



Ryan Souter



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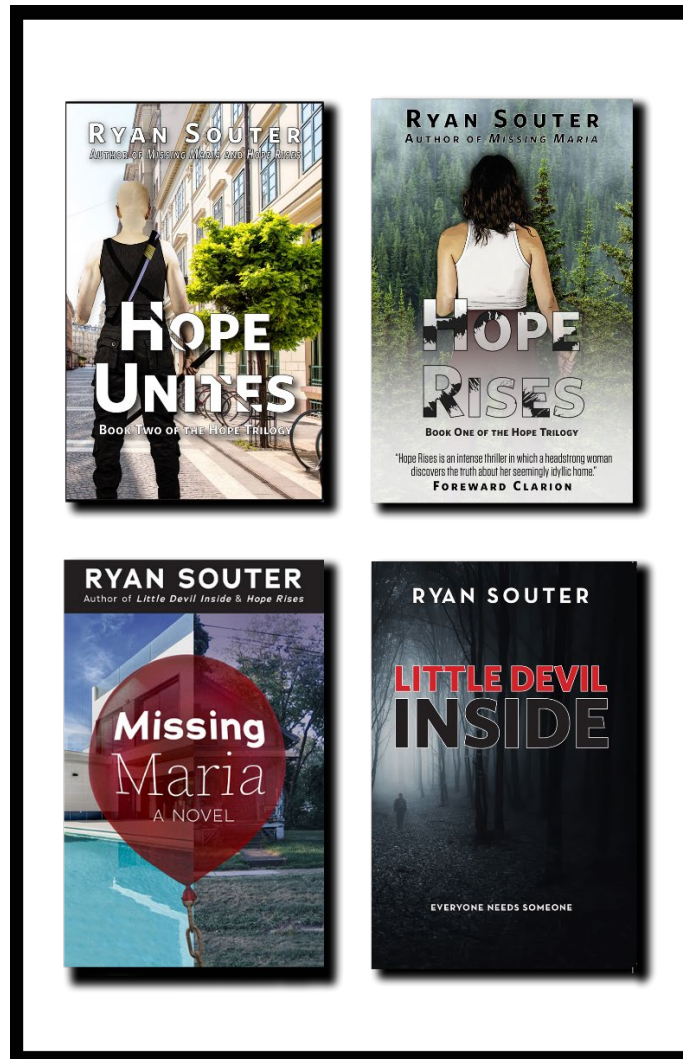
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Fighting For



A Novel

Round 1



***HIT** hard. Hit fast. Hit often.* Ivan Gibson lives by that motto. He repeats it over and over in his head as he drives to the warehouse on the edge of the city. He repeats it again right before the fists start flying.

He reaches the destination and drives through an open gate of a rusted-out, ten-foot-tall chain-link fence. The fence surrounds a wide-open space with overgrown grassy spots mixed with large patches of gravel. Right beside the unmanicured lot is a large, abandoned warehouse that looks, from the outside, like it's going to collapse.

Ivan finds an open spot along the decrepit fence to park his black 2015 Jeep Wrangler. "Welcome to Friday Night Fight Night," he tells himself, killing the engine. It's going to be another busy one; the number of vehicles tells him so. Not that he's surprised—Friday Night Fight Night always pulls in a good crowd. It seems many people find it thrilling to see two people pitted against one another, ready and willing to "throw down."

He leaves his hand wraps and boxing gloves in the Wrangler; he'll grab them when it's nearing time to fight.

When he gets out of his vehicle, he sees Vinnie Mosley standing outside beside the one entrance door. Vinnie doesn't shake Ivan's hand; instead, he makes a fist with his right hand and holds it up. Ivan makes a fist of his own. They fist bump. Vinnie knows Ivan is here to fight and earn some quick cash.

Ivan notices a small tattoo of a knife piercing a heart etched on the back of Vinnie's right hand near the thumb. "Nice tattoo. You just get it?"

“That I did. It’s what my most recent ex did to me—she put a knife right through this...” and points at his chest.

“That sucks.”

“Welcome to life—sometimes it sucks, big guy.”

Ivan knows why Vinnie called him “big guy.” Ivan towers a foot above Vinnie and is a lot broader in the shoulders. Ivan can’t contest what Vinnie said about life sucking, although he has trouble picturing someone being Vinnie’s girlfriend. The guy is rough to look at: half his teeth are missing, his shoulder-length hair regularly looks greasy and straggly, his face is invaded by wrinkles. His weathered appearance makes him look sixty-five versus his actual age of fifty. But even serial killers have been married, so anything in this crazy, messed-up world is possible.

“You ready to lay someone out and win some cash?” Vinnie asks with an eager smile.

