

Chapter 1

Today is my little brother's birthday, which should be a good thing. Except he's dead. Nathan and my parents died eight months ago. Car crash. Head-on by a drunk driver.

I blink away unshed tears and grit my teeth. This guy picked the wrong day to fight me. My attack is fierce and unrelenting, pummeling my sparring partner into submission. He staggers backward until he's pinned against the ropes, his forearms protecting his face. Glassy eyes roll into their sockets, and he slides like a sack of potatoes to the ground.

"I think that's a record, Aleasha!" Cecil calls.

I shoot him a glance. He's grinning and pacing the ropes. His hands, gnarled from years of fighting, clutch my towel and water bottle. I spit out my mouth guard and undo my chin strap, shoving a rogue strand of brown hair out of my eyes. "Do you have anyone else I can fight?"

He shakes his graying head. "Sorry, Eeash. You've used up all my fighters. And I had to beg the last guy."

"Thanks anyway, Coach." I jump down onto the cold concrete floor of the gym, enjoying the chill. This place is a sweat box, reeking with the stench of sweat and dirty socks. Giant fans placed along the walls do little to circulate the air. But Cecil's gym wasn't meant to be comfortable. It was meant to create fighters.

A large, matted area for martial arts, flanks the ring. On the other side, free weights, pulleys, and bags. Sweat drips off dozens of faces as grunts echo off the cinder block walls. Giant posters filled with motivational quotes and faces--previous members who've competed in big-time venues--stare from the walls. Several posters are of Cecil, the owner, in his prime.

"I'll fight you."

My mouth forms an O as a guy strides toward me with tousled brown hair and a wife-beater

tank top that does nothing to hide his sculpted body. He's lean, which is unusual around here. Most guys like to bulk up. But this one looks like he's built for speed and efficiency.

"I'm sorry?" I say, trying to sound casual, but my delivery is more of a croak.

"The name's Andrew." He flashes a thousand-watt smile and his eyes wrinkle at the corners. He holds out a hand. "You're Aleasha Summers, right?"

I shake his hand and tilt my head. "Do I know you? You seem familiar, but I can't place your face."

His smile dims almost imperceptibly. "I can't say we've met. I would have remembered."

Cecil puts a hand on my shoulder. "You wanna spar with Aleasha? Are you experienced?"

"I can hold my own," Andrew says, his green eyes never leaving mine, his lips twitch upward.

Is he mocking me? Is he flirting? I narrow my eyes. I'm *sure* I've seen him before. Brown, tousled hair, easy smile, oozing with confidence, intense gaze. Any other day, I'd be intrigued, but today I'm just annoyed.

Cecil claps his hands together, drawing my gaze off Andrew. "Okay, pretty boy, here's how it works. The bout is ten minutes. If you survive, you get paid for the session."

"How about, if I win, she takes me to dinner?" Andrew says, wagging his brows.

My eyes snap back to Andrew. "Seriously? Let me guess. If I win, *you* take *me* to dinner?"

"So it's a deal?"

"I think I'll pass."

"It's just dinner. Nothing more."

Normally, I'd tell him to take a hike. But today is different. Today, I need to hit something until my mind forgets that my heart is broken, and that I will never sing Happy Birthday to my little brother, Nathan again. "Just get your stuff," I mutter, promising myself that pretty boy won't be quite so pretty when I'm done with him.

I move to the mat and stretch, waiting for Andrew to gear up.

"Are you seriously gonna fight him?" Cecil asks from behind me.

"Yep."

"And the stakes are dinner?"

"Cecil, you were *right there* while we were talking," I say glancing over my shoulder.

He breaks into a grin then puts two fingers to his mouth, and whistles. "We've got a live one!"

I curse under my breath and glare at his back. The staccato of metal-on-metal from the weights and pulleys grinds to a halt as faces turn to stare at me.

"C'mon, Cecil," I rumble as bodies migrate to the edge of mat. He ignores me and hobbles to the group, talking in hushed tones.

Andrew walks up to me wearing a pair of shorts hanging loosely over compression gear. He's barefoot and shirtless and ripped. *Hell-o.*

Andrew inclines his head toward the group. "What's going on?"

