. “Talk to me, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Ava shook her head. “It’s hard to get around him. His power. His speed. I’m not asking you or him to go easy on me, I know what this is, but I... Maybe I’m overthinking it. I don’t know.”

“You’re also clearly distracted. Not mentally here. Talk to me. If something is missing, tell me. Is it because you don’t have your trainers?”

“It’s a big adjustment, but it’s done. I need to get on with things. I need to win.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. You want to win more than you want to fight...” Fiona said, biting her lip. “Do you still have a problem with fighting someone who’s trans?”

“I didn’t have one in the first place! That’s what I was trying to prove to everyone. I’m so sick of hearing I’m transphobic.”

Fiona gave a sad smile. “That’s your problem, right there.”

“What?”

Fiona held up her hand. “That reaction. You are so twisted up about proving that you don’t have a problem, that it’s become a problem. I never said you were transphobic and I don’t believe you are.”

“I am just so sick and tired of hearing about it everywhere I go.”

“Get used to it,” Fiona replied simply. “Ignorance is everywhere. Name-calling and slander are everywhere. Don’t get along? Label someone. Can’t agree on an argument? Label someone. It’s the get out of jail free card anyone can use. You need to forget about all that. Shut it out. All that matters is the belt.”

“She’s right,” came a voice from behind them. Ava turned around to see the last person she expected standing there, a gym bag over her shoulder, looking determined.

Ava’s mouth fell open just as she heard Fiona’s awe-inspired whisper of, “Veronica—fucking—Nash? I am so wet right now.”

“What are you doing here?” Ava asked, under her breath, as Owen reappeared with a towel over one shoulder, mopping his sweaty brow.

“She called me, asked if she could help. I said yes. Meet your new sparring partner.”

FIONA LOOKED LIKE SHE WANTED TO LAUNCH HERSELF AT Veronica. “Oh, my God, I have so many questions. Your high kick technique is... flawless. Do you do pilates? Is that your secret? And your seventh defence against Tatiana Gregson, you led with your left hand. You’ve never done it before or since. Was that the plan all along or did you come up with it on the fly? And also—”

Owen grabbed Fiona as she was still chatting away. “Let’s give them a few minutes. Excuse us, ladies.”

They both disappeared and left Ava alone with Veronica. What once was completely unthinkable, and then became overwhelmingly desired, had become stagnant and awkward.

“So...” Ava started. “S’up?”

Veronica put down her bag slowly. “I’m not here to cause you any problems.”

“Then why are you here? I specifically remember you saying you wouldn’t train me.”

“I said I knew people who could help. As it so happens, I realised I can help. I’m not a trainer. But I can help.”

“By doing what exactly?”

“By showing you what it means to be a champion. You beat me. You gave me your best, and that’s what you’ll need to do again. You can’t be at your peak for one fight, then ease off for others. You have to be at your peak each and every time you go out there.”

“I defended the title! I aimed up each and every time.”

“Except for this last one,” Veronica said quietly.

“What do you want from me?” Ava threw her hands out. “You’re all up in my case because I lost the belt. Well, you know what, even the GOAT loses every once in a while.”

“What do I want?” Veronica said, taking a step forward. “I want Ava Beckinsale. The one that was hungry. That took no prisoners. That looked me in the eye and grit her mouthguard, prepared to go to war.”

“Trust me, you don’t know how close you are to meeting her,” Ava said, setting her shoulders.

Veronica scoffed. “This version does nothing more than try to be everyone’s friend. That never works. I knew you were distracted when I saw you at the hotel. I knew you weren’t ready.”

“You brought those kids up to me. Was I supposed to turn them away?”

“I meant me.”

Ava looked her up and down. “You’re still on about that? It was a kiss.”

“You wanted more.”

“Forgive me for not being a robot,” Ava replied with a mock curtsy. “I guess I’m not built to be like you.” There was a flash of hurt in Veronica’s eyes, gone in a second but it had been there, and Ava started to apologise but lost the chance.

“I’ll put my things away. Then we’ll get started.”

Ava ducked under Veronica’s right hook to bear the brunt of a left uppercut. She swore at herself. Veronica had said it was coming, and she still copped it.

“Ava!” Veronica screamed. “Wake up! You’ve got less than a month before you shape up to this bitch again. She

won't be telling you which punches are coming when. Believe me! If this is the way you're gonna train for the fight, fucking quit."

