

Chapter 1

Aaron flexed his fingers and then squeezed his hands, the red and black wraps tight. He was ready, hearing the crowd, the noise, the cheers as the match before him went on: Dregar, unbeaten, versus Trooper, a new guy from Oregon. The crowd was electric, and the announcer on the overhead was loud, raising the crazed energy in the coliseum.

He was waiting for the call, for the locker room door to open. He could hear the frenzy. The energy was through the roof tonight, and he needed a minute to get in the zone, to focus on what he had to do and keep his thoughts from all the dark places they continued to slip to. He would focus on the fight and every punch he landed. He had trained for this, his body was ready for this, his mind was ready for this... He just needed to keep his thoughts centered and in the present.

The door squeaked.

“They’re ready for you,” said Jim, his trainer and manager. Jim knew Aaron well, knew his moods and his routine before every fight. He knew not to go on and on, because Aaron wouldn’t hear him. Aaron wanted quiet, with no one in his face.

He fisted his hands again, feeling the wraps snug, protecting his callused skin. His bare chest and abs were smooth, and he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror by the door. He was toned, hard. His bare feet were shoved into sandals, his red shorts low on his hips, a black robe resting over his shoulders. He slung his arms into it, knowing the routine.

Jim just walked with him without saying a word. Aaron was in his head, not hearing him or anyone else right now. He needed to settle his thoughts. He needed to contain the ache that always started in his chest, in his heart, eating away at his guts and moving up until it stuck in his throat and he would do anything to get it out. It was the same before every fight—the same pain and crushing loss. Her face would come to him slowly, then her scent.

Jim was in front of him as he left the locker room. The stench of sweat and cologne hung heavy in the air. The beefy security guys dressed in black sports shirts and blue jeans, all muscle, were controlling the crowds and lined the rows and the entrance. Then there were the fans in the arena, which was always jam packed. It was loud chaos, and he walked with his head down, focused, seeing only hands reaching out into the aisle as he passed.

He didn’t hear his name, but he heard the fans chanting, and that was when he felt the loss of her. The tightness filling his chest turned to fire and rage, and everything disappeared from his peripheral, the sounds drowning into a hum that built as he approached the cage. He was warm even though he knew the air conditioners were cranked. Jim pulled his robe off, and he stepped out of his sandals. A hand touched his shoulder. Jim said something, but Aaron was too focused on his pain, his hurt, and the fight he was facing. He nodded out of habit and to get him to stop talking. There was a zone he needed to get into to fight, but Aaron was past that now.

He was never scared.

He was ready to fight. He wanted to fight.

He stepped into the ring and heard the announcer, his name echoing in the arena. His opponent was on the other side: Matterson, from Georgia. He wore black shorts, the same tight second skin, five foot ten and one hundred eighty-five pounds. Aaron had three inches and fifteen pounds on him, but that wasn’t his only advantage.

As soon as the bell rang, he saw her. That was when it all hit him, not her face but the screams, the noise, the fear and the panic and the fact that he hadn’t been able to do a damn thing to help her, to get to her. He had been caught up in his own hell. He hadn’t been strong enough.

When he went at his opponent, even though he could hear his fists, feel the punches, the pounding of flesh, the connecting of bone, the blood, he didn't stop. He kept going. His adrenaline surged and roared in his ears, and his two realities merged in that moment just like they did every time he stepped into the ring, stepped into a fight.

He would win, but he had already lost.

This fight, like every one, was a do over. What he'd once struggled against had been too much, and he was reliving it again and again in a different time, a different place. He could win his fights now, but the one that counted couldn't have been won. He hadn't been able to save her—*Brittany*. He relived the horror of that day twelve years ago. He'd been young, eighteen, believing he knew everything and could do anything. The fact was that he'd known nothing at all.

He fought for her now, but he still couldn't save her.