“It’s the only reason I’m here,” Ivan says with a nod. He wouldn’t be caught dead at this shithole of a place on Friday night if it wasn’t for a potential payday.

Vinnie leans in towards Ivan for a closer look at the purplish discolouration surrounding the right eye. “How’s the eye?”

Last Friday Ivan’s eye had a run-in with his opponent’s fist. “I’ll live.”

Vinnie backs away while his eager smile remains. “The ‘big man’ keeps coming back.”

“What can I say—I like money.”

“That’s good because people like a good show.”

“When am I up?”

“You’re fourth in line.”

“Cool, cool,” Ivan says nonchalantly. *It gives me time to relax*, he thinks. *And warm up.*

A curt laugh escapes Vinnie. “Some people would call you a cocky—or overly confident—son of a bitch for saying that. I like to think it’s you being fearless.”

“That’s me—fearless.” It’s true. In his mind, the guys he fights are “wannabes”; guys who think they’re tough shit, but don’t know what the heck they’re really doing. In his mind, he’s fought far tougher and more skilled guys in the boxing ring. A lot of the fighters at Friday Night Fight are throwing wild punches most of the time. Ivan simply picks them apart, finishes the job as quickly as possible, gets paid, and goes home. But that still doesn’t mean he never gets hit (sometimes those wild punches land), hence the bruise around his right eye.

“You mind if I head inside now?” Ivan asks, not that he’s really asking. Even if Vinnie told him to hold off, Ivan would still push past him. What is Vinnie going to do? Throw a punch at him? Ivan thinks not.

Vinnie steps off to the side. “Be my guest.”

Ivan doesn’t bother to thank him for stepping aside. Vinnie isn’t the type of guy Ivan normally would associate with. They only connected by chance after one of Ivan’s last sanctioned fights in the ring. Vinnie approached him, mentioned how he ran an organized underground fight ring. At first Ivan wasn’t interested, but when money was mentioned, he couldn’t resist asking questions. The next Friday he was pulling up to this decrepit warehouse checking out what Vinnie had to offer, and the Friday after that he was stepping up and winning.

It’s simple: You win, you get four hundred dollars; you lose, you get nothing. There’s nothing special about it. Vinnie believes if fighters know that losing means making zero bank, it makes them fight harder, give the audience a better show. Ivan believes he’s right.

A couple of guys walk up to Vinnie. They pay and step inside the sorry excuse for a building. Ivan follows them.

Inside, the concrete floor is tarnished with countless cracks and various stains of God knows what, accompanied by a layer of dust covering the ground. The walls are concrete bricks to match the concrete floor. A couple of lights on stands are set up, blasting the area with light. Extension cords pass through the door outside to a gas-powered generator. The generator shuts off and, voila, there goes the light.

The place is nothing like how a sanctioned boxing match would be set up. There are no seats; it’s standing room only. The audience is a mixture of all ages from sixteen and up. It’s male-dominated, but a handful of women are in attendance. All ages and sexes enjoy the sight of blood being spilled. Welcome to human nature.

The crowd stands in a circle around an open space that is the fighting area.

Ivan watches a couple of guys make their way through the crowd and collect money. Friday Night Fight Night is a betting event. He stands on the outer edge of the crowd. No one talks to him. Everyone is too focused on what’s about to play out.

With Friday Night Fight Night, there are only four rules: no eye gouging, no fish hooking, no groin shots, and no hitting to the back of the head. Ivan is pretty sure Vinnie pulled the fourth rule

from the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship). Ivan understands why there are a few rules—you don't want the fights ending too quickly. A quick fight doesn't sufficiently feed the crowd.

The first couple of matches are guy versus guy; the third one is woman versus woman. Some women like to fight just as much as the guys do, and sometimes the women even put on a better show than their male counterparts, feeling they have more to prove.

Right before the third fight starts, Ivan heads back to his vehicle to grab his hand wraps and boxing gloves.

He makes sure to always bring the gloves. Most of the time the gloves are worn along with the hand wraps, but sometimes it's just the wraps, making it one step above bareknuckle fighting.

The crowd takes a vote when it comes to wearing boxing gloves or not. They decide. Welcome to crowd participation. Most of the time it's gloves on, but not always. For Ivan's fight this evening, it's gloves on.

He doesn't need to change his wardrobe; he's already dressed in old gym shorts, an old T-shirt, and running shoes. It's good enough. He wraps both his hands, slips on the gloves and goes back inside.

The third fight ends with one of the opponents being knocked out and dragged out of the open space.

Now it's Ivan's turn. The crowd lets him pass into the circular space in the centre, and he makes direct eye contact with his opponent standing across from him. He has no idea who the guy is and doesn't care; they're not here to be friendly with each other.

