



## **Praise for *SHE'S A KNOCKOUT***

"A fearless exploration of grief, relationships, and imposter syndrome all the while sprinkling in some romance for the lovers out there. Like a perfectly-timed punch, this book is an absolute triumph."

**Anika Hussain, author of *This is How You Fall in Love***



"A winning combination of sports romance (with a side of enemies-to-lovers) and an exploration of grief and self-worth, *She's a Knockout* is a delightful debut that packs a punch. I simply adored it!"

**Amelia Diane Coombs, author of *Drop Dead Sisters***



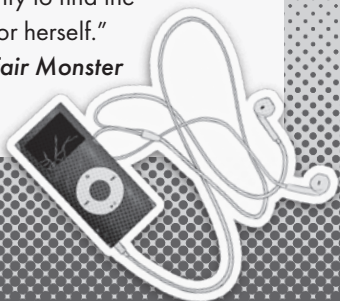
"This uplifting and compelling enemies-to-lovers romance set in the world of MMA fighting had me hooked from the very start. It's funny, fierce and relatable. It also deals with themes of grief and the idea of not feeling deserving on your own success – worrying that it's a fluke and that failure is just around the corner (something so many readers will relate to)."

**Rashmi Sirdeshpande, author of *Good News***



"Come for the fast-paced intensity of women's MMA, stay for the sweet romance and even sweeter experience of watching Annie wrestle her grief and insecurity to find the strength to believe in and fight for herself."

**Adrienne Rivera, author of *My Fair Monster***



*For my family.* – **BB**

LITTLE TIGER

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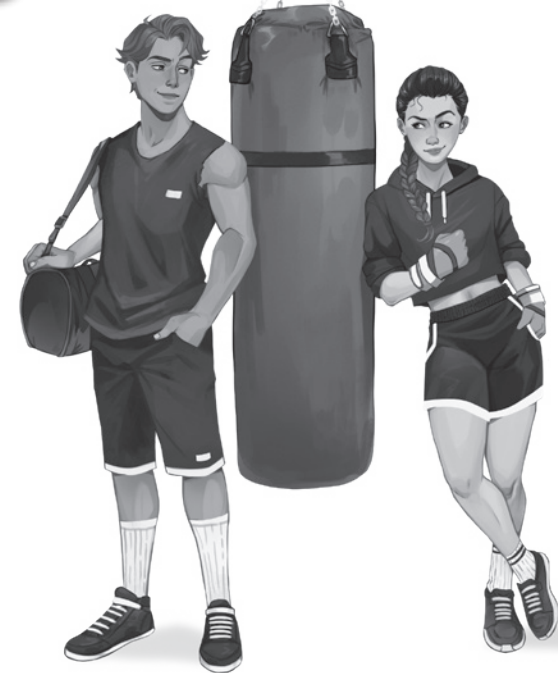


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**BRITNEY BROUWER**

# She's a KNOCKOUT



**LITTLE TIGER**

LONDON

# CHAPTER ONE



The fight's playing. Again.

*Dammit.*

I never thought I'd have to see it, let alone watch it over and over and over. I can't escape it. The fight follows me everywhere, even to the convenience store down the street two days after I stepped out of the cage. I recognize it immediately on the old TV behind the clerk, despite its fuzzy images. I pull up my hood. Time to hide.

The store is dead quiet except for the tinny voices from the TV: *Five-time champion Taylor Heery is taking on Annie Armani. This is Annie's first professional fight and her chance to win the junior MMA title. And so soon after her brother, fellow MMA fighter Marc Armani, was killed in a tragic motorcycle accident. Look at her eyes – have you ever seen such intensity?*

I glance up at the TV. My eyes don't look intense to me – they're wide and uncertain. My opponent, on the other hand, bounces on her toes and gnaws on her mouth guard fiercely like the pro she is. Her dark eyes are focused, two black pupils and nothing else. *That's* intensity.