"Hang on, whoa," Owen said from the edge of the cage.

"No. No whoa," Veronica replied, looking at him. "You can be the nice guy all you want, but it's the truth. This won't work. I'm not wasting my time, or hers, setting her up to fail."

"It will work. It just needs time."

"There is no time!" Veronica screamed. "How can you be so calm?"

"Because screaming and ranting gets us nowhere," Owen replied. "We've all agreed on the strategy; we just need to put it into practice."

"We can agree all you want. She's not putting it into practice," Veronica countered.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Ava yelled to the ceiling and headed for the Cage door. "I'm standing right fucking here, you know."

"Ava."

The tone caused her to spin and look at him. But he was looking at Veronica. Ava had never seen him like that before outside of the Cage. His muscles taut. His jaw set as he glared at the other fighter with nothing short of merciless intensity. This was Owen Gasnier, Undefeated Heavyweight Champion of the World. When he spoke again, he addressed Ava but never took his eyes off Veronica. "Sit. Down."

"Don't you dare look at me like that," Veronica said, hands on hips.

"Shut up," Owen said, waving his hand dismissively. "You don't believe this is can work. You need to be shown. And so do you." Owen glanced at Ava, before turning back to Veronica. "I outweigh you. I'm taller. I'm broader. I'm a guy. You use what Fiona suggests. I'll fight Taniela's way."

"Are you suggesting, what I think you're suggesting?"

“You and me. One-on-one. Right here, right now.”

AVA SAT WITH HER BACK AGAINST THE COLD STEEL, WATCHING as Owen and Veronica shaped up to each other. Owen planted himself in the centre of the mat, Taniela style, as she heard Fiona—who had just returned from a water run—say, “Um... when did I step into World War III? What’s going on?”

But she never had a chance to respond because, without warning, Veronica exploded into movement. Punch. Block. Spinning elbow. Duck. Counter. Flying up knee. Dodge. Jab. Hook. Dodge. Counter.

It was frantic and relentless.

Owen wasn’t allowed to slow down as Veronica grit her teeth and swung with surgeon-like precision, but he had an answer for everything. Picking her up, he slammed her into the steel wall, and she struggled like a rabbit caught in a viper’s grip, but Ava could see he was wearing her down—his power simply overwhelming. Just keeping his mass contained was draining, and Ava felt like she was looking into the future. Veronica—despite all her training, all her prowess—couldn’t do it.

But suddenly, the mother fucking greatest of all time screamed and pushed herself off the Cage, swinging her legs up to wrap them around Owen’s neck before he could block her and—as he stumbled away from the wall—she flung herself towards the floor. The momentum took him with her, and she used it, with his own body weight, against him. It was a move straight out of a wrestling ring. But it worked. She flipped him—his feet flying out behind him and up into the air

as his upper body continued to follow hers forward and down—and they crashed to the mat.

Veronica was the fastest to recover and rolled over to attempt an armbar designed to force him to tap out, and Owen struggled—straining as Veronica refused to budge—but slowly rose to his knees.

Two titans locked in a show of wills and strength until they both started to laugh.

“That is what I’m talking about, people!” Fiona screamed, jumping up and down and doing a short dance outside the Cage.

“You first,” Owen said.

“Fuck off. You first,” she replied, giggling.

They both fell away from each other, taking a few seconds to compose themselves. When Owen rose he offered Veronica a hand to get her to her feet and looked between her and Ava. “See? The tactics work.”

“Yeah, I guess they do,” Veronica smiled as she accepted his handshake. “I’m convinced.”

Ava eyed her off. “Oh, so you’re convinced? Now I don’t have to quit? Well, hooray for me, huh?”

Veronica called her name, but Ava didn’t turn around, taking a towel with her and heading to the showers.

She stripped and ran the hottest shower she could, only having just stepped under the spray when the door burst open. She kept her eyes closed—knowing without seeing who it was—until the water was shut off.

“We need to talk,” Veronica said.

“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” Ava said, turning it back on.

“Yes, you do. I’ve been worried that this was part of the issue, but now I know it is. So let’s get it straight right now. I’m sorry I didn’t contact you after the loss. But do you really not understand why?”

