

The Advocate

Rain dripped from the gutters, falling mutely to the damp pavement that still steamed slightly from the unexpected summer shower. Jeremy Michaels walked with his head down—hands in his pockets, not even noticing the day’s heat had diminished with the rain. He had known it would happen. He had told Nick that Lowber would turn. Thieves weren’t trustworthy—that was so obvious it was like breathing. But Lowber was the worst. He wasn’t just a man who stole; he was a thief by identity. Therefore, his sole purpose in life was to *be* a thief, in every sense of the word. Betrayal boosted his ego. Jeremy had tried to tell Nick that, but Nick had trusted him. Nick was too honest—that was his problem.

Jeremy quickened his pace now at the thought of it all. He didn’t know why it bothered him so much. He was a thief himself; he shouldn’t care. But he knew why. Thief or not, he was at his core a man of justice. And this had been unjust. It wasn’t just selfish, or shady it was unjust through and through.

He turned a corner and ran up half a dozen steps to a back door. After a quick rap on

the door it cracked open. The man inside recognized him and opened it the rest of the way.

“Jeremy. I thought you weren’t gonna make it. The show’s about to start.” The man’s friendly white smile shone out from his black face. He was of medium build, smartly dressed, but not enough to draw attention in this neighborhood—a stark contrast to his shorter, muscular, always serious friend.

“Business good?”

His black friend smirked, leading him down a hallway, “There ain’t never been a good fight since you left, man. These guys are all amateurs. They ain’t got no heart. I still don’t understand why you had to leave...it cost Boss a lot of customers.” Jeremy’s face never broke from its somber expression.

Why had he left? Because he had become sick of taking his anger and frustration out in the middle of the ring with an audience cheering and eating popcorn. He had decided to go out in the world and actually do something about it. Sure, maybe his way was under the law. But the law is an agent of order, not justice. His thoughts returned to why he was there.

“So tell me why you dragged me over here to watch a mediocre fight on a Friday night.”

“Hold on, hold on,” his friend said in a dramatic fashion, holding his hands out to stop Jeremy, “I said there ain’t been a good fight since you left...until tonight. You think I would drag you over here for anything less than the best?”

“Who is it?” His friend flashed his smile again.

“Richter.”

“Richter?” His friend nodded. “You got Tripp Richter in your ring tonight?” Jeremy asked again incredulously. His friend was beaming smugly.

“Well, it ain’t exactly my ring, but yes. He’s here for the expo. I told ya—nothing but the best for you, my friend.”

“Who’s he fighting?”

“Wait and see.”

“Dallas, who’s he fighting?” Jeremy persisted seriously.

“Jeremy, man, I ain’t gonna tell you. Alls I’ll say is, I had my doubts...but when it was offered ten to one, and guaranteed a three quarter fill...Boss took it, and I took interest. Wanna know how many we’re seatin’ tonight?” He turned again to Jeremy with that huge grin. Jeremy studied his face, then accommodated.

“How many?”

“Overfill, baby! We had to bring in extra chairs to fill in all over the place, and believe me we did. These people don’t mind though, and Boss certainly don’t mind. This deal’s making him a lot of money.” They were walking again.

“But what kinda prize you guys giving up for Richter?”

“Not a cent.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m serious! I didn’t believe it neither. Both fighters agreed to it before the fight. In fact it was their only condition.”

“Who would Richter take on for zero cash in this part of town?”

“All I can say is, this ain’t an ordinary fight, Jeremy. That’s why you’re here,” his tone had turned somber. Jeremy was about to ask him what he meant but they passed through into the arena room and the noise of the gathered crowd was too loud. It wasn’t a huge auditorium, but large enough to seat a little over a thousand. Jeremy followed Dallas down to the front row where their seats were reserved. He glanced over the faces in the crowd absent mindedly, vaguely wondering who they were and what had led them here. How many of them actually knew what went on in the streets of this city? How many actually cared?

They reached their seats and Dallas turned to him for conversation, breaking through his melancholy thoughts. The noise was lowering as people settled into their seats.

“You still out fighting crime like a superhero?” Jeremy knew him well enough to hear past the flippant tone and understand the sincerity of the question.

“Something like that.” Jeremy was staring at the ring directly in front of them. Dallas was watching him, and his tone and manner changed.

“Listen, Jeremy, I think it’s great what you do...don’t let a punk like Lowber kill it for you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Jeremy’s face was firm. Dallas shrugged.

“Alright. I got no problem with that.” Dallas straightened his coat jacket and settled down in his chair, relieved of his consolatory duties.

Presently things started rolling. The ref came out soon, followed by Richter and his entourage. The crowd was on its feet, roaring with enthusiasm as the big time star entered their small time auditorium. Jeremy watched his movements closely. He had never fought Richter, although he had wanted to. For the most part, the man stuck to MMA, but Jeremy knew he was well trained beyond that.

