

Chapter 1

ROLLING

Remember to remain calm,” Sensei Chen said. “And breathe. Do that and you’ll keep a clear head.”

Sensei Chen spoke to Eric Davis and Greg Wall. They were “rolling” in the middle of Chen MMA Center. *Rolling* was a sparring session when two people practiced their mixed martial arts moves. There were kicks, punches, blocks, and chokeholds. None of the moves were at full force. Many of Sensei’s students watched the session.

The MMA center was always busy. Sensei’s students worked on heavy bags. Others jumped rope. Some rolled on the mats. Everyone worked hard to be good.

Eric worked harder than most. He was a 16-year-old sophomore at Starling High School. It was in the sleepy town of Deermont, California.

When Eric wasn't rolling, he lifted weights. He also jogged for cardio. Eating well was part of the plan too.

Eric wasn't the most popular at school. He was known for being into MMA. His main focus was jujitsu. The school's wrestling coach wanted him on the team. So did the wrestlers. Eric wasn't interested in wrestling. MMA allowed him to do more. He could fight standing up or on the ground.

Eric loved rolling. He enjoyed combat—using his body as a weapon. It took skill. The tougher the match the better.

There were a few ways to win. But submitting an opponent quickly felt great. Getting them to tap three times—no matter when it came—was the best part. To tap out meant an end to the match.

Eric loved to win. And he almost always did. There were many trophies at home to prove it. The MMA center also displayed tournament trophies. Eric had played a big part in winning them.

“Honesty. Integrity. Intensity,” Sensei Chen said. He addressed the students watching. It was Sensei's MMA creed. The three words were on every wall of the center. “Bring those traits to a match—always. You can never lose if you do.”

Eric and Greg were both black belts in jujitsu. Eric was a bantamweight. He weighed 135 pounds. Greg weighed a little more.

Their matches were exciting. They moved fast. Eric was on top of Greg. Greg was in a chokehold. But he somehow rolled out of it.

Greg turned. Suddenly Eric was on his back.

The students watching cheered. Many thought Greg was as good as Eric. Some even thought he was better. But whenever they rolled, Eric always won.

Greg pressed his weight on top of Eric. He was trying to impose his will. It would've worked on anyone else.

Eric stayed calm. *Breathe*, he told himself. He slowly wrapped his legs around Greg's. It was a leg lock. Greg tried to fight. His legs were strong. Eric didn't care. He knew his were stronger.

Then Greg made a big mistake. He tried to adjust himself. That's when Eric pushed himself off the mat. With all of his strength, he turned Greg over. Now Greg was on his back.

The students cheered for Eric now.

Before Greg knew it, he was in a chokehold again. Eric's arm was around his throat. It was getting tighter.

Eric could feel the energy in Greg's body. There was confidence before. Now he was tense. He couldn't breathe. Eric wouldn't let him.

"Match!" Sensei Chen said.

Eric and Greg immediately let go of each other. They both got to their feet.

The students clapped. What a great match!

Rolling wasn't about winning or losing. It was about practicing what you'd learned. Getting better was the goal.

The students at Chen MMA knew one thing. In a real match, Eric would've won. He always won on the mat.

Chapter 2

MICHELLE

Eric rode his bike home. He liked to relax after training. Riding slowly gave him time to think. Cars zoomed past.

There was still homework to do. It wasn't much. Algebra and chemistry.

“No intense rolling for a while,” Sensei Chen had said. This was right after Eric and Greg had rolled. “We’ve got the county tournament coming up. I want everyone ready. Our team needs to be injury free.”

Chen MMA had about 60 students. Most of them were teenagers. Ten to 15 of them would be in the tournament. Those would be the best students.

Deermont was in Steel County. The tournament would be countywide. The town was small. It had strip malls and schools. Industrial buildings surrounded it. Eric didn't know much about them.

Eric reached into his pocket. He took out his phone. No messages. His heart sank. He'd been hoping for a message from Michelle Thomas. They were dating. Four dates, four weekends in a row.

He'd thought they were together. They were a "thing." But Lance Espinoza told him differently.

"Bro," Lance had said, laughing. "I saw Michelle at the Dekker mall. She was totally macking with some guy from Dekker High School. I think he's on the water polo team."

Eric knew Michelle hung out in Dekker. It was the city next to Deermont. Her cousins lived there. She had friends who liked to hang out there too.

He'd called Michelle after hearing that. She didn't pick up. Now it had been two weeks. Eric still hadn't talked to her.

"Dude," Liam Axelson had said. "You should totally hose that guy. Let's go to Dekker."

"Yeah," Lance had chimed in. "We'll totally get him at the mall in front of everybody. Take him down!"

Lance and Liam had laughed about it. They'd talked about how Eric could get revenge. He could use MMA moves. It was payback time.

Eric had smiled.

