

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Sweep the Leg*

One year later . . .

The Richmond County Institute of Martial Arts

April 3, 1989

Tony Nocerino charged.

I whipped my leg straight up and down in an ax kick, accidentally brushing his cheek.

Tony stopped short and howled. A baby tooth popped out of his mouth. The tiny molar bounced onto the dojo's polished, hardwood floor. Eyes wide, Tony clutched a shaking hand to his bloody lips. He scampered off to the bathroom, tears in his eyes.

*What have I done?* I whipped myself up into a state of total panic.

Ten minutes later, Master Yumi Park reassured me it was not a permanent tooth.

*Oh, thank God. But how does he still have baby teeth to lose?*

This thirty-second sparring match was six months ago. The consequences of those thirty seconds were more lasting than I could have expected. Tony never forgot his humiliation. My fear of hurting an opponent became so overpowering that I rarely won another Tae Kwon Do sparring match. Worst of all, the day I went up for my black belt, I put in a remarkably inept performance in front of my parents, Mitchell, Uncle Carmine, Aunt Beatrice, and Cousin Gabriel. I held back so much during my sparring match with Nan Gibson — a college sophomore also going up for black belt — I would have performed better if I'd stayed home. Ironically, I had no reason to hold back, since Nan could outfight me with two broken legs and a 104-degree fever. I earned the black belt anyway but felt I didn't deserve the new rank.

And yet, here I was, acting as ranking student, leading the basic warm-up exercises. After I completed the twenty-minute set, Master Yumi Park emerged from her office and transitioned the class from calisthenics to sparring practice. "First match!" Yumi declared. The thirty intermediate-school-age students scrambled and sat themselves cross-legged in a circle around the sparring mat. Yumi pointed to the mat. "Cavalieri and Nocerino. Best two out of three."

As Tony got up to join me, one of his idiot friends yelled out, "Sweep the leg!"

Another Merry Man yelled, "Put him in a body bag!"

Yumi cleared her throat loudly, silencing them. "The next person to quote *Karate Kid* gets a front-snap kick to the face."

"You mean a Crane Kick?" the first wise guy called out.

"Okay, that's a *Karate Kid* reference. Ten push-ups on your palms."

The fellow wanted to complain but didn't and complied, doing the pushups hastily and without bending his elbows enough.

"Those are some sloppy push-ups," Yumi observed. "Five more. Good ones."

"Yes, sir!" Fortunately for him, Yumi didn't hear him humming a pop song from the first *Karate Kid*: Joe Esposito's "You're the Best."

"That's more like it." Yumi walked next to me and whispered. "You've had problems with Nocerino for years, am I right?"

"He's having difficulty seeing me as a Black Belt."

"Paint him a picture. No holding back like you've been doing lately, or you answer to me." Yumi threw an annoyed glance at the increasingly talkative class. "Hey! With the talking." They shut up quick. Yumi stepped back to watch from the sidelines. "Fighting stance!"

Tony and I bellowed deep "Ki-Hap!" cries. I snapped into the stance: knees bent lightly, toes up, balled fists held up, guarding my midsection. I was braced for a fight, yet limber. Broadcasting overconfidence, Tony lazily assumed a loose fighting stance. He let his arms flop around by his sides instead of keeping them up in defensive posture, leaving himself vulnerable.

*Okay, now I'm gonna destroy this arrogant piece of shit.*

"Sijak!"

I expected Tony to attack with a stepping side kick. He did. I dodged the telegraphed move. Tony threw a reverse-punch. I blocked it with my forearm. I followed up with a short jab to the chest. "Ki-hap!"

Tony stepped back, surprised by the contact.

*Boom, baby!*

"Point, Damien!" Yumi called. "Continue!"

I attacked Tony with a combination of kicks and punches, keeping him reeling under the pressure. Tony sensed he was being forced out

of the ring. He ducked under my last kick, running around me to the center of the mat. As Tony ran past me, he aimed a reverse punch at my ribs. I twisted out of the way, avoiding the full brunt of the blow. Tony's fist grazed my side. Both of us drew apart, pausing to see if the punch was point-worthy.