Vinnie steps in between them. He only says one thing: "Let's get it on!" Then he quickly disappears into the bloodthirsty crowd.

Ivan and his opponent start to circle, analyzing one another, waiting to see who is going to make the first move. Ivan stares his opponent dead in the eyes and sees what he thinks is fear. That's a good thing. Someone afraid can make stupid moves and not think clearly. In the fight game, one stupid or careless move can be the difference between winning and losing.

Ivan takes a quick couple of steps forward, hoping that will make his opponent start to engage. It works. His opponent moves in. Who will take the first swing? It isn't Ivan.

His opponent throws a jab, but there's zero threat. The punch is a little slow and cumbersome. Ivan easily reads it and thinks, *Where does Vinnie find these guys?* He takes a small step back with his rear foot. The guy's glove misses Ivan by a good couple of inches. He follows up with a right

cross that Ivan easily reads, keeping himself just out of harm's way. Then the guy lunges forward with his right knee pointed at Ivan's mid-section. Ivan steps aside, and the guy goes sailing past.

In these fights, it's hands, knees, *and* feet.

Ivan keeps his cool. The guy comes charging in again. He goes for another jab and cross combo. And, again, Ivan steps back just enough. The guy does the same combo a couple more times. It's predictable. It's a pattern, and the human mind likes reading patterns.

But Ivan knows he needs to do something soon; he can't let the guy keep swinging at him. If he doesn't "throw down" very soon the crowd will begin getting irritated and think he's not fighting, not really doing anything, which is a crock since he's been busy reading his opponent.

The two of them start trading blows for a bit. Ivan keeps his guard up, but a couple of punches land on his ribs, and then a couple manage to slip past his guard, nailing him in the face. Ivan doesn't let it faze him.

The guy throws another jab and cross, which Ivan either easily blocks or misses because Ivan slips to the side. Ivan counters with a hook, landing the blow flush against the side of his opponent's face. The hit is enough to stun the guy for a second or two—that's all the time Ivan needs. He works the guy's body, striking low and then high to the face. The guy doesn't know what's hitting him.

Now that he's in tight and close, Ivan throws a rear uppercut with his right-hand cleanly connecting with the guy's chin. The guy's eyes roll into the back of his head, his knees go weak—actually, both his whole legs go weak—and he kisses the ground.

Ivan knows he's not getting back up again. The guy rolls around on the filthy floor for a bit. Vinnie steps into the open circle, gives the guy the ten count, and declares Ivan the winner.

Ivan is going home four hundred dollars richer.

Round 2



SHORTLY after six a.m. the next morning, Ivan pulls himself out of bed. He notices a bit of soreness around his ribs where the punches landed; they're not broken, he knows that much. Even though he easily outfought his opponent, that doesn't mean he walked away nice and clean—you exchange punches with a guy and there's a good chance you'll get hit at some point, especially if the fight drags out. That's the real world.

He doesn't let the mild discomfort stop him from doing his usual morning exercise routine: core exercises, some shadowboxing in the living room, and finish with a jog. After showering up, he consumes his regular breakfast, which simply consists of oatmeal mixed with egg whites, a banana, and a protein shake. Then it's off to Serenity Cemetery to work a Saturday shift (normally he doesn't, but every so often it'll go down that way).

When he starts up his Wrangler parked in the single-vehicle driveway, the engine sputters and spits.

"C'mon, c'mon...don't let me down," Ivan says as if talking to the vehicle will make the engine start. "C'mon." *God, vehicles suck sometimes*, he thinks. *Never-finished, money-eating pieces of crap.*

To his relief, after another three seconds of keeping the key cranked, the engine comes to life. He has no idea why the vehicle is being a pain in his ass this morning; he's not a mechanic. What he does know is that vehicles are rarely a cheap fix and that's never a great thing when your finances are already tight.

At least it's not a bad drive to the cemetery; this early on Saturday morning, much of the city is still waking up, cutting out the heavy traffic.

When he arrives at the Serenity Cemetery, he enters through a black-coated cast iron gate. It's only a hundred feet or so to the nearly empty parking lot except for one Ford pickup truck—his boss Jack's vehicle. Before he starts work for the day, he makes his way over to his mom's grave.

The name Eden Gibson is engraved on the tombstone along with her date of birth and the day she left this world. It's been twenty-nine-years since she passed, leaving behind a ten-year-old Ivan. To this very day, he still notices her absence, still misses her, forever and for always.

The daisies in the small flowerpot he recently left at her grave are looking rough, drying out and dying. He'll have to give her fresh ones next time. His mom always liked daisies.

Ivan looks up from the grave to see Jack walking his way. He's always liked Jack, couldn't ask for a better boss. Jack is calm, reasonable, just lets you do your job without micro-managing you.

"How are things?" Jack asks casually.