His arm was raised as he was declared the victor. He was out of breath, seeing Matterson on the ground, his team around him, helping him to his feet. Aaron had won again, as he did every time he stepped into the ring, but it was a win that filled him with nothing as he took in the crowds. He could hear the noise, the cheers, the chanting for him. *McCabe, McCabe*, over and over. The energy should have lifted him, but it left him a spectator, seeing it all from the outside looking in.

He saw the groupies, the screaming women and cheering men. The vibration of adrenaline was still crashing through him. He blinked, suddenly back in the arena, seeing the lights, the rumbling crowds, and the flashing cameras. He took in the banner strung between two women, one in a tight stretched white tank, with no bra, leaving little to the imagination as she jumped in the air: *McCabe, I love you!* But she was just a face in the crowd, because the woman he loved, the one who haunted his dreams, the one he fought for every time he stepped into the ring, this was all for her.

He was doing now what he hadn't been able to do then, but none of it made him feel anything except the crushing weight of loss, because she was gone now, and it hit him harder than it had after any other fight. Brittany was the only woman he'd ever loved.

He climbed out of the ring and slipped into his robe. Hands dabbed at something on his face—a cut, most likely. There were smiles, cheers, slaps on his back and his shoulders from his team. He'd made his fans happy, his coach happy, the screaming women happy, except Aaron didn't care about any of them.

The only person he wanted to make happy was the one person who wasn't here: Brittany, with her sweet face, her hazel eyes, her auburn hair, and the dimples he loved.

He hung his head, his hood pulled up. Again it hit low in his gut, the thud of emptiness as he saw it clearly, the plea in her eyes as she'd reached out across a courtyard to him. That second had changed his entire life, because Aaron hadn't been able to do then what he could have done now. He hadn't been able to save Brittany.

Chapter 2

The changing room was crowded. A reporter was talking to one of the other fighters, and Jim was standing with Aaron's assistant, Trey, whose light hair was so long in front that he had to keep flicking it to the side. It was the only aspect of his efficient assistant that irritated him.

Aaron pulled on his sweats and slid his feet into sneakers, leaning down to tie them. An ice pack brushed against his shoulder, and he stood up, hearing the clatter of locker doors and the buzz of voices in the background. He tasted something metallic in his mouth—blood.

"Ice for your jaw, for the swelling," Jim said. Aaron wanted to brush it away, but he knew the man wouldn't let him. His mustache was in need of a trim, and his blue eyes meant business. "You need those cuts on your face tended to. See the sports doctor to get that one over your eye closed up."

Aaron lifted his hand and brushed the wetness from his forehead, and it was then he realized he was bleeding. How had he not known? He closed his locker door and walked over to the sink, taking in his swollen face in the mirror: blood on his forehead, his nose and eye swollen, but nothing broken, just messed up.

"Nice," he said, knowing his opponent looked far worse. "I can clean myself up back at the hotel." He snatched his hoodie from the locker, pulled it on, and dumped everything else into his gym bag, the ice pack forgotten.

"Hey, hold up a second," Trey called out as he jogged over from where he'd been speaking with the other fighters' team members.

Aaron had his hand on the door and pulled it open. He was done and ready to go. He stepped into the hallway, which was packed with security, the other teams, and groupies who'd managed to make their way back, dressed like truck-stop hookers. He heard whistling, calling out, propositions, the same as every fight. He could take his pick, anyone or all of them. It was all the same, all about the sex. He simply pulled his hoodie up to cover his head and walked on.

"Aaron, you heading back to the hotel?" Trey said. "I'll catch a ride with you. I wanted to talk with you about your next fight, some of the details..."

"Later," Aaron said, cutting him off. Trey sported the beach bum look, but Aaron knew underneath he was all nerd, and his attention to detail never had Aaron wondering what the hell was going on. Trey handled everything for each fight, for training, for hotels, travelling, and PR. But now Trey was changing the rules. He kept walking, and Trey was still there. "Just the same, Trey," Aaron said. "Catch a ride with Jim."

Just like he did every fight, Aaron left alone. They got him there, and he got himself home, which he'd insisted right from the start. It was what he needed at his low point, which was where he was after each and every fight. He was raw, vulnerable, and he needed to slip out and patch himself up alone from the inside out. Then he'd be able to start another day.