“I’m over it. Are we done?”

“Goddammit, Ava, talk to me!”

“Why?” Ava bellowed. “You don’t want to hear what I have to say. You’ve made that perfectly clear.”

“I didn’t want to be a distraction.”

“Bullshit. You felt something, and it scared you. You wanna get this out? Fine. Tell me the truth. Did I get too close?”

“Yes,” Veronica replied softly.

“Why are you punishing me for it?”

“I’m not,” Veronica replied, even more softly, looking down. A single tear fell from her eye. “I’m punishing myself.”

“What are you talking about?”

Veronica sighed. “You wanted to know about my scar? It was from an emergency hysterectomy I had while in high school. A group of girls attacked me. Got me on the ground. Kicked the shit out of me. They caved my stomach in, left me unconscious. Because one of them was told her boyfriend was cheating on her. With me. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. Without the surgery, I would’ve died.

“When I left the hospital, I found a self-defence class and spent the next year preparing to face those girls. That was the day I became a cold machine. I had to in order to give them even a small taste of what they had done to me. Ironically, I’d had a crush on the girl who was told I was fucking her boyfriend. I was never the same after that. Fighting was all I had. It’s what saved me.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Ava whispered, haunted.

“Because that mentality is what carried me through my entire career. Machine-like. But I can’t deny that you’ve always had an impact on me. And after our last fight, I couldn’t get you out of my head. You were a critical juncture in my life. You shattered everything I thought I knew. The truth is, you make me feel unsure for the first time since I

became that machine. I don't feel like the GOAT when I'm around you."

"But you are. I've always wanted to be you."

"I don't want you to be me. I want you to be better. But that scares me."

"Why?"

"Because I fear you'll get a good look at me and realise I'm not special... and it'll change the way you feel about me. I had never let anything get in the way of winning, and it had worked for so long until you. You showed me that I didn't have to be like that after all. Even with all of my discipline, I still lost. It was as heartbreaking as it was freeing. You'll never know the impact you made on my life. And I didn't mean to push you away. I didn't. But I don't want to hold you back."

"I don't want you to hold me back either. I want you by my side," Ava replied. "I know what you put yourself through to be the best. The sacrifices. You did what you felt you had to. Pushed everything away. But I can't do that. I want more than a few nights. I want someone to come home to. I want it all. The belt and you. I'm training for the belt, but you're what I need to live. You don't think I'm scared? All I know is the biggest regrets are the risks you don't take." Ava paused and looked Veronica up and down. "Oh, fuck it." She pulled Veronica in and latched onto her mouth hungrily.

Veronica gasped but accepted the kiss for a moment before breaking away. "You're in training."

Ava reached into Veronica's tights. "And you're wet."

Groaning, she gripped Ava by the wrist, halting her. "You have to focus. I'm just here to help you..."

"I am focused. Focused on what I want. You give me strength. You said no before the first fight and look what happened."

"What are you saying?"

"Your rule was 'no sex before fights.' That's not my rule. It doesn't work for me." Ava shoved Veronica against the

bathroom wall with a power that surprised them both. The confidence and happiness brewing within her was palpable.

Even if Veronica wasn't ready to label it, Ava knew she felt something. And as she weakened her grip on Ava's wrist, allowing her fingers deeper access, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

"You thought shutting me out would help me focus. But that's not me. That's you. We're two different people. Two different fighters. I can't give everything I have to this business, because I want to give it to you."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't just want you. I need you. Please, for once just let me in."

Veronica looked at Ava and bit her lower lip as she circled her clit with her thumb. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You already have. I recovered. Besides, it doesn't mean I won't take my fights as seriously."

"That's not what I mean," she replied, caressing Ava's face. "I don't want to break your heart."

"So don't."

Veronica pushed herself into Ava's saturated body and smashed their mouths together. Submitting to Ava's fingers. Her lips. And their bodies crashed, or rather splashed, to the floor. The intensity of their bodies meeting as high as ever. But there was no biting here, no marking, not the physical kind. This time the marks were in a place no one could see.

TANIKA TANIELA VS AVA BECKINSALE
Bantamweight Championship of the World

REMATCH

“I HATE THIS,” RUBEN SAID.