"Can't complain. I need to get my mom fresh flowers."

Jack eyes Ivan's face. Ivan knows why; it's the blemishes.

"Rough night?" Jack asks.

"Not bad."

"You butted heads with someone?"

Jack knows Ivan is into boxing, but not so much about his fighting inside some garbage warehouse. Ivan likes to keep it that way. Thankfully, Jack doesn't ask too many questions.

"Yeah, something like that," Ivan simply says.

"You know there's more to life than throwing punches. You know that, right?"

"Not for me," Ivan responds. Boxing is in his blood. It's been his life since he was fifteen. It's part of his being.

"Okay, so be it. You're planning to do more branch clean up?"

Ivan nods. A day ago, the winds picked up, became all *high and mighty*, slamming into the trees and littering the ground with branches. "I'll get right on it."

"Hokey dokey," Jack says and lets Ivan be.

Doing groundskeeping work at the cemetery has been Ivan's main source of income for the past five years. It doesn't pay a great wage, but he likes it, he likes the solitude, and it pays enough for him to just get by each month. The beauty of working at a cemetery is the dead don't talk. Their eternal slumber gives Ivan peace. Does working among the dead give Ivan discomfort? No. Not at

all. Death is as natural as birth. No matter what, we all end the same—a pile of ash or a pile of bones. At least that's how Ivan sees it.

Ivan speaks to the grave. "I'll see you later, Mom."

At the end of the day, before Ivan leaves to go home, Jack gives him his paycheque.

"Sorry, this one is a little light," Jack says, referring to the amount.

"It's alright. It's not your fault."

The job is up and down when it comes to hours. One week it's part-time hours, another week Jack manages to give him full-time. It's a bit of a rollercoaster ride. That's okay. It gives Ivan more time to train, to work towards getting back in the ring.

"I'll see you on Monday," Jack says.

"See you Monday."

Jack gives Ivan a jolly smile and heads to his truck.

When Jack pulls away and disappears Ivan shifts his body into a fighting stance. He starts punching the air. He works whatever combos come to mind. He steps forward, backward, side to side, all while keeping his arms in motion. He could do this all day.

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," he tells himself.

2

BEFORE heading to Maxine's—his ex-girlfriend and mother of his only child—he stops at home and grabs his Friday Night Fight Night winnings from an envelope he keeps in his sock drawer, then heads back out to deliver the money.

When he arrives at her two-bedroom rental house, he parks out front on the street and not the driveway; he doesn't plan to stay long. In the front yard, his daughter, Gabriella, is busy taking photos of the oak tree on the edge of the lot. Ivan watches her, wondering if she's doing it for a school assignment. Maxine mentioned a few weeks ago that Gabriella is taking a photography class in her last year at Bennington High School.

Gabriella stops what she's doing when she sees her dad. She watches him closely but doesn't say anything. Ivan can feel her eyes on him. "Is your mom home?" he says flatly.

Gabriella's tone sounds just as lifeless as her dad's. "She's inside."

Ivan nods. He has no idea what else to say to her. He knows the teenager staring at him, but, at the same time, he doesn't know her. It's like she's a couple degrees away from being a stranger.

Gabriella returns to taking photos. He watches her take a few steps, sees her half drag, half step with her right leg, the malfunctioning knee. It pains him to see it. Pains him enough to make him look away. He hates seeing her walk; hates it every time. He's hated it ever since the *accident*.

She goes over to a row of bushes that borders one side of the yard. He watches her as she awkwardly tries to sit down.

"You want some help?" Ivan offers.

"No."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she says sternly.

He watches her half sit, half plunk her butt on the grass. "I was thinking maybe we could go grab a bite to eat sometime and catch up." He hasn't seen her, or talked to her, in a couple months.

"Why?" she asks coldly. "Did you forget something?"

He has no idea what she's talking about.

She focuses on taking photos of the bushes.

Ivan takes that as his cue to move on. He doesn't bother to knock or ring the doorbell before going inside. Technically, he's family, and in his mind, family is allowed to just enter.

"Maxine," he calls out, slipping off his shoes at the front door.

"In the kitchen," she calls back.

Ivan heads down the hall to the kitchen on his left. He walks in on her putting together an apple pie. She loves to bake. The first time they met twenty years ago, at a house party, she told him baking was a passion of hers; he told her his passion was boxing. The two of them hit it off, started dating, and two years later Gabriella was born—by accident. Sometimes, birth control fails. And five years after that, they were divorced, with Ivan being told his obsession with boxing was getting in the way of their relationship. But Ivan wasn't going to give up boxing, not when he saw himself having a chance to one day be a champion. It ended with Gabriella living with her mom full-time. From then on, he would pop in and out of Gabriella's life.