"Almost, Tony, almost," Yumi said. "You needed a follow-up punch there."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Nan Gibson, who had arrived early for the next lesson. She stood by the dojo entrance in her civvies, glowering at me for sparring with Tony with greater ferocity than I had demonstrated during our black belt trials.

Tony's leg smacked hard against my stomach. It hurt like a mo-fo. "Point!" Yumi shouted. "Tie. Next point wins."

I walked in a small circle outside the ring, cursing myself for being distracted. Piecing my confidence back together as I returned to the ring took some effort. "Wake up, Mr. Cavalieri," Yumi commanded.

Tony and I bowed to each other for the third and final time, and slid back into fighting stance. Tony's stance wasn't slack any more. Seeing Yumi drop her arm, we walked with sideward steps around the edge of the ring, watching one another for weaknesses.

I threw a roundhouse kick, which Tony blocked. Tony tried a left-hand jab, but I side-stepped it. He pulled back and resumed circling me. Now he was intent on dancing around me, waiting for me to get impatient, attack recklessly, and run straight into his kicks and punches. I joined Tony in the circling, also biding my time.

Yumi yawned theatrically. "Boring! The whole class is falling asleep." At her gesture, everyone began making loud snoring sounds.

"Y'all need sleep apnea machines," I called out.

Tony lunged, screaming a Korean battle cry. He raised his leg to his chest, preparing to lash out with another roundhouse kick.

I was faster. My right leg whipped straight up, slicing the air right in front of Tony's face. It was another ax-kick. The same kick that had cost him a baby tooth.

Tony couldn't help himself. He paled. He flinched. He stepped backward awkwardly. His hands dropped to his side, leaving his chest unprotected.

I fired off a front-snap kick. The kick slammed against Tony's chest. Tony fell over backwards. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, dumbfounded.

"Point two," Yumi said.

My classmates offered me a smattering of applause, which felt surreal. This was the fellow who had ordered his friends to throw rocks at my head by the creek a few years ago. There were no applauding witnesses to that indignity. And let's not forget the ambush outside the school bus with the cigarette burn. This time, during a pseudo-rematch, my winning was accompanied by nearly cinematic applause. I smiled and bowed in thanks to my fellow students, which included several clapping Merry Men. As I bowed, I noticed that my black belt had loosened, and hung limp to the floor. I turned around to face the back of the Dojo as a sign of respect and adjusted the uniform, smoothing out its creases, and pulling the belt taught.

"That last kick was a *Karate Kid* reference!" the fellow who had done the pushups before complained. "Crane kick! You should make Damien do pushups, too!"

"Not yet," Yumi replied, imitating Mr. Miyagi for the first time. "Mr. Cavaliere, you and Mr. Nocerino shake hands. It was a good match."

I was satisfied with the win, so I had no trouble stretching out my hand to Tony. Tony stared dumbly at the outstretched hand for a split second before offering his hand grudgingly in return. His handshake was loose, and he looked away as we shook. There was an unspoken promise that I wouldn't spread the word about his loss so long as he never gave me grief again.

"Seven concrete blocks?" I eyed the seven pavers that spanned two vertical cinder blocks, spaced apart at half-inch intervals by wooden shims. I'd punched through three before. Still!

"Don't worry," Yumi reassured me. "They've been pre-broken. You'd only be breaking apart glued halves. Just remember to follow through."

*Phew.* Naturally, it was far easier to break pre-broken and glued pieces of wood and concrete than unbroken ones. Her advice was also

key. If I imagined the side of my knife hand coming to a stop as it struck the concrete, then that would happen. If I imagined my open hand passing through all seven concrete blocks, sweeping down past my leg in one fluid arc, then *that* would happen. After a couple of practice, mimed chops, I made my requisite yell and struck the stack of blocks. My hand passed through one, then all seven of the concrete blocks, facing more resistance than I expected. I wasn't breaking glue. I was putting my open hand through seven unbroken concrete blocks. I stepped back, looking back and forth between my raw, red hand and the broken, collapsed stack of concrete. *Did she just lie to me?*

Yumi smiled. "If I told you they were unbroken, you would have psyched yourself out."