"Aaron!"

He heard the yell, the familiar voice, and took in his brother Chase standing off to the side. His light hair was longer than usual, touching the sides of his ears. He hadn't shaven, and his sharp blue eyes were unsmiling.

"Chase, what are you doing here?" Aaron said, and he gestured to the security guard to let him through. The guy was supposed to be manning the crowds to keep those not part of the teams away from the dressing room, but apparently groupies and women looking for a quick screw weren't on the banned list.

It took only a second before Aaron realized Trey had actually left, walking the other way. He was rattled, and he wanted to get the hell out of here.

“You got a ride?” Chase said.

Aaron shook his head “Grabbing a cab back to the hotel.”

“I’ll drive you.”

He was about to say no, not to worry about it, but Chase was already walking to the back door of the arena and pushing it open, making his way past the crowds and more screaming women trying to get close to Aaron. He saw none of them. The parking lot was packed.

He saw the BMW, his brother’s car, and Chase clicked the lock and popped the trunk. The night was warm, and Aaron was sweating as he tossed his bag in and shoved it closed with one hand. Best to leave the hoodie on over his bare chest and his head, hiding everything about himself that felt open, exposed, and raw.

He rested his large frame in the comfortable leather seat, fastened his belt, and didn’t look his brother’s way as Chase backed out of the stall. He didn’t give much attention to the long line of cars, horns honking, and the bright lights of the city. Chase said nothing at all. It was then Aaron heard tapping, Chase’s fingers on the wheel.

“Which hotel?” Chase asked.

“Anaheim Grove,” he said, hoping Chase wouldn’t ask to stay and talk. Hopefully he would just dump him and run.

They drove in silence, and Aaron took in the views of a city he had no intention of enjoying. His right side was blurred, and he was feeling the tightness of his messed-up eye. The swelling would pass, though, and his vision would clear. Tomorrow would be another day.

“You all right?” Chase asked as he turned another corner. More stop lights ahead, maybe ten minutes to the hotel. Hopefully less.

“Fine,” he said, wishing his brother would take the hint and shut the hell up.

“You want to stop at the ER, have a doc look at you? Make sure nothing’s broken, stitch up those cuts?”

Why was he asking now when they were almost at his hotel? “No.” Another left and two more blocks. Less than five minutes. *Hurry the fuck up!*

“You need ice on your face or you’re going to be a mess tomorrow.”

He’d been a mess before he stepped into the ring. At least there was a reason for it now. “Later,” he said, his adrenaline no longer spiked. He was starting to feel the tenderness in his ribs, the aches in his side, his shoulder, and his back from all the blows he’d never felt touch him. He’d take a couple Advil, raid the minibar, and sleep it off. Tomorrow he’d work through the welcome pain. It was a physical feeling that grounded him.

He was looking for the sign of the bright pink two-story inn that was surprisingly more comfortable than any luxury hotel he’d stayed in. It was quiet, peaceful, and roomy.

Chase pulled in front of it and parked, and Aaron opened the door before Chase could get into some long-winded discussion about how fucked up Aaron seemed, or analyze any part of the fight, or, worse, try to fix him in some way.

Aaron tapped the trunk with his hand, and Chase must have known, as he clicked the button and the trunk popped open. Aaron lifted his bag out, tossed it over his shoulder, and closed the trunk, then took in Chase standing there, watching him. His look was shrewd, uncomfortable. His brother was always sticking his nose where it didn’t belong. Time to send him on his way, but instead Chase handed his keys to the bellman and stepped up on the curb.

“What are you doing?” Aaron said. It wasn’t lost on him that those were the most words he’d used tonight. His jaw ached every time he moved it.

“I’m staying here, too.”

Aaron just stood there with his bag over his shoulder. “Since when?” Coincidence? Hell no, not where Chase was concerned. Aaron was pissed and hoped his brother picked it up. He shook his head and made a rude noise, which was far easier than forming the *Fuck off* his mouth refused to say. Maybe that was why Chase smiled. Of course he knew.