Jeremy shifted in his chair, his pride asking him all the old questions. Why hadn’t he pursued fighting? He could have risen to the top. He was a first class fighter, and that wasn’t just his pride: it was a fact. But Jeremy had never wanted the fame. Although he could have taken a fighter like Richter, he had never entered those arenas. He reminded himself of his decision to live his life and not fight pretend battles on a lit platform. The real war was raging outside these walls, and he was enlisted. Slowly, he leaned back in his chair again. Then the second fighter came out. Dallas turned to watch his face.

At first Jeremy couldn't pick out the one from among the five. There was a boy, an old man, three men—those were security—and a...Jeremy's face turned to shock as the girl stepped under the ropes and into the ring. This was a joke. He got a sinking feeling in his stomach. Then he noticed Dallas watching him.

"Alright, I give up...what is this?" Dallas didn't laugh.

"This is for real." He had lost his easy-going, carefree front.

"I'm in no mood to play games with you," Jeremy spoke angrily.

"Listen, I don't always agree with the boss, but that's not my place." Jeremy stood up to leave.

"Michaels!" He never called him that, not anymore. Jeremy slowly sat back down, remembering who Dallas was. He'd let him explain.

"There's something going on here, and I don't mean my perv boss setting up a fight between a little girl and an all star fighter just to make big bucks. Why would Richter agree to this when all it could mean is bad press and no prize?"

"How should I know that?" Jeremy asked testily.

"And what kind of girl would step in the ring with Richter?"

"An idiot...blinded by pride...or asking for a beating."

“I really don’t think she’s an idiot... Look, there’s been some real funny things going on around here, and you’re the only one I know who could get to the bottom of it.”

Jeremy looked at the girl getting ready for the fight. She had light brown hair cut off abruptly just below her ears. She looked fit, strong, and remarkably calm. She was leaning against the corner with her eyes on the floor as her trainer, the older man Jeremy had seen earlier, spoke to her quietly. Jeremy pulled out his cell phone, and began texting.

“Who is she?”

“I ain’t never heard of her before.”

“She’s not a fighter?”

“She doesn’t compete anyway.” Dallas said meaningfully. Jeremy looked over at him.

“Registered at a gym?” Dallas shook his head.

“Why’d your boss take her?”

“Apparently she did a demo for him... I wasn’t there. But I saw him when he got back,” Dallas raised his eyebrows.

“He was impressed?”

Dallas raised his eyebrows. Jeremy looked back at the girl. She had turned around and was facing her opponent—adjusting her sparring, grip gloves while keeping a steady gaze.

“How old is she?”

“Barely twenty, I think.” The rules were given and the opponents called to shake hands.

“It’s a street fight,” Jeremy muttered in surprise.

“Anything goes as long as it’s in the ring.”

“It’s just an expo fight? How long?” He was sitting forward in his chair.

“Ten rounds, about two minutes each. Thirty second breaks.”

“Short and deadly.” Jeremy knew it didn’t take long in a fight like this.

The bell rang and the first round started.

The opponents circled each other for the first few seconds, and then Richter came in with a fierce attack. Jeremy noted that was unlike him. Richter was known for his patience in drawing his opponents out. But Jeremy’s main focus was on the girl. She was quick and well trained. Both were using a hybrid of fighting styles, anything to hurt their opponent.

Neither Jeremy nor Dallas spoke, both were intensely focused on the fight in front of them. The crowd around them was roaring with excitement. Jeremy had to work to restrain his anger and watch objectively. His mind was focused, willing her to defend herself, and she was. The first round ended, and both returned to their corners for a quick break. Jeremy breathed out and leaned back momentarily. She had done amazingly well. He was impressed by her strength, agility, and experience. Richter’s weight and strength did not seem to be working much in

his advantage, although Jeremy guessed they would win out in the long run. He received a text back and looked at his phone.

“He wants a picture, and what’d you say her name was?”

Dallas pulled out a paper from his pocket.

“Benaiah Montego.”

“What is that?”

“Beats me...sounds like a vacation resort in the Bahamas.”

Jeremy looked at him sternly.

“He could kill her out there, Dallas.”

“She looks like she’s doing a pretty good job to me.” The second round had just started with Benaiah pulling a quick attack on Richter. He was taken aback and momentarily driven back toward his corner. The crowd went wild.

Jeremy continued to watch her carefully over the next few rounds as he waited for information. She stayed with him move for move, blow for blow for the next four rounds. Every time the bell sounded a new round Jeremy held his breath, not wanting to see her beaten to a pulp. It was physically impossible for her to go the whole way with him. Every block and use of strength was twice as hard for her then him, and Jeremy was beginning to see signs of it in her movements. She was tiring. He gritted his teeth. The weaker she got, the more there was opportunity for the larger damaging blows to come in.

