

## Bullied By The Badboy By Maramartha Chapter 6

Right knee

The first round lasts fifty minutes. Blood rushes to my ears, I am bleeding behind the mask and my heart beats so loud above the cheers, I can hardly hear what Coach is saying. He squats in front of me, holding the water bottle to my mouth and I take a swig until my stomach protests. I wince when I lift the hem of my tank top and see blood. Coach presses a warm towel to my side, my teeth sink into my lip to stop from screaming or punching him. He should have discouraged me from getting into that ring tonight.

“Are you okay?” Coach asks with a worried expression and I nod. I am not in the least bit okay. My body hurts like hell. I need to soak in a tub full of ice for a week and lock myself inside with buckets of ice-cream. “Tee.”

“I’m fine.”

At a regular taekwondo competition, we would have gotten helmets, shin guards and body protectors. The rules would have also applied—no kicks below the waist; headshots. But here, everything we do is different. The thrill of underground fighting comes from the possibility of danger and the crowd loves it. Heck, I love it too but right now, my body feels like a war zone and I want nothing more than to rip this mask off my face. I try to sit up and a bout of pain rips my insides, I fake a smile when Coach eyes me.

Coach sees through my smile, he palms my face. “If you can’t go the next round, just say the word.”

I am no quitter.

I will not say that word. I punch him lightly on the chest and chuckle. Gosh, even chuckling hurts.

“Na, I’m good. I’m fine.” His eyebrows raise in disbelief, I nod. “Coach, this is nothing. I can handle it.”

But I fail to mention I might not last a third round. Since the first round ended in a draw, another round is automatically added. Coach hands over the water bottle, I take a sip, rinse my mouth before spitting it out. I glance in Ben’s direction to see if I caused any damage. He is hunched in his corner, eyes downcast.

Would he have gone easy on me if he knew I was a female?

On cue, his head raises and our eyes meet. The cut on his lips is what I notice first, the deep cupid bow of his pink lips. My gaze rests there for too long, the commentator’s voice snaps me out of it. Our break is almost over. I clear my throat and flex my hands. How can I be thinking of kissing my opponent?

He’s the enemy.

Ben twists his neck until a pop sound echoes in the ring, a lump forms in my throat when his eyes return to mine. I want to look away but I can’t, not when he’s staring so hard like he can see beneath the mask. I touch my cheek to be sure it’s intact, a corner of his lips slowly lifts into a smirk and I roll my eyes.

Coach squeezes my knees. “Tessa,” he whispers, I note the urgency in his tone. His voice lowers as if he’s about to tell me a secret, I dip my head. “His knee.” My gaze flickers to Ben, he is talking to his Coach, they seem to be having a heated discussion. “His right knee is weak, go for it. Take advantage of that.”

His words unlock old memories and I am reminded Ben used to be the captain and quarterback of the football team. He was the star player until he got tackled and almost lost his knee. He doesn't play football anymore but he still rolls with the jocks. I glance at Coach and subtly at Ben's right knee. If Coach hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have known because he never walks like he has a busted knee.

The female commentator's voice booms through the speakers, Coach helps me to my feet, muttering so many instructions at once. I understand his nervousness, I am too. The cheers are not as loud as it was at the beginning but the tension in the air is thicker, so thick I can almost taste it. I don't want to wonder how many of them placed a bet on me winning, I don't want to think about the number of people that might go broke if I lose to Ben. I take one step forward and Coach pulls me back, he motions to his leg.

"His knee," Coach mumbles into my ear and pats my back. I nod and walk to the centre.

Two ladies in tiny black bikinis sashay into the ring holding a banner with the number two boldly written on it to indicate the new round. I take that time to assess Ben as he joins me in the middle. None of us react to the crowd, instead, we analyse each other quietly. He towers over me with at least four inches and the wheels in my head spin into overdrive trying to remember tricks I can use to my advantage.

When fighting a taller person, you must get closer to them so they have little to no opportunity to raise their legs because headshots have the most points. Ben's weight makes it harder for him to kick as fast, as high and as much as I can, it's what I get for being skinny. But his weight also lends strength to his punches, they are deadly. I ponder over this as the girls exit the ring. The referee steps between us to create a gap, the bell goes off to signify the start of the second round and the crowd falls eerily silent.

Ben is the first to attack, I dodge it. Someone in the crowd yells his stage name. My heart pounds against my chest like a caged animal, he strikes again and I groan as his fist connects with my side. Not again. Coach screams my name, he's not allowed to give instructions once the fight begins but I know what he needs me to do. Getting into position, I fake an attack, Ben ducks and I perform a slapping kick to his right knee. He staggers backwards, a dark look crawls into his eyes as he slides to a stop and I smirk.

Coach was right.