"Here." Ivan holds up the envelope of cash and lays it on the counter beside him.

Maxine pauses while cutting up an apple, looks at the envelope and then at Ivan's marked-up face. She puts down the knife and goes over to him, takes a closer look at a reddish scuff on his right cheek. "How fresh is that one?" she asks.

He could tell her it's from the fight last night but chooses not to. He's never told her about Friday Night Fight Night and doesn't plan to. It's not a road he wishes to travel down with her. It's easier to dismiss it: "Don't worry about it," he says.

"I thought you weren't fighting?"

In a way, she's correct. He hasn't fought a sanctioned fight in the ring in two years. He sidesteps her question. He points to the envelope. "It's four hundred bucks."

"Does it go towards last month's payment or this month's?"

"Last month's."

"What about this month?"

"I'll get it to you later. I just need more time."

Disappointment crosses her face.

"Don't give me that look. The cemetery work's been a little slow. I'll get caught up, don't worry." Child support is another regular payment that's part of his life.

"*Don't* tell me not to worry." She backs away from him, leans up against the counter, then says, "It also would be nice for our daughter if she didn't have to see her dad come by looking like he got into some bar fight."

Ivan isn't here to be lectured; the only thing he came here to do was drop off money.

Maxine asks, "Did you wish her happy birthday?"

Shit. Ivan wants to kick himself. It quickly dawns on him that it was Gabriella's seventeenth yesterday. He was too preoccupied with taking a round out of a guy in a warehouse while his daughter was celebrating her birthday. "I'll tell her when I leave." It sounds lame, but he doesn't know what else to say.

"Let me guess, you were too busy punching a bag or something and her birthday completely slipped your mind," Maxine says.

"I'm sorry. I screwed up. I'll make it up to her."

Maxine is quiet, but Ivan can tell by the look on her face that she's not impressed. "Did you buy her that camera she's using right now?" he asks.

"I did."

“It looks pricey.”

“It wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t in the budget to buy her top of the line. It was the only thing she wanted. It’s her passion.”

“Cameras? Photography or something?”

Maxine returns to her pie, continues cutting apples. “If you communicated with her, you wouldn’t have to ask me that.”

Now, Ivan feels even more lame—the disengaged father figure.

She suddenly stops what she’s doing. She puts down the knife and presses her fingertips to her forehead, squeezes her eyes shut, turning them into thin slits for a few seconds. She opens her eyes, forgets about the pie and takes a seat at the kitchen table. Her hands are still attached to her forehead.

Ivan goes over to her. He kneels so they’re about eye level. “You alright?”

“It’s just a headache. The last couple of days they’ve come on suddenly. It’s just work stress.”

“Has Costco been beating you into the ground?” She’s a full-time cashier at Costco.

“I’ve been doing some house cleaning.”

“House cleaning?”

“A side job on the weekends.”

“Why?” Ivan asks. He does pay her money.

“Gabriella wants to take the photography program at Boniface Institute of Arts after high school—and post-secondary education costs money.” She finally pulls her hands away.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asks.

“Just tired. I need to go lie down.” She pulls a few strands of dark blonde hair out of her face. “Go say hi to your daughter.” She leaves Ivan still kneeling on the ground.

IVAN drives to Iron Hands—the boxing club he’s been training at since he was a teenager—when the Wrangle begins acting up. The engine warning light on the dashboard lights up. He can feel the vehicle losing power, the speed decreasing even with his foot on the gas.

“No, no, no...you piece of crap,” he curses, hitting the top of the steering wheel with both palms.

The Iron Hands building is well within view. He's so close.

"C'mon, don't do this now."

Thankfully, he's somewhat lucky today, lucky enough to reach Iron Hands and make it into the parking lot when his mode of transportation finally dies out.

"You suck," he mutters to the vehicle.

He turns the key, giving the engine a try. It makes a low whirring sound and quickly gives up. He's almost certain the vehicle isn't moving anywhere without the assistance of a tow truck. He smacks the steering wheel one more time. But there's nothing he can do; the vehicle has made its choice, telling him *I'm not driving your butt anywhere until I get some help*. Looks like Lizzie will be his ride home later.

Ivan lets it go. There's no point in fretting about it.

First thing Monday morning he'll call a tow truck company and get his Jeep into the shop; he can take an Uber to work. Hopefully whatever is wrong doesn't break his bank account.

Suddenly, he gets a text from Vinnie. It reads: **Got another fight for you this coming Friday. You want it?**

Ivan doesn't need to think long and hard about the offer. **YES**, he types. Just like that, he has another fight lined up.

He heads inside the boxing club—his "sanctuary," as he calls it—an escape from the reality and grind of everyday life, his therapy, a place to punch and sweat out his frustrations.