"You should have warned me," I breathed.

"If I'd warned you, you wouldn't have succeeded. I know who I'm dealing with." Yumi clasped her hands behind her back and absently rocked back and forth on her heels.

I frowned. "I suppose so." *Yeah, she's telling falsehoods now.* I was annoyed, so I didn't notice right away that Yumi was rocking back and forth for a long time. "Are you okay, sir?"

She frowned. "I may have some disappointing news."

I braced myself without having any idea what I was bracing myself for. "Oh?"

She tried to sound nonchalant. "It is possible this will be my last night of teaching."

"Oh?" Would I never see her again? If this were true, it would be the worst news since being separated from Mitchell, Irene, and Carmella all within a two-year period. Yumi was a high school senior and could well be preparing to go off to college next fall, but I didn't think that was what was going on. I suspected there were problems in the Park family. I didn't know the Park men, of course. Yumi's school was in walking distance from my home, so I never attended classes at the Eltingville flagship school, where Grandmaster Min-Jun Park taught, or the St. George satellite, where her brothers, Lorne and Pernell, taught. I also wasn't privy to any gossip about any of them. However, two weeks ago, I saw a quarter-page Sunday newspaper ad for a newly minted Tae Kwon Do school operated by Lorne and Pernell

called *Next Generation Tae Kwon Do*. The different branding signaled the school was unaffiliated with their father's franchise, and the possible consequence of a family feud over money issues. Had the sons grown old enough to ask the Grandmaster for autonomous control of a branch school, and he refused them? Perhaps they felt he was underpaying and infantilizing them, and they had earned the gift through their labor teaching at his schools. For his part, the Grandmaster probably saw them as grasping at his purse or demanding a share of their inheritance before he was dead. This was what I imagined their perspectives to be. One week ago, a full-page Sunday newspaper advertisement appeared for Grandmaster Min-Jun Park's *Richmond County Institute of Tae Kwon Do*. It read: "Ignore the pretenders. Take *real* Tae Kwon Do lessons from a *real* Grandmaster." The Grandmaster was accusing two of his boys of being *fake* martial arts instructors. Daddy was *angry*. After seeing this ad, I became afraid for Yumi. The feud seemed to be escalating. How trapped between her father and her brothers did she feel? Yumi had yet to defect to *Next Generation Tae Kwon Do* and remained teaching at the *Richmond County Institute of Martial Arts*. Still, I suspected she was doing her best to play a neutral Sweden, working to broker peace while neither openly defying her father nor condemning her brothers. If the peace took too long to come, sooner or later, both her father and brothers would demand that she choose a side unequivocally. Of course, I knew none of this for certain. All I knew was that I'd seen two provocative advertisements in two Sunday papers. The rest was speculation and fancy. Still, the stress registering on Yumi's face seemed to validate my theory.

"The main pain in life is impermanence," Yumi said.

"I didn't know that."

"I wanted to say 'goodbye' to you just in case this is my last day."

I felt a lump in my throat. "Is it *Next Generation Tae Kwon Do*?"

"The Grandmaster is coming to speak with me." She consulted the digital watch she wore under her uniform. "He's always exactly on time."

"That sounds intense," I said. *Interesting that she didn't call him "Dad" or "Father."*

Yumi smiled sadly, "I'm a disappointment to him in many ways. The fact that I'm a Democrat is just icing on the cake."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I can't see how anyone could be disappointed in you."

Grandmaster Min-Jun Park's silent, imposing figure filled the front entrance of the dojo. He stood there in a silver sharkskin suit, waiting.

Yumi gave me a final smile.

*It'll be "cool" when she's not here tomorrow.*

April 4, 1989

I practically ran back to the dojo the next day and found Chris Wolfe, the beefy blonde dude in an American flag karate uniform, alone inside Yumi's office.

"Yumi around?" I hoped she would surprise us by emerging from a shadowy alcove.

"Master Park will not be teaching here anymore," Chris said flatly. "I'm in charge."

"Is she okay?"