Tearing my attention from the TV, I slip into the candy aisle, scooping up a bag of Skittles for Margie before heading for the milk I came in for. If it weren't for the sour milk that ruined my plans to make mac and cheese, I wouldn't have left the house in the first place.

Preferably I'd hide out until this fight blows over, but here I am.

Goosebumps line my flesh, but not from the cold blast of the refrigerated air. Seeing the fight paired with the announcer's voice has me on edge. I shut the fridge door with too much force and cringe as the sound echoes through the store. It's not supposed to be like this. No one's supposed to care about some girls' fight, even if it was a title fight to determine the top junior mixed martial arts female fighter. No one cared before the fight – half the pulled-together venue was empty. Now it's all anyone is talking about.

I take a deep breath at the same time as my filmed counterpart, who blinks rapidly as she waits for the fight

to start. I look like I'm desperately holding back tears, which the announcer linked to Marc's death. I wasn't crying – I just couldn't believe I was there, fighting for the chance to win the title.

Pulling out a wad of bills from my back pocket, I slowly approach the counter, mentally calculating how much money I have. This is the last of my cash, the last bit Marc gave me over two months ago, like he'd known he was going to die. I should get a couple hundred from my fight, maybe even a couple thousand, since I won, but I have no idea when it'll come in. Until then I'll be completely broke. I should put the Skittles back, but I can't bring myself to do it. My little sister loves Skittles.

I clear my throat. The clerk's attention stays on the TV. The fight hasn't started yet, but both girls stand in their corners, ready to go. My opponent smiles. I look ready to barf.

"Gimme one sec," the clerk says, the fight reflecting in his gray eyes. "This girl's gonna throw a punch like nothin' I ever seen before."

I swallow and focus on keeping my body still. In control. "That fight happened two days ago. Everyone knows who won."

"I still wanna watch that punch. It's gone viral. Can't go anywhere without seeing it."

*Isn't that the truth.*

And then, at that moment, comes the KO punch. Just like in real time, my stomach lurches.

The fight started with a whistle from the ref, Taylor Heery rushed me, I pulled my arm back. Everything was blurry, everything was numb, like my senses had dulled – until I released that punch. Taylor Heery may have been knocked out, but I was the one seeing stars. Flashes from cameras went off in my eyes, and shocked expressions littered the few faces I could make out in the crowd.

The clerk lets out a low whistle, shaking his head in awe, snapping me back to the store. “She won her first title, but there’s no smile, no elation – nothin’. If you ask me, I think that’s the sign of a champion. She knew she was going to win from the moment she stepped into that ring.”

*Should I have been elated?* I wonder. I’ve watched so many fights, watched as the victors danced around, punching their fists in the air in a show of machismo, yelling their excitement. Me? I’d been too busy trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

Two days later, and I’m still trying to figure it out.

The clerk and I stare at the TV as the referee holds up my hand. The crowd goes wild, but my eyes stare aimlessly into the dark void of the arena.

The clerk’s attention leaves the TV; the action’s over.

As he rings up the milk and Skittles, I glance back at the screen and right into my own blank eyes. My stomach flips again. The excitement of victory never came, not even a hint, in part because underdogs aren’t supposed to win. *I wasn’t supposed to win.*

“What if she didn’t know she was going to win? What if she doubted herself even after she threw that punch?” I cringe as soon as the words escape my mouth.

“That girl?” He scoffs. “She’s a winner. You don’t throw that kind of punch from nowhere.” He hands me my change.

I stare at him for a second. *Yes, you do throw those kind of punches out of nowhere.*

“Thanks,” I mumble, taking my items and turning to leave.

It’s not until I reach the door that the man exclaims with wonder, “Well, I’ll be damned...” He must have seen the embroidered letters adorning the back of my sweatshirt advertising Donovan’s Fight Club, the premier mixed martial arts facility in Philly, where I train.

Marc bought me the sweatshirt and I wear it everywhere. In my panic at being recognized, I pull it over my head, turn it inside out to hide the gym logo, and tug it back on. With Margie’s Skittles in one hand and the milk in the other, I run into the darkness.