Iron Hands is nothing fancy. It's a simple layout: a regulation-size boxing ring in the centre of the room, heavy bags along one wall, free weights and weight benches along the opposite wall, men's and women's change rooms located at the back of the gym space. In one corner near the heavy bags is a headache bag, a small, head-sized punching bag for precision strikes, and a speed bag. Iron Hand owner Lizzie Hampton's office is to the left when you first walk inside.

Beside Lizzie's office door is a bulletin board secured to the wall. A poster tacked up catches Ivan's eye. He gives it a closer look. Sees it's for an upcoming boxing charity event, called **Punching Out Parkinson's**, to raise money for Parkinson's research. One might think a sport where you get knocked in the head wouldn't be a good fit for a Parkinson's disease charity event, but evidently boxing training helps those diagnosed with the disease by improving motor skills and coordination, increasing strength and endurance, improving cognitive function, etc.

He sees that the event is being held at the Scotia Entertainment Centre in the city, hosted by Razzle Dazzle Promotions. Ivan knows the Razzle Dazzle owner, Benny Taylor, a retired boxer with a knack for capturing people's attention and selling tickets.

Lizzie exits the women's change room, spots Ivan and comes over.

"When did this go up?" Ivan asks her.

She glances at the poster, then back at Ivan. "About a week ago." She notices Ivan's face, says with a grin: "Nice facial colouring. A lady friend get a little too rough with you last night? She didn't like what you had to offer?"

It's classic Lizzie, all in fun. She doesn't have a "verbal filter." Ivan has known her long enough to know not to take what she says too seriously.

"No lady friend," Ivan says. He hopes she doesn't ask more questions. He's not interested in talking about his scuffed-up face. He'd rather talk about anything else.

"So...it was a rough night with yourself in the bedroom. You need to be more careful when self-loving. You got it?"

And, of course, she had to steer the conversation in that direction—it's Lizzie! He sees his dad, Eddie, in the ring working with a few people of various ages. "You sure you should still be letting a sixty-seven-year-old man teach boxing?"

"Your dad's doing just fine."

"Be careful the guy doesn't blow a shoulder or a knee or something."

"C'mon, don't jinx the poor guy," she says, shaking her head. "He gets hurt, and I'm the one who has to deal with it."

That is true. For the past five years, Lizzie and Eddie have lived together in Lizzie's two-bedroom apartment on the second floor above the gym with the stairwell heading upstairs near her office. Is there any romantic or sexual interest between them? As far as Ivan knows, there never has been. It's strictly platonic. Just two good friends—a three-year age difference between them, Lizzie being the younger of the two— sharing a space and making it work. For them it's strictly companionship.

"If you're so worried about him, you could help teach the boxing fundamentals class with him," Lizzie casually suggests.

This isn't the first time she's mentioned it and probably won't be the last. He can't picture himself teaching a class with his dad and getting along. Not a chance. He quickly disregards the idea. "I'll pass."

She shrugs. "Suit yourself," she says, and steps into her office.

Ivan takes one more look at the poster. He hears Lizzie call his name, telling him to step inside her domain. When he does, she's sitting behind her cluttered desk. She tosses a tennis ball at him. He catches it, looks at it. "What's this about?"

"Start bouncing it like a basketball."

"Why?" he says, unsure where she's exactly going with this.

"Just do it."

"Okay," he says, still not sure why, but decides to humour her. He uses his right hand. Up and down the ball goes.

"Faster!" she says, getting all riled up.

Ivan follows the order, speeding up the ball. He includes his left hand in the mix, bouncing the ball between both hands, managing to stay on top of it.

"That's right, keep light on those feet!" she says with energetic enthusiasm. She gives him a toying smile. "Dance for me, boy! Dance for me!"

And that's when Ivan stops, realizing she's just messing with him. He tosses back the ball.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted. Now I have work to do"—she waves him away—"so, be gone."

He leaves, shaking his head, smiling and laughing. The smile disappears when he passes alongside the ring.

The students listen eagerly. All eyes are fixated on Eddie.

"You throw the jab and take a small step forward at the same time," Eddie says, then gives a quick demonstration. He punches with his left arm and takes a small step with his left foot in unison with his punching arm. "Make it all flow nice and smooth."

As Ivan passes by the ring, he and his dad make eye contact.

"You gonna work the heavy bag?" Eddie asks.

"Yeah," Ivan says. He breaks eye contact. He makes a beeline straight to the men's change room where he has his own locker and keeps a change of workout clothes.

THE week passes and before Ivan knows it, it's Friday Night Fight Night and another chance to make a buck.

The evening is basically the same as the last fight night; the only difference is Ivan's fight is the second one instead of the last one. It doesn't matter to Ivan. He'll fight when they want him to fight.