"They're taking bets," I mutter, then re-strap my headgear.

"Are they always like this?"

"Cecil's my trainer, so he likes it when I fight."

"Hmm. I guess Cecil's gonna be disappointed tonight."

"Not likely. I haven't lost in months."

Andrew grins.

"HEY!" I point to the large digital clock on the wall. Cecil motions for someone to add ten minutes to the timer, then meets Andrew and me in the middle of the mat. He looks from me to Andrew and back again.

"Okay, Eeash, you're 5'10", 165 lbs, right?"

I pop in my mouth guard and nod.

He looks Andrew up and down. "And you're, what? 6'2" 180ish?"

"About that, yeah."

Cecil nods, then turns to me. "You okay with that?" He smirks and I scowl, a low growl escaping from the back of my throat.

Cecil chuckles, then yells, "Start the clock!"

The gym explodes into cheers and catcalls as Andrew and I slowly circle each other. His stance is low, like a fighter. Rather than bouncing around like some of the other idiots I've sparred, Andrew's movements are smooth; practiced.

I throw a jab, and Andrew blocks it, then breaks into another grin. I think he's *enjoying* himself.

I respond by unleashing a full-frontal attack - a series of strikes, kicks, hooks, and jabs - all of which are blocked. With each attempt, I become increasingly impatient. *Why isn't he countering? And why aren't I landing any punches?!*

"C'mon," I bark, grunting between blows.

He blocks me again and shakes his head, that irritating smile refusing to budge of his face.

After several more stymied attempts, I glance at the clock. We have seconds left, and Andrew hasn't thrown a single punch.

I spit out my mouth guard in frustration and say, "Dude! Are you gonna fight or what?"

With one second left on the timer, he smirks and drops his hands. "My mother taught me never to hit a gir--"

My fist connects with his face and his head whips back. He staggers backward a couple steps, blinking several times. The crowd groans and winces.

"Well, your mamma never thought you'd fight *me*," I say, stalking off the mat.

I yank off my helmet, chuck my gear in to my backpack, then hoist the bag onto my shoulders.

What a complete waste of time.

"I'm sorry," Andrew says from behind me. "I don't hit people I'm asking to dinner."

I whirl around to give him a piece of my mind. But he's standing there all shirtless and charming, dabbing at his lip with a rag.

"Um, well...that's too bad because I'm still not eating with you."

"Hold on." Andrew grabs my arm as I turn to leave. "I won fair and square. I stayed in the ring ten minutes. That's all the old man asked me to do."

"No touchy," I say, swiping him off my arm. "Besides, I'm seventeen," I say, grabbing my water bottle and shoving it into the bag too.

"And your point is...?"

"I'm too young for you."

"I don't think three years is too much of a stretch, do you?"

I shake my head, clenching my jaw. "You were supposed to *fight* me for ten minutes. Not run around like a scared little girl fending off my advances."

Andrew smirks, stepping closer. "First off, having a strong defense is a *great* offense. And second, you can make all the advances you want *on* the mat, so long as I can make them *off* it."

"Allllright. I think we're done here." I pull some money from my bag, pressing the bills against his chest. "That should be enough for dinner."

I wave goodbye to Cecil and leave without looking back. Pausing in the parking lot, I close my eyes and listen to the symphony of horns and engines zooming by. The June sun warms my head while a breeze dries my sweat and carries the aggravation of the gym away.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry."

I open my eyes and sigh, letting my shoulders slump. Doesn't this guy ever stop?

Andrew circles around until he's facing me, then holds out his hand. "Let's start over. The name's Drew."

"Aleasha," I say, shaking his hand a second time. "And you're *still* not getting a date." I grab the helmet off my black Kawasaki Ninja. While I'm fiddling with the strap, Drew puts his hand on my arm.

"Would it help if I say 'please'?"

"Bite me." I shrug him off and climb onto my bike, letting it roar to life.

"That can be arranged," he says, flashing a grin.

I respond with a tight smile, flipping him the bird as I drive away.