“I know you do,” Chris replied, rubbing his back as they watched the title crawl across the screen: Main Event Pay-Per-View. “Just think, after this, no matter what, we’ll finally be able to talk to her.”

Ruben nodded. Of course, it wasn’t enough. But he didn’t say that. A knock on the door made him frown. “Who the hell could that be?”

He opened it to find Ava’s father and Owen Gasnier standing there.

“Any chance you’ve got room for two more?” the older Beckinsale asked, raising a bottle.

Confused and caught off balance, the first thing out of Ruben’s mouth was directed at Gasnier. “Why aren’t you with Ava?”

But the younger man didn’t take offence. “Your girl—her words by the way—informed me the ladies had this in the bag. And what she really wanted was all of her boys together to watch the epic ass-kicking she was about to hand out.”

“So... you’re one of her boys too?” Ruben couldn’t keep from laughing because it sounded like his smartarsed girl.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else. She’d kill me.”

His first meeting with the younger Gasnier wasn’t going anything like he had always expected it to, so he glanced at Bill to try to regain his balance, but when he spotted the bottle again, he grimaced and said, “Oh... I don’t drink.”

“Ava told me. This is grape soda. She said you drank it together.”

“She...” Ruben looked from the bottle to her father.

“She still can’t call, but wanted you to know she loves you both and can’t wait to see you. So, we’re the messenger boys,” Bill said with a grin.

Ruben pulled him in for a hug and led both men inside.

“Good evening, fight fans. Welcome to Graveyard Arena in New Zealand from wherever you are right around the world! We’ve had plenty of great matchups for you already, but now we have come to the main event: Taniela vs Beckinsale. The rematch. Good evening, John.”

“Good evening, Paul, and to all of you watching. Here it is. The match that some say will be the definitive fight in the careers of both women. We all remember what happened the last time these two stepped into the Cage together. The result of that match—that many thought should never have occurred—shocked everyone.”

“I think it was the manner in which that result came about that shocked us. Ava Beckinsale went almost bell-to-bell with Veronica Nash and came away with the victory, yet couldn’t last twelve seconds with Tanika Taniela. Two very different opponents—it has to be said—but my word, it was brutal to watch that last match.”

“That begs the question, how do you see this one?”

“Well, there’s a lot to unpack here. Beckinsale has a new training team—her original team having been suspended for

six months due to unsportsmanlike conduct after that last match. So she's enlisted the help of Owen Gasnier and his team. Right there, you couldn't ask for a better team in your corner, but to top it off, our cameras caught none other than Veronica Nash herself walking in as a part of Team Beckinsale a little while ago. That's definitely something I never thought we'd see. So on training and preparation alone, I'd usually have to go with Beckinsale. She's likely to be as tuned and focused as a fighter could possibly be. But that doesn't always mean much coming up against the power of Taniela. Those fists are rocket launchers, most recently destroying Deanna Jean."

"To be fair, Deanna was coming back from a horrible accident, and she was hounded by that huge section of the crowd performing a modified Haka. Intimidating stuff, professional athlete or not."

"Indeed. And those same supporters will be here tonight no doubt. Probably even more, given the bigger crowd size. Ava Beckinsale should be prepared for them since she saw the way they rattled Deanna Jean, but if she can't shake it off, her real problem will be getting more than rattled by those hammer fists of Taniela's."

"Hopefully, Beckinsale's new team has a strategy to counter them and keep Ava focused. Otherwise, this will be another short fight. I'm going with Beckinsale, purely for the absolute A-plus talent in her corner. But as soon as that door closes and the match starts, it's at best 50-50."

Ava stared at herself in the mirror as the five-minute warning came via the hallway attendant. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she turned around to face Fiona, sporting a pink Team Beckinsale jacket with "Fifi" written in sparkly silver cursive.

"Remember the game plan. Bulldoze those legs. Above and below the knees. Force her to move and quit that statue

bullshit.” Fiona wrapped her arms around Ava, who squeezed back.

“No matter what happens, thank you.”

“You’ve got this,” Fiona whispered before heading out the door, leaving only Veronica.

Veronica approached slowly, arms folded. “All good advice, but remember one more thing.”

“That I’m your girl?”

“Who you are, and who you’re doing this for.”

Ava swallowed and nodded. She was doing it for herself—but also for two people who weren’t here when they should be. “So... I’m your girl?”