He knew he could beat up Michelle's dates. There weren't too many people who would mess with him.

His friends had missed the point. They didn't notice

how bummed he was. Neither asked if he was okay. They just assumed he was. Eric was a tough MMA guy. Nothing was supposed to bother him.

Chen MMA kept him away from other activities. He didn't get involved in any of the school sports' drama. At the same time, he wasn't part of anything at Starling.

He didn't have a lot of close friends. It was hard getting close to people. Even Lance and Liam were only acquaintances. They played football and baseball. He mostly hung out with them at school. It was rare to see them casually.

Of course he didn't want to get Michelle back by fighting. He shouldn't have to. She was the one who had bailed. He'd been happy with her. If she didn't want to be with him, then screw her.

"You'll slaughter that guy," Liam had said. "Michelle will come running back."

"For real," Lance had said.

Eric had smiled and shrugged. No way would that work.

Now, as he rode his bike home, he still felt the same way.

Chapter 3

MOVING BACK

Even when it looked bad, I wasn't nervous," Eric said. "No way was Greg going to beat me." He was sitting at the dinner table with his mom, dad, and seven-year-old sister, Madison—Maddie for short.

His mom had made meatloaf. It was one of Eric's favorite meals. He loved her mashed potatoes too.

"That's because of your training," his dad said. "Sensei Chen has taught you well. Remaining calm in a tough situation is something you can use in life. It's not just for the mat."

"Yeah," his mom said, smiling. "Like when you take your next English test."

Eric grinned. He did well in school. But English was too personal. Mrs. Jordan liked students to talk about

themselves. The teacher wanted them to share their thoughts and feelings.

Eric knew how he felt. He had opinions about things. Writing those feelings and opinions down on paper was hard. Sometimes it was easier typing them on a laptop. Talking about his feelings was difficult, though.

“I never get nervous during tests,” Maddie said.

“That’s because you don’t have tests,” Eric said.

“Yes I do!” she snapped.

“All done with your homework?” his dad asked.

Eric had a hard time figuring out his dad. He loved him. But he didn’t feel close to him. He could talk to his mom. Talking to Maddie was easy. But his dad was a mystery.

His dad always gave him advice. Eric would follow it. Then his dad would question him about it. It was confusing. He never really knew where he stood.

Both his parents worked with numbers. His father worked at a bank. He was a loan officer. His mom worked part-time at city hall. She was in the accounting department.

The family lived in a spacious one-story home. Eric knew he was lucky. Things were good. Still, something felt off. Disconnected ...

“Oh, Eric,” his mom said between bites. “Did your father tell you the news?”

Eric looked at his dad.

“What news?” his dad asked.

“About the Bonum family,” his mom said.

“Oh yeah,” his dad said. “They’re moving back.”

“They are?” Eric said. He sat up in his chair.

“Yeah,” Maddie said. “Your girlfriend is coming back.”

“Right,” Eric joked.

It was partially true.

Eric and Danielle Bonum had been really good friends. They had met when they were five. The pair had always gotten along.

Danielle wasn’t girlie. She did everything Eric did. Danielle was just as good at sports as the boys.

They had always been close. The two talked about everything. Movies. Music. Books. Danielle made it easy.

Things changed in middle school. Eric started to think about her differently.

He loved her dark skin. Her long curly black hair was perfect. She had hazel eyes. He would stare into them as they talked. Oh man, was he lost. He had fallen hard for her. It had happened overnight.

Somehow he’d found the courage to tell her. To his surprise, Danielle felt the same way. In fact, she’d said she’d felt that way for months.

They spent the summer before eighth grade together. Did they make out the whole summer? It seemed like it.

But there was no PDA. However, both families knew. Their affection was obvious.

It was like nothing Eric had ever experienced. Being with Danielle felt right. She made Eric feel good about himself.

They had known each other forever. Then they became best friends. That friendship had blossomed. It was in another zone.

It was a month before school would start. The shoe dropped. It was bad. The Bonum family was moving.

Danielle's father worked in cyber security. His company was transferring him.

"We need to make the most of this," she had said. "I'll be gone soon."

"I know," he had said.

"Time needs to stop. I want to stay here with you forever."

"Me too."

Their bond felt so strong. When she moved away, they made promises.

"We'll talk every day," she said.

"Yeah!" he agreed. "We'll see each other on holidays too."

They kept in touch. And then they didn't. Little by little, the communication stopped. Eric was bummed. Still, he was busy with MMA, friends, and other girls.

The memory of Danielle slowly faded. Eric didn't even realize it was happening. He dated other girls. A lot of them he actually liked. But none of them made him feel the way Danielle did.

"Are you going to smooch her when she comes back?" Maddie asked, breaking into his thoughts.

His parents laughed. Eric laughed too.

Maddie was a mind reader. He *did* want to kiss his old flame.