"Why wouldn't she be okay?" Chris looked annoyed that I was more concerned about my past teacher than delighted by the news of him being appointed the new teacher.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "It just seems like something's going on."

"You're *worried* about Yumi?"

I paraphrased C.S. Lewis: "I was up all night, crying until I had no tears left in me."

"She's fine," Chris said. "If she wasn't, it wouldn't be any of your business anyway."

"Okay. Fair enough."

Chris sat down in the swivel chair behind Yumi's old desk. "You should know, I don't play favorites like she does. You're not gonna be treated different from any other student."

"I wasn't expecting any special treatment."

"Weren't you?" Chris folded his hands in front of him on the desk. "I know you think you're better than the rest of us. I'm sure you're thinking of quitting just because Yumi is gone. And you have your

black belt and can say you're done. Hooray. But only quitters quit. If you're a real martial arts student, you study Tae Kwon Do for life. It doesn't matter who your teacher is. If you stop now, just because your favorite sensei is gone, then you were never serious in the first place, and you're gonna get very soft and very fat, very quickly."

I placed a hand over my heart. "Well, I appreciate you saying that, Chris."

I considered Chris' exhibitionist American flag uniform. I had no problem with Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Superman wearing the colors of the American flag on their costumes. Those superheroes symbolized the best of Western democratic values. They were fictional characters written and drawn by antifascist Jewish, Italian, and Latino comic book creators. Chris, meanwhile, looked like he was brandishing the American flag like an alpha male weapon against "girly men" like me. His martial arts uniform was WWF-reminiscent, "Hans and Franz" bullshit. He wasn't a real patriot or a real teacher. He was a bully and an opportunist who fell into a job he didn't deserve because he was in the right place at the right time. No doubt his classes would contain almost no meditation or general fitness. There would be aggressive attack moves, weapons study, and macho posturing aplenty. More "Cobra Kai," less "Miyagi." Yumi should be sitting at that desk, not this jackass.

Since Chris expected me react to his "pep talk," I settled on quoting one of my favorite *Doctor Who* serials, "The Enemy of the World": "People spend all their time making nice things and then other people come along and break them."

Chris scrunched his eyebrows together. "What?"

"This will be my final day. I take my leave of you, kind sir." I ended my martial arts education with Tolkien: "I will not say, 'Do not weep;' for not all tears are an evil."

"What?" asked Chris.

I gave him a Queen Elizabeth II pageant wave and walked out of the dojo.

As twilight fell, I walked the one-and-a-half miles down North Gannon Avenue towards home, passing suburban homes on my right and the Staten Island Expressway on my left. Master Yumi Park would



no longer be my teacher. I felt numb. Had I been a character in a movie, I might have fallen to my knees in slow motion, raised my fists heavenwards, tossed my head back, and screamed, “Noooooooooooo!” Or I could have assumed a stoic look as a single tear slid from my eye. Or I could have pounded a table with both fists and hissed, “She has been taken from me!” As amusing as these images might have been, they didn’t make me laugh. Nor did I entertain doing those ridiculous things. Great news. Apocalyptic news. Both left me equally unmoved. Had my emotions been sandblasted out of my heart? When had this happened? Was there any one cause, or was the process so incremental — and brought about by so many small insults and minor tragedies — that I didn’t realize I was the proverbial frog in boiling water?

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I muttered to myself.

A stop-off at Saint Luke’s Roman Catholic Church was in order. It was only a block or so out of my way. It should have occurred to me that the church would be locked during the evenings for security reasons, but the chains on the handles seemed like overkill and sent the wrong message. Normally, I would have been too shy to present myself at the adjacent rectory building, but I was just annoyed enough by the chains that I went there. Peering through an eye-level glass window set inside the oak door, I saw a brightly lit waiting room with a red carpet, dark brown wood-paneled walls, a desk, and high-school girl receptionist I knew by sight. The receptionist saw my face framed in the window, somehow avoided being startled by it, and opened the door for me to step into the foyer. “Can I help you?”

I kicked my baritone up an octave or three to appear less threatening. “Father Jack Stańczyk in?”

“He only comes in on weekends to say a mass or two. He doesn’t live here.”