Veronica smiled. “You’re the best. You just need to prove it one more time.”

“And here she is, the former champion of the world, Ava Beckinsale. Flanking her—no, if you’re just joining us, your eyes are not deceiving you—that’s Fiona Marie, one of Owen Gasnier’s trainers—affectionately known as Fifi to his fans—and the legend Veronica Nash. A sight I never thought I’d see, but there it is.”

“Can’t get your regular trainers? Just get the next best thing, aye?”

“And in she goes to the Cage, warming up with a bit of shadowboxing. She definitely looks fit and firing doesn’t she?”

“Absolutely. Looks spectacular in every sense of the word. The crowd has quietened, and if I’m not mistaken, the Haka is being prepared. Yep, the lights have gone out and the cheers from the crowd are rising again. There are multiple Haka groups here tonight, totalling at least two thousand members, Cage side. With a message for Ava Beckinsale: Go home.”

“Beckinsale is walking out of the cage! We have never seen her do this, John. What do you think? Were we wrong about how ready she looked? Did the size of that Haka section rattle her?”

“I don’t think that’s the case at all, Paul. Look at where she’s headed. Right down to the Haka contingent—specifically, the area between them and the Cage. Only about 2 metres of space between her and them now. Security tried to stop her, but she moved right past them. I don’t know if this is by design or pure coincidence, but she’s positioned herself DIRECTLY IN FRONT of Teni Taniela, Tanika’s uncle. Our cameras have watched him since he entered the building earlier tonight, and man, can we see where Tanika got her poker face. This man is unreadable, giving nothing away about how he expects this night to turn out. Also in this section are the members of the Fit to Fight Gym—that’s the gym Taniela fights out of, owned by her trainer, Jonah Dutch.”

“The former champion is showing them nothing but the respect this honoured tradition deserves, but it’s clear she’s a got a message of her own: I will not be intimidated. Beckinsale is silently challenging them to do their worst. One woman staring down THOUSANDS of people as the Haka begins!”

“You’re right, Paul. I know our TV audience can’t feel the atmosphere in this arena, but I hope they’re getting some sense of it. This arena is literally shaking! The crowd is going nuts, and the Haka is being performed with absolute gusto. But Beckinsale has not moved! Not even a flinch. She’s set her body and is facing down the Haka.”

“She did it! There’s a mixed reaction amongst the crowd. Some still jeering and insulting her as she moves back into the Cage, but she seems to have earned the respect of others who are applauding—including Teni Taniela. But NOW they’re applauding harder as Tanika Taniela makes her way down to the Cage. She steps in, title belt held high, looking—or rather glancing—at Beckinsale. Maybe reminding her what this match is about. Though I hardly doubt Beckinsale needs it. You’ve got to wonder if Taniela is prepared to meet the

Beckinsale that beat Veronica Nash. Because that looks like who she's standing in the Cage with tonight.”

“The Cage clears, the ref raises his hand and WE ARE ON.”

“Taniela sets her feet in the middle of the Cage, waiting for an opportunity to present itself. It's her trademark. Unconventional, but it's clearly worked for her up until now. But the former champion seems to be throwing her for a loop. Beckinsale stays back. Taniela sets her feet again.”

“Beckinsale would've studied Taniela's recent fights with her team. No matter what, you can't say she'll be caught unaware this time. BOOM! Beckinsale explodes forward quickly, taking the champion off guard, but she better watch out for those hands!”

“I don't even know what we just saw there. Beckinsale came forward—maybe a foot—and launched a thunderous low side kick directly into Taniela's thigh, then backed away. She's half circling Tanika now, not taking her eyes off the fighter.”

“Here she comes again—stalking forward, hands up, YES! She launches another kick to Tanika's leg. It wasn't a mistake; this is deliberate. And back she goes again! And again!”

“The crowd doesn't know what to make of this! It's clearly a tactic. Kick and retreat. Staying out of the way of Taniela's fists.”

“Right now, it has to be like kicking a statue, as she comes in again. WHOA! Beckinsale just ducked under a tiny jab there. That's the danger she has to watch out for. No kick achieved as the bell rings. Well, hell, wasn't expecting that.”

Ava retreated to her corner where Fiona and Veronica immediately began acting as her cutmen.