Kenny Long. That's the name of the guy he's going to face; at least that's what Vinnie tells him. Kenny isn't a small guy. He's a little larger than Ivan, and Ivan isn't a small guy himself. It's not that Kenny is ripped and chiselled muscle-wise, but he's taller than Ivan by a couple of inches and is broader in the shoulders. He easily could weigh between 230 and 250 pounds. Ivan doesn't let the size difference get to him. Sometimes being the smaller guy is an advantage; you can move a little quicker from having to carry around less weight.

Ivan and Kenny step into the open circle, both ready to go.

Vinnie gives the signal and falls back into the crowd. Right away, the fight doesn't go smoothly for Ivan. He underestimated Kenny. He thinks because Kenny has a larger physique that his movements will be slower, but he's wrong. Kenny moves quickly for a large man.

Both give it their best, and the crowd loves them for it.

In the end, Ivan manages to land a right hook square into Kenny's left jaw. It's enough to rattle Kenny's brain. His legs go weak, and he crashes to the floor.

For a moment Kenny is on his hands and knees. Ivan takes a few steps back—it's always a cheap shot to hit someone when they're down—and waits to see if Kenny will get to his feet. It's not happening.

Vinnie steps into the open circle, stands over Kenny and starts counting.

When Vinnie reaches the count of five, Ivan thinks Kenny may actually get back on his feet. Ivan can see the guy is trying, giving it his best, but his body says otherwise.

The count continues.

Six.

Seven.

Kenny is still on his hands and knees. All he does is shake his head like he's trying to get his rattled brain to fall back in order.

Eight.

Nine.

Kenny can't get past shaking his head.

Vinnie says the word "ten," and just like that it's all over for Kenny Long.

Ivan is glad it's over. If the fight had dragged on, even a little longer, he could very well be the one on the ground shaking his head. Kenny wasn't an easy opponent to put down.

Ivan cuts through the crowd. A few people congratulate him and give him a pat on the back. He steps outside to get some fresh air and away from the musty smell that you can't escape inside the decrepit shithole of a building. This whole underground fighting scene is a steaming pile of garbage in Ivan's opinion, but it's a payday. Ivan is pretty sure Vinnie slides some cash to the authorities to look the other way. It makes sense. If money wasn't being passed along to the powers that be, Ivan believes this whole scene would've been shut down a long time ago.

Ivan slips off his boxing gloves and drops them on the ground. He lightly presses his fingertips under his left eye and winces. Tomorrow morning he'll wake up to another blemish on his face.

"Evening, Ivan."

Ivan turns around to see a guy who looks to be close to his dad's age standing behind him. "Do I know you?"

The guy steps outside the building.

Ivan can't help but notice the guy's crisp dress pants and dress shirt look expensive. His hair is neatly trimmed. He doesn't look like he belongs here, not with this crowd. He looks familiar to Ivan, but he doesn't know why.

"Benny. Benny Taylor."

And then it all clicks. Ivan just needed to hear the name. What the heck is someone like Benny Taylor doing at this dive of a place? This isn't his world. He should be hanging out with the upper clientele, shouldn't he?

"That was a hell of a show you just put on in there," says Benny. "Your right hook is impressive."

"Thanks." Ivan has no idea why someone like Benny Taylor is talking to him.

"You're boss...Vinnie—"

"He's not my boss."

"Well, whoever he is, he told me that you're pretty damn good at winning."

“I guess you can say that.” Now it’s Ivan’s turn to ask the questions. “How did you find out about this place?”

“People talk.”

Vinnie doesn’t allow anyone to record the fights. But you can’t stop people from talking.

“I thought I’d come down and check it out,” Benny says.

Okay, fair enough, Ivan thinks, but still, why are we talking?

“You like money, Ivan?” Before Ivan can answer, Benny says, “Of course you do. Who doesn’t? If you didn’t like winning money, you wouldn’t be here.”

“What’s your point?” Ivan isn’t in the mood for playing games; he just finished fighting Kenny Long.

Benny takes another step closer. “How would you like the chance to win twenty-grand?”

Ivan almost laughs in Benny’s face, thinking it must be some kind of joke. “Yeah, right,” he says.

“I’m serious. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be at a place like this.”

That’s a valid point. And by the look on Benny’s face, Ivan can tell the guy isn’t screwing around. Benny also doesn’t seem like the type who likes to waste time.

“I’m guessing you know who my son is—Hoyce Taylor,” Benny says.

Of course, Ivan knows who Hoyce Taylor is. Hoyce Taylor is a twenty-eight-year-old heavyweight who’s quickly moving up the ranks and is on the trajectory to becoming the number one contender in the heavyweight division, the “heavyweight champion of the world.”

“What about him?” Ivan asks.