✱

Loud music from Marc's ancient iPod pumps through my earbuds as I walk into Donovan's Fight Club, where the familiar stink of mustiness and sweat greets me. I've only been absent for a few days but God does it feel good to be back.

With my hood up and music blasting, it's like I have tunnel vision. I head straight for the punching bag tucked away in a corner room off the main gym. I like being by myself to go through my routine without any interruptions. I used to practice solo in the dusty, moldy basement. Neither that or the corner room are great options, but both are quiet.

I throw my duffel bag on the ground and pull out the grappling gloves Marc gave me nearly a year ago, when we first got serious about MMA after years of karate and martial arts training. Switching between punches and kicks, I start my warm-up.

I'm not sure what I'm listening to – a playlist Marc made, which he not-so-creatively titled "Angry". It's the perfect workout fuel. The music blasts in my ears, the singer screams out his words, the guitarist fiercely attacks his riffs, and the bass thuds with the driving beat.

A few guys poke their heads in from around the corner.

Azem Zogolli, one of my usual grappling partners, waves. I don't wave back. Azem, like many others at the gym, has been distant since Marc died. I know it's because they're grieving in their own ways. We're a family here, so losing Marc hit everyone hard. But once the funeral was over, they picked themselves up and carried on. They left me behind.

Now they gawk at me. I'm so flustered, my next punch misses the bag completely. I do my best to regain my posture. There's instant heat in my ears. I can't even land a punch on a non-moving bag.

The track on the iPod switches from the screaming, bass-heavy song to something surprisingly low-key. Licking my chapped lips, my tongue comes back salty. I haven't been at it long, but I'm already drenched in sweat.

Grabbing my bag, I pass through the guys without a word, ignoring their cheers and words of congratulation, and head downstairs to my locker. Donovan's Fight Club was converted from a factory into a boxing club in the 1950s, but despite the inclusion of top-of-the-line MMA equipment, there hasn't been much updating to the interior. There's no traditional "locker room" – no ice baths or massage tables, and the only shower is in the unisex bathroom across the hall – instead, there's a small

room of lockers on the partially underground bottom level. Turning on the lights still requires pulling a string hanging from the ceiling.

The light comes on with a click and I turn to my metal-mesh locker, the only one with a pink lock. I'm the only female fighter who's been granted a locker. Not necessarily because the trainers and fighters are sexist but because there are only twenty lockers total, saved for the gym's best fighters. I'm not the only girl at the gym but I'm the only one to seriously train in MMA. I hold my lock in my hand, thinking back to six months ago when my trainer, Chris Matsumoto, gave me this locker, which is Chris's way of declaring a fighter "elite". I'd been so overjoyed then that I almost cried.

Now? I don't feel anything. I release my lock and it clanks against the locker.

Marc's locker is right next to mine. I rap my knuckle against it, like I used to tap Marc's knuckle after a training session. But there's no rattle of his lock answering me – because his black lock isn't on the locker anymore. The locker is empty.

*What the hell?* I had left everything right where it was – his gloves, his gross jiu jitsu gi that he never washed – now, even his douche-y Axe body spray is gone. Chris promised me we'd leave it all there as a tribute to Marc.

The staggering surprise quickly fades into an all-too-familiar emotion: anger.

I open my locker, toss in my bag and turn on my heel to leave the room, ignoring the handwritten sign reading: **ALWAYS TURN THE LIGHT OFF.**

I'm about to go knock on Chris's office door, but my phone buzzes in my hand. My agent's name flashes on the screen: *Harry Goodman*.

I'm not sure Harry knows where Marc's equipment is, but I ask him anyway, my voice shaking. "Where did Marc's stuff go?"

"There's my lady!" Harry says dramatically in my ear, ignoring my question.

I ignore him back. "Marc's locker. His stuff is gone." I run up the stairs and out the side door. I always come in and out through the side door – I haven't been through the main entrance of the gym since my days working at the front desk, answering calls and folding towels.