“I already knew where you were staying. Checked in earlier. Wanted to have a talk with you.”

He didn’t let his brother finish as he walked into the hotel. Maybe if he weren’t so wrapped up in himself, in trying to dampen all his heartache and everything that had spilled out of him in that fight, he’d have given a damn about what an asshole he was being.

He stopped at the front desk. The girl behind it gasped when she saw him. Yeah, he did look pretty bad. “Key to my room, 106. Aaron McCabe,” he said.

Maybe she didn’t recognize him, as she was staring, her mouth open.

“Oh, Mr. McCabe, you’re back. How was the fight?” the other receptionist said. What was her name, Shawna or Sandy? His eye must have been swelling shut now, as he was having trouble seeing out of it at all.

“Fine,” he said. “Send ice to my room.” He grabbed the key card on the counter and walked away before she could say anything else, and he took in Chase standing there, frowning, his arms crossed. He should be nice, say something, but he wanted him to go away, wanted everyone to go away and leave him be until he could have time to sleep and stuff everything broken about himself back into that hidden place where no one could see it. His trainer knew, and even his assistant knew, so why couldn’t Chase follow the routine?

He walked right past his brother and down the wide hall, past the bright lights and spotless orange carpeting, to the suites at the end. He didn’t have to look back to know Chase was right behind him, dogging his heels.

He stopped outside his door and shoved the key card in his lock. It clicked, and he pushed it open. He could walk in and leave his brother, let the door slam in his face, except Chase was plagued with major character flaws that had him poking his nose in everyone else’s business.

“What the fuck, Chase?” Aaron said, and his jaw throbbed again, a painful reminder he needed ice, Advil, and whatever hard liquor was stashed in his minibar. “Go to your own room. I don’t need a fucking babysitter watching me all fucking night.”

“No, but I think it’s time you talked about the reason you step into that ring.”

Aaron dumped his bag on the floor. He could see his brother taking in the suite, the living room, the double doors that opened to his king-size bed. A sliding glass door faced the courtyard, all grass, trees, and green.

Aaron yanked open the minibar and took in the selection: cheap wine, beer, or hard liquor. He settled on the bourbon, twisted the cap, and swallowed it right from the bottle, then groaned not from the bite but from the fire in his jaw, the burn in his mouth. A tooth was loose, and he tasted more blood. There was a knock on the door.

Chase at least made himself useful and opened it. He was talking to someone, and then the door closed. “Ice is here,” he said, and Aaron heard him filling a bag. Chase was efficient as he tied it closed and handed it to him. “Put it on your jaw,” he said.

Aaron just stared at the bag and snatched it from him, pressing it to his jaw, the freezing bringing more pain instead of relief. He tossed the bag on the table, downed the rest of the bottle,

and dumped the empty on top of the bag of ice. He took in Chase again, who now appeared pissed as he sat in one of the chairs, crossed his jean-clad legs, and settled in. He was in no hurry to leave.

“Again, Aaron, your fighting.”

“Fuck off, Chase. My jaw hurts. Go away. I don’t want to talk.” He groaned as he reached in his bag, pulled out the bottle of Advil, and dumped three in his hand. Then he added another before tossing them back and swallowing them dry.

Chase was still watching him. “Have some water.”

Was he serious? Aaron just stood there.

Chase shook his head. “Great, then you can listen, because after all these years of watching you fight in that ring, tonight was the first time I realized that whatever is driving you in there isn’t human. Before I thought it was motivation, passion. I thought you had focus, knew how to get in and stay in the zone that makes you one of the best fighters there is. I believed you loved what you did, just like all those guys who step in the ring, but then it hit me tonight. I’ve always wondered whether it was something more. It’s like whatever is haunting you is driving you into that ring, and unlike any sane person, you see it as a chance to kill or be killed. Worse, I realized, watching you pound the shit out of that guy tonight, that if someone hadn’t been there to end that fight, to pull you off your opponent, you’d have kept fighting until one of you was dead.”