“Alright, that's what I'm talking about. How you feeling?”
Fiona said.

“Like I’ve been kicking concrete for the better part of three minutes.”

“Suck it up. We got lucky with that dodge. You did well to see that jab coming. You’ve got her confused, and she’s showing some self-preservation,” Veronica said, adjusting an ice pack to the back of Ava’s neck.

“That’s the first crack.” Fiona began wiping down Ava’s eyebrows, making sure there was still enough salve to prevent any perspiration from running into her eyes but not enough that the salve itself would become the problem. “But that’s all it is right now. You’re making her think on the fly a bit. She’s never had to do that before. The more she has to, the more of a chance you have to make her worry. Ramp it up this round. Let’s fucking go!”

“Here we go for round two. Ava bouncing on her feet; Tanika walking fine it seems. Let’s see how this round comes about. BANG! WHOA! Beckinsale struck with that right foot again—right against Taniela’s knee before she could even plant her feet. But the champ didn’t move! She sticks with planting her feet and gets ready to deliver an almighty hit at the first opportunity.”

“Beckinsale is baiting her, but she’s not fighting Beckinsale’s fight.”

“No, she’s not. But the mark of a true champion, and a fighter in general, is being able to think on your feet. No pun intended. Beckinsale is trickling up the points with these kicks. AND ANOTHER! Back she goes! Taniela’s strength is her fists and conserving herself to unleash absolute, unrelenting hellfire, but Beckinsale is performing what can only be described as guerrilla warfare. Strike, retreat, repeat. And again! OOPS! Taniela shaped up to throw one there but stopped herself. Beckinsale’s strategy is definitely working. Frustration and pain are starting to be a factor here. That classic Taniela poker face is cracking.”

“Here comes Beckinsale again... AH! THERE YOU GO. A SWING BY TANIELA! SHE GLANCED OFF OF BECKINSALE’S HEAD THERE. HERE SHE COMES. THE CHAMPION ISN’T STANDING FOR THIS ANYMORE! She launches herself forward and swings for Beckinsale’s head again. Beckinsale covers up and dodges away! But beckons Taniela closer! Those hands saying, ‘Come and get some!’ And Taniela obliges! She shoves Beckinsale into the Cage. Cracks her with rights! She’s pounding against Beckinsale’s forearms hard! Oh man! One slipped through and connected with Beckinsale’s temple just as the bell rang! And Beckinsale is down! Ref says it didn’t count. She was saved by mere seconds there. You’d think if Taniela was allowed to get on top of Beckinsale it would have been all over right there...”

Ava cringed as Veronica pressed an ice mould to her head.

“Fuck... that really hurt.”

“Yeah, yeah. She hits hard. We know that. I’m not impressed,” Fiona said.

But Ava could tell she was rattled. That last punch, and the result, was close. Too close.

“Okay, last round. We spoke about this. You can’t get her in power, but you will in speed. We just have to hope the damage you’ve done to her leg will really start to burn now that she’s sitting for a minute,” Veronica said.

Fiona grabbed her shoulders and looked her directly in her eyes. “Get her sloppy, then desperate. We timed it to this exact point. You’ve done everything you needed to so far. This is the last hurdle. Watch yourself. Strike and move. Forward and back. Don’t get hit. Outthink her.”

“Here we go, fight fans. Both women are on their feet, and neither one should be as sure of themselves as in the previous rounds. We will know in three minutes who the best in the world is!”

“Tanika lunges for Beckinsale! No setting of her feet here! She knows she’s behind on points. No time to waste. Beckinsale reels back! Hits the Cage! Here comes Taniela again. Swing and a miss! Beckinsale moves away but Tanika follows. Does the champ smell blood in the water? Beckinsale is on the back foot here, well and truly. She’s fought an amazing defensive fight so far but how much longer can she avoid the champ’s fists? Taniela’s movements may be cautious at the moment, but by God, that power...”

“Beckinsale strikes again with that snap kick, BUT SHE GETS PINGED! Straight to the head! Beckinsale spins out of that hit! I dunno who struck harder there. Taniela is clearly fighting on one leg, staggering.”

“But Beckinsale has blood in her mouth! Lip split open! She’s in trouble here!”