"About that... It's actually why I'm calling." Harry clears his throat. Starts over. "I have some big news!" He sounds like he's recording a radio advertisement describing some great product he's selling.

Ugh. "You can skip the dramatics. What happened to Marc's locker?" Panic's made my voice all tight and scratchy.

"Where are you?" His tone deflates.

“The gym. Marc’s locker has been emptied—”

“I’ve got his stuff, but his locker has been given away,” Harry interrupts.

I pause. Then, “Given away to who?”

“You are not going to believe what happened. Yesterday, I got a call. There’s been a documentary in the works for a while now focused on women’s MMA in the junior division. It was going to feature Janice Hall from L.A. and –” Harry pauses for dramatic emphasis – “Taylor Heery.”

I say nothing. I’d heard rumors about a possible show. Not that long ago, I skimmed through a Reddit post listing names of potential fighters that might be featured. I remember seeing Janice Hall’s name and Taylor’s, along with a few other female fighters. My name was missing. I lean against the outer wall of the gym, the bricks cool against my sweaty skin. What does this have to do with Marc’s locker?

Realizing I’m not taking whatever bait he’s giving me, Harry clears his throat again and continues. “Annie, they don’t want to feature Taylor Heery anymore. They want to feature you instead.”

My pulse quickens. “They want to feature me instead of Taylor?”

“Yes. Do you understand what this means?”

I don’t say it, but I think, *No*.

It doesn’t matter. Harry keeps blabbing. “It means you’re sliding into Taylor Heery’s spot. You took her title, now you’re taking her role in the documentary. And more importantly, you’re taking her spot in an upcoming title-defending match against Janice Hall.”

“Another fight? Already?” My throat’s dry in an instant, my words scratching their way to the surface. Matches can – and usually do – take months to set up. Fighters wait around, praying their next opportunity comes sooner rather than later. I should be thrilled. Instead, my chest feels so tight it’ll squeeze the life right out of me.

“Yep. Against Janice Hall.”

I’ve watched some of Janice’s fights. She’s powerful and I’ve thought to myself more than once that I wish I had her technique.

“And in the meantime, there’s going to be a televised show leading up to the fight. They’re calling it *Fight for the Title*. You’re the star they’ve been waiting for, Annie. You’re the girl they’ve been waiting for to really push female MMA. It’s all about you.”

My throat catches, my heart leaps. Less than a month ago, people were saying there was no way in hell I could beat Taylor Heery. Now they’re replacing Taylor with me.

Another fight. A TV show. Featuring *me*.

“I’m a nobody.” My voice shakes, giving away my self-doubt.

“No one can stop talking about that punch. The video’s all over – I know you’ve seen it. They want to strike while the iron’s hot. Everyone’s obsessed with you.”

This is what I’ve always wanted, of course, but I never thought about what it would mean to get it. My head swims, the world spins. The reality of what Harry’s saying rushes over me. If there’s a TV show, people will figure out I’m not as strong as I looked when I threw that KO punch. If there’s another fight so soon, I might fall before I’ve had a chance to relish being on top.

“But—” My voice squeaks. “I *can’t* have a TV show. I don’t want people seeing me, seeing my life.” It’s not like I have much of a life to show. I’m either in bed, at school or at the gym, going through my everyday motions, trying so hard to pretend I don’t miss Marc. Pretending I’m okay.

“They won’t come to your home,” Harry assures me quickly. “They’ll only be at the gym. Chris already cleared it.”

“Why would Chris agree to this?” Chris practices humility and expects his fighters to do the same. I can’t imagine him letting cameras into his gym to do a feature on one fighter.

Harry’s grin is practically audible on the other end. “They’ve offered a ton of money. Money for you, and money for Chris, and for the gym.” Of course. Money.

Money that they’d offered to Taylor Heery. Money they’ve taken away from Taylor Heery, probably in the same amount of seconds it took me to knock her out.