“I think you two would be a hell of a match.”

Now, Ivan really wants to burst into a wail of laughter. Benny can’t be serious. Or is he? Ivan tells himself that Benny wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t being serious. But still. “What’s the angle?” Ivan asks. There must be something more behind this.

“I’m hosting a charity match for—”

“—I know what it’s for. I saw a poster for it at Iron Hands.”

“My dad passed away from the disease,” Benny says. “I thought I’d give something back. Raise some money for Parkinson’s research.”

Ivan still thinks there must be more to this. “I still don’t really get why we’re talking,” he says.

“I told you I—”

“—think Hoyce and I would be a hell of a match. But why me?”

Benny turns the question around. “Why not you?”

Ivan isn’t sure how to answer that.

Benny says, “You fight my son and knock him down for the full count, and you walk away with twenty-grand. That’s it, that’s all.”

He makes it sound simple, but Ivan knows it’s not simple. The fact that it’s Hoyce Taylor makes it not so simple. He hesitates. “I’m not so sure about this.”

“How many grudge matches do you have to fight here to win twenty-grand?”

Ivan does the quick math in his head. “Fifty.” The number sounds a little shocking as soon as he says it. Damn, that’s a lot of fights.

Benny just smiles. “Fifty fights. Damn. That’s a lot of punches. I’m offering you a chance to win, with one fight, the equivalent of fifty. That sounds like a hell of an opportunity.”

Ivan has a better question. “And if I lose?”

“You lose, you get nothing. It’s no different than what you’re doing here. You win, you get paid; you lose, well... You know the deal.”

“Can I think about it?”

“What’s there to think about? Just give me a simple yes or no.”

Ivan runs it through his head again. Fifty underground matches equivalent to one match with Hoyce. “You know I don’t have my boxing license anymore, right?” Around two years ago, he lost it when he ventured into the world of underground fighting. *Desperate times called for desperate measures*, he had told himself.

“It’s an exhibition match. I don’t see it being a problem. And it’s for a good cause.”

That’s another valid point. The boxing commission would have no grounds to come at Ivan if he fought Hoyce.

Benny adds: “Think of it as street-boxer versus pro-boxer.” He gives Ivan a Cheshire cat grin. “Damn, that has a nice ring to it. As far as I know, you’ve never been knocked down for the count, and neither has my boy. That adds a whole other angle to things.”

Ivan can literally see Benny’s promotional brain working.

“So, what do you say, Ivan?”

Ivan still isn’t sure. He never expected to be having this conversation right here and now.

Benny still works to coax Ivan to come along for the ride. “I know you haven’t been in the ring in a while, but when you were, you had a fire in you. I saw some of your fights. You had something. And some people still know your name. *You’re* not completely forgotten. And around this derelict place people know your name.”

The last line isn’t much of a compliment, but Ivan doesn’t care. The offer is making his head spin a little. But, he says, “And what if I’m not interested?”

“Then I’ll be disappointed for a brief few minutes and move on with my life.”

Ivan knows he’s telling the truth. Benny will just find someone else to fight Hoyce, and Ivan is certain Benny will have no problem finding someone. It’s now or never. He extends his hand. “We have a deal.”

“You have about three months to train,” Benny says. “It’ll be a hell of a show.”

“Yes...yes it will,” Ivan says.

“We’ll talk soon.” Benny walks away.

“Don’t you need my number?” Ivan calls out to him.

Benny keeps walking “Got it from Vinnie.”

Ivan watches Benny step inside his pristine Mercedes-Benz and drive off.

5

ON the drive home, all Ivan can think about is stepping into the ring with Hoyce—an opportunity that he never imagined would come his way. It can be his one chance to make his way back. The ring is calling *his* name.

He’s still thinking about it when he pulls into the driveway of the house he rents: a small one-bedroom, seven-hundred square foot bungalow with no basement. For a moment he stands outside beside his vehicle staring at the rental, the place he’s called home for years. Maybe the Hoyce fight could be a way out of his current existence, a chance to make a name for himself and buy a real home of his own.

He goes inside and lies down on his bed with his phone in hand.

He searches for fight footage of Hoyce; an easy find on YouTube.

The next hour is spent watching Hoyce knock his opponents around the ring like they're nothing. The guy is powerful and fast, highly skilled, looks like he owns the ring. Ivan can't deny it.

Watching Hoyce decimate his opponents, Ivan knows he's going to need someone in his corner during training. He can't go into this fight not having pushed himself physically and mentally in the gym. Without proper conditioning, facing Hoyce in the ring will be suicide. Ivan isn't a fool; he knows what he's up against.

He puts his phone down on the bedside table and turns off the bedside lamp. He closes his eyes and hopes to dream of putting Hoyce down for the ten count.