“Oh my! The former champion ducked under another swing and tagged Tanika! One, two! OH! Tanika bulldozed into Beckinsale! She’s got Beckinsale pinned against the Cage! Throwing rights as she holds her with the left! The clock is ticking down! Beckinsale, trying to hold on! Literally! Ref is close, checking over both fighters! Beckinsale is fading! Another hit to the head! And another! She can’t take any more, surely?”

“Ref will have to call it... OH MY GOD!”

“BECKINSALE JUST FLIPPED TANIELA OVER! JUDO FANS EAT YOUR HEARTS OUT! BECKINSALE NOW ON TOP OF TANIELA! FIGHTING WITH ALL SHE’S GOT! FRANTIC! BY GOD YOU CAN HEAR HER SCREAMING WITH THE EXERTION! IT’S BLIND INSTINCT! POUNDING TANIELA WITH PUNCH AFTER PUNCH! THAT’S IT! IT’S OVER! THE BELL HAS RUNG.”

“Did the ref call it?”

“I don’t think so. Just checking. No, he hasn’t. He’s sending it to the judges. What a fight!”

“Both women are out on their feet, struggling to stand! But they both make it up, moving to stand with the ref, facing the crowd as the judges confer. Both fighters still look barely able to stand, and the judges seem to be taking their time.”

“Or having trouble deciding.”

“Possibly. I am. Who do you like for this one?”

“I have no idea. This was close. Damn close.”

“Here we go. The official is entering the Cage. Let’s head down for the announcement...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a split decision. The winner by TKO in the final round, and... NEW BANTAMWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD... FOR THE SECOND TIME... AVVAAAA BECKINSALE!”

Back in Sydney, all of Ava’s boys leapt as one and erupted with joy as the announcement came over the screen. Owen embraced the other three in a quick group hug but let them have their moment as a family as he stepped away to make a phone call.

A very special phone call.

“Can you hear me?” came Fiona’s voice.

“Yes.” He smiled.

“I SAID... CAN YOOOUUU HEAR ME? FUCK ME, HOW GOOD IS THIS?”

Owen chuckled. “I’m so proud of you. Never forget what your belief did for her. But now that the fight’s over, we need to do what we discussed.”

“On it, boss.”

Ava's knees buckled, and she collapsed in a flood of tears, covering her face with both hands, unable to control herself. She had done it. For Ruben and Chris, who should be here, but she knew were watching with her dad. For Gaz and Fiona, who always had faith in her. For Veronica, who—beaming with pride—grabbed her with enough force she could have taken Ava to the ground in a tackle if she wanted. Luckily she was more focused on taking possession of the new champ's lips, regardless of the blood. She had gone from not wanting to be caught by an elderly couple to passionately kissing her in front of the packed arena and the millions watching around the world. And if the way the intensity of the cheers amped up was anything to go by, the fans loved it.

Lastly for herself.

Hearing someone clear their throat, Ava and Veronica broke apart and watched as Tanika held out her hand. Shaking it, Ava looked the other woman in the eye and saw the hostility that normally resided there was gone.

They hugged and Tanika whispered in her ear, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For letting me, be me. For treating me like an equal—like at the Jean fight. It's all I've ever wanted."

Ava bumped their foreheads together gently, then let go.

She knew about wants.

Watching Tanika Taniela leave the Cage, she saw her swallowed up by a still-beaming crowd. She didn't know any specifics about what had happened in the woman's past to cause the bitterness that had seemed to live inside her like a living rage when they first met, but it looked like she had finally found the support and peace she needed.

Ava "The Animal" Beckinsale was happy for her.

Slim arms grabbed Ava around the waist and squeezed, trying unsuccessfully to pick her up into the air. Laughing, she turned to see Fiona and turned the tables on her. When she sat her down, she gripped her in a hard hug. “I can never thank you enough for this.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Fiona chuckled. “But for now, you can do something for me.”

“What?”

“Say hello to your family. They really miss you.”

Fiona held up a phone to show Ruben and Chris—with her father and Owen behind them—on the screen, waiting with bated breath to see her for the first time in months.

Fresh tears wracked Ava as she took the phone with a shaking hand. All the things she wanted to say and there was nothing she could get out but a sobbing yet beaming, “Oh, my God. Hi!”

Moments later, as the belt was presented to her for the fourth time in her career, and she raised both arms to a mighty roar from the crowd, she knew everything she had endured had been worth it.