Harry keeps talking. “The show will add notoriety to you as a fighter, to Donovan’s – of course – and even to Chris. And get this – they’re bringing in a new sparring partner for you!” Another dramatic pause. You’d think Harry had been the star of his school plays, not a member of the stuffy debate team. “Jake Duff,” Harry finally says, the name coming out in an excited puff of breath. “Jake Duff, Annie!”

My blood goes cold. “They’re bringing in pretty-boy Jake Duff to be my sparring partner?” I look up at the sky, blue without a single cloud. I squint against the sun, like if I look hard enough, I’ll see into the heavens, where God has to be doubled over with laughter. Because this *has* to be some kind of sick joke.

On the other end, there’s static, like Harry’s stunned into silence. But I know Harry. It’s time for debate-team Harry to come in. I brace myself for the negotiations to begin. *Three, two, one...* And yep, right on cue: “Look, I know Marc had some beef with him. But, Annie,

Jake's the real deal. I spent all day googling him. He's an Olympic medalist and multi-title winner. You name it – he's specialized in every field of martial arts there is to be specialized in. And he's only seventeen. A phenom before eighteen, just like you!"

Marc took a lot of heat for getting into a social media fight with a "kid". But I don't need Harry's spewing out Google facts to know Jake Duff's not some "kid". He's a snotty, egotistical jerk who runs his mouth and has no respect for other fighters. He goaded Marc online, said he was willing to fight him, and then backed out at the last minute, claiming a scheduling conflict. Marc had spent weeks prepping for that fight, and it would have been massive for his career.

I'm spiraling now, working myself up until I'm trembling.

If Marc had fought Jake and won, maybe he'd still be here.

"I said you'd do it. I said you'd agree to it all."

"Harry!" My exclamation makes two passing tourists flinch. Their glares deepen over their shoulders, their gazes holding. Like I'm ruining their experience of walking down one of Philly's oldest streets. Luckily they keep on walking, because I'm not in the mood for their pissy attitudes.

"Come on, you and I *both* need this," Harry pleads. "Chris does too. It's a win for everybody!"

I consider hanging up on him. Or maybe throwing my phone at the wall so it smashes into a zillion pieces. Then I can pretend none of this is happening. So what if I technically won a title fight and my punch is racking up millions of views on social media? I press my lips together tightly. "I'm going to need time to think about it. This is a lot."

Harry lets out an exasperated sigh. "What did you think was going to happen?" The irritation is heavy in his tone. "You were going to have one fight, and then that's it, your MMA career would be over?"

*Yes.* Obviously I never wanted things to end after one fight, but I *did* think it could end in the ring against Taylor Heery. I didn't expect to win. Instead, I say, "I didn't think I'd land some reality TV show because of one fight."

"Documentary," Harry corrects. As if *that* will change my mind. Then he sighs. "That's how it works, Annie. You play ball for them, they make things happen. You know that."

I am well aware. MMA is all about entertainment. When Marc and I first joined Donovan's, there was a guy who was super hyped up, winning tons of fights.

But when the UFC came calling, he didn't want to do the promotions they pushed, the podcast interviews, the autograph sessions. They dropped him and never looked back. As far as I know, he's working at some pizza joint down the Shore now.

"This is your chance, Annie. Blow it and it could all be over."

"Give me time to think about it," I say, even though there's not much to think about.

Harry's clearly pissed that I'm not jumping at this chance. But I can't say yes. That word is stuck inside me, along with the panicked beats of my heart. Never mind about Jake Duff – I can't believe this is happening.

Which doesn't mean I don't *want* to say yes. My knees keep shaking, but a different emotion starts flooding me – *excitement*. I did it. I won a title. I'm going to star in a TV show. I'm going to get another fight.

I tell Harry I'll talk to him later and lean my head against the hard brick wall. With my eyes closed, I imagine Marc standing next to me. He'd be as bewildered as I am. If I focus hard enough, I can picture the astonished look on his face: mouth shaped in an "o", his hand smacked on his forehead. Marc always had the most cartoonish reactions. It's part of what made him so likable – his passion in every situation.

I know what he'd say too: *Holy shit, Annie*.

Yeah, Marc. Holy shit indeed.