“Oh.” That explained why I had so few opportunities to see him outside of mass during my year of increased church engagement. I suspected this was the case but was still disappointed. “I don’t suppose Miss O’Sullivan works here?”

“She moved to New Jersey. Would you like to speak with Monsignor Tobin?”

Years of Tobin's dreadful homilies came to mind. "Okay. I'm Damien Cavaleri."

"No, you're not." The bald, bearded Monsignor Steve Tobin appeared behind the receptionist. Off-duty and relaxing after dinner, Tobin had unbuttoned the top of his black dress shirt. Half his starched white collar hung out in midair. "That's not how you pronounce your name. You're saying 'Cavalerry?' You're butchering and Americanizing it. You should say it the way they do in Italy. Pronounce it 'Kah-val-year-ee.' Have some ethnic pride. Be a real Italian!"

I arched my right eyebrow. "Is that how we're supposed to say it?" The irony of a priest named Tobin lecturing me on proper Italian pronunciation was not lost on me. I considered his point. He was right, of course. My pronunciation was off. According to the rules I had somehow managed to learn in two years of raucous Italian classes, Mom and Dad had encouraged me to say our family name incorrectly all along. Cavalerry was at best simplified and Americanized, at worst completely inaccurate. "But the salesmen who call us can't even pronounce our name the watered-down way. They say 'Cave-a-liar-eye.' How can I hope anyone could say it correctly?"

"You're not going to let courtesy callers decide your surname for you, are you? Of course not! Say your name right. Anyway, I've seen you around sometimes. What can I do for you?"

I wasn't sure what I was going to say before I said it. "I want to be a Jesuit, maybe."

The Monsignor was not expecting me to go there. He assumed a less casual stance. "Why jump right to Jesuit? That is, if you think you might have a calling?"

"Father Jack Stańczyk. I'd like to be a similar sort of priest."

Tobin placed his hands in his pockets and chose his words carefully. "I'm glad to hear you are interested in joining the priesthood. I'm slightly concerned about your choice of role model. If you had said you wanted to follow my example, or those provided by the religious instruction teachers I've been hiring, like Miss O'Sullivan, who you mentioned, I'd feel better. She and I understand that there are two kinds of Catholics. There's the real Catholics and the buffet Catholics. Real Catholics believe in the Magisterium, the Catechism of the Catholic

Church, and the authority of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. We believe that the reforms imposed upon the Church during the Second Vatican Council were a mistake that need reversing. Fake Catholics are another story. They reject all these bedrock beliefs.”

“You’re not saying that Father Jack isn’t a real Catholic, are you?”

Tobin must have seen how stricken I looked. He held his hands up, as if I were a potential suicide threatening to jump off a ledge. “I do have reservations about the liberation theology that creeps into his homilies. Jack weaves in too much Dorothy Day and too little *Opus Dei*.”

Tobin might as well have been speaking Latin. “Fr. Jack just seems like a nice man.”

“I can offer you a sympathetic ear if you want to talk.”

Father Jack was the person I really needed, but he wasn’t there. I also needed Master Park. I needed Mitchell. I needed my small handful of cool relatives: Gabriel, the Biancas, or that interesting rich lady with the batty sister in the miniskirt. I needed someone. Tobin might be boring, confusing, and bald, but he was here. “I’d like that.”

“Excellent. Would you like some tea or some coffee while we talk?”

“Tea sounds good.”

Tobin started off to get me some tea, remembered something, and turned back to me. “Stop me if you heard this one. A mother tells her parish priest that her son is very interested in joining a seminary. She asked what would be involved in becoming a priest. He explained to her, ‘If your son wants to be a diocesan priest, he’ll have to study for eight years. If he wants to become a Franciscan, he’ll have to study for ten years. If he wants to become a Jesuit, he’ll have to study for fourteen years.’ The mother considered all this and decided, ‘He better become a Jesuit. He’s a little slow!’”

I was legitimately confused. “That would be funnier if Jesuits were stupid in real life, but they aren’t. Like, jokes have to be true to be funny . . .”

The Monsignor shrugged. “I guess you can’t please everybody. That one usually kills it.”