She had regained her title, her self-respect, proved her place was in the MMA world once and for all and she had the love of her family and friends—and of someone she adored.

Which was all she had ever wanted.

EPILOGUE

A FEW WEEKS LATER, VERONICA WALKED INTO THE SAME GYM she had helped train Ava in, carrying her gym bag. But Ava wasn't who she wanted to see. She wasn't even there.

"I hear congratulations are in order," came the voice of Owen Gasnier, pounding a heavy bag at the other end of the room, not even pausing to speak.

"I guess a little birdie told you about my move."

He smiled. "Something keeping you here in 'Straya, eh?"

Veronica smiled but didn't say anything.

"I'm glad you two love birds are singing."

"Thank you and for everything you've done for her. I know Ava thanked you herself when we got back from New Zealand, but I never had the chance once Fiona decided it was time to get all of her questions answered finally. She wouldn't have been able to do it without you."

"You didn't have to come down here for that. We're all having dinner next week. What's really up?" he said with a smirk.

"Fine. Head-on. Like we do everything, right? I've wanted to fight you for years. I even tried to get it set up once or twice."

Owen nodded. "I'd heard that. Never really thought too much about it. It was flattering though."

"I still want to."

Owen blinked. “Didn’t we already do this?”

“We did. Kind of.”

“You flipped me.”

“Using tactics Fiona created for Ava, showing her they worked right when she needed a boost.”

Owen crossed his arms. “Are you accusing me of tanking?”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. Just pointing out what happened.”

“So now that the company has sanctioned a trans fighter, you think they’ll book this?”

“I’m sure they would if you’d go for it. The money would be insane. But I’m not here for the company.”

“So why bring it up? You’ve got nothing to prove to anyone.”

“You were my greatest challenge until Ava came along. She beat me against all the odds. And that... really didn’t sit well for a long time, but I’ve made peace with it. You, however, are still the unknown. I just gotta know...” She smiled, dropping her gym bag. “Still in our prime, who’s better. Me or you. C’mon, I know you’re a sweetheart, but don’t pretend you haven’t thought about it.”

Owen looked her up and down—she knew he saw an athlete still in top physical form—and she saw a flicker in his eyes. The warrior inside couldn’t say no to the challenge. He wanted to know too. It had nothing to do with man vs woman. It was about personal pride. And yes, ego.

“Once or twice,” he muttered. “But the company wouldn’t —”

“Fuck the company. I’m here for me. No press. No crowd. You and me. One-on-one. The only people that will know the result are right here. What do you say, champ? Wanna go the distance with the GOAT?”

“That’s undefeated champ,” Owen replied with a small smile.

“Except to me during that training exercise.” Veronica shrugged. “So, let me ask one more time. You want the GOAT?”

Owen looked her over again and smiled, “I want the GOAT.”



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading Unbroken II, #3. If you have enjoyed it, please show your support by leaving a review. Just visit my Amazon Author page:

Aaron L Speer

To learn more about his upcoming books

join his Newsletter

or

Enter *Speerverse Fanatics*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love writing adult paranormal fiction. Vampires, werewolves, ghosts... oh my. But I also write Contemporary Romance (MMA), Coming of Age, Thrillers and hope to one day have the chance to branch out into other genres. I've been writing since I was 11, but I've always been a dreamer... often getting caught staring off into space as I created stories in my mind.

One of my stories, Night Walker (Undeadly Secrets Series Book 1), won the 2017 Golden Stake Award at the International Vampire Film and Arts Festival held in Transylvania. I'm still quite chuffed about walking away with it after facing some great contenders.

My favourite activities include spending time with family, dragging my forever patient wife to watch my beloved St George Illawarra Dragons, popping into the movies for the latest blockbusters, going to the gym for my dream body. Or just a body. Anything, really.

My beautiful wife and I live with our two amazing children in Sydney, Australia: the setting for the majority of my works.

To learn more about his upcoming books

join his [Newsletter](#)

Enter [Speerverse Fanatics](#)

or visit www.aaronlspeer.com

Want to drop Aaron a line? Or have a question?

email teamaaronlspeer@gmail.com

If you're a reviewer looking for great books to read, come join [Speerverse Reviewers](#)

Or

FOLLOW HIM TODAY