His phone started buzzing and he moved outside in order to hear.

“Nick. What did you find...well the name might not be real. You didn’t get any hits on the face?” Jeremy paused as he listened. “I don’t know who this girl is, but she’s taking hit for hit with Tripp Richter...she’s incredible, Nick...what? Lowber’s here?” Jeremy’s face hardened. “That much...on Richter? Yeah...I’m about to get back in there. No, I won’t do anything stupid...alright.” He hung up the phone and stood stock still, trying to calm himself down. Lowber was the financial backer for Tripp Richter. Lowber didn’t put his money anywhere he might lose it. He didn’t even put it anywhere it would make an honest interest. Everything was grab, steal, and triple. What was going on here that would attract him?

Jeremy heard a roar from the crowd and was reminded he was missing the fight. He hurried back in and made his way to Dallas’ side.

“What’d I miss?”

“Two rounds,” Dallas was sitting forward with his hands folded, unusually tense. “Richter’s been taking her down slow. He got her pretty bad this last round.”

Jeremy looked at Benaiah. She was leaning on the corner with her trainer, her muscles tense, shining with sweat under the bright lights. Her face couldn’t hide a grimace of pain. Jeremy studied the lines of her body, his expert eyes looking for what had been injured.

Ribcage...head blows. He clenched his fists. She was breathing heavy. But his eyes wandered over to Richter and he was pleased to see fatigue on that end too.

“She still working him?”

“Like a champ!” Dallas smiled proudly.

The bell rang and the round started again. By the time it was over she was wheezing. He couldn’t take it anymore.

“Where you going?” Dallas asked in vain as he left his seat. Dallas watched as he made his way over to the girl’s corner. Security stepped forward, but Jeremy just flashed the ID he’d lifted off his friend. They let him through.

“Hey!” Jeremy called out to the old man. He turned in surprise. “Get her out of there!” Jeremy whispered fiercely.

“Excuse me? Who are you, sir?”

“I work at the gym,” Jeremy lied, “and if you’re the trainer you should be, you’ll pull her out now!”

“I can’t do that.”

“She can’t take him! Pull her before she gets seriously hurt!” The girl Benaiah looked at him from where she sat, taking water from the boy.

“I did not choose this fight for her,” the trainer said simply. Jeremy turned to her.

“Swallow your pride and get out of that ring. Earn your respect somewhere else.”

Seconds were ticking away.

“I’m not leaving this ring,” she said faintly. Her eyes were determined. Jeremy was taken aback by their quiet intensity. Those weren’t the eyes of a swaggering up-and-coming who over calculated her skill. She wasn’t trying to prove anything. He couldn’t say anything. The trainer leaned forward and whispered something in her ear. She closed her eyes and nodded. The bell rang and started round eight. Jeremy crossed his arms tensely. Round eight didn’t treat her well.

“Hang in there, Benaiah,” the old man spoke softly, “two more rounds, okay? You can’t give up. This is not about you. You finish...and you do as much damage as you can.”

“No, no. He has to hit the mat!” she spoke in a frustrated voice. The trainer studied her face.

“Then get him there. What are you waiting for? Did you come this far just to fail? Think carefully, Benaiah. Think about who he is...your pain will pass...”

Benaiah grabbed the old man’s hand firmly and then turned again to face her opponent. Jeremy put a fist over his mouth, sensing the inward battle she was fighting in order to endure. She went out and gave it her all, taking hit after hit and fighting through the pain, slowly wearing him down as well. And then it came, and Jeremy was impressed by her accurate assessment of her opponent’s weaknesses. All it took was the right timing to get in the right hit.

Dominoes. One, two, three, hit, kick. Richter fell to the mat, knocked unconscious.

Time stood still. Jeremy jerked unintentionally. The room held its breath. The ref came forward in slow motion as the girl Benaiah swayed in fatigue. It was called.

The room erupted like an exploding volcano—there was too much pressure for a safe release. Dallas leaped up from where he sat in his seat, punching the air in exaltation for this girl he had become strangely attached to. Benaiah staggered over and out of the ring. Jeremy ran forward instinctively to help her trainer support her. A motion caught his eye, and he looked up to see Lowber rising angrily from his seat and signaling his men. Jeremy ducked his head. Then the trainer was speaking to him.

“Get her to the locker room!” Jeremy didn’t have time to ask questions as the old man slipped into the crowd. Around them, security did their best to hold the crowd back. What would Lowber do? He could not be happy. Benaiah didn’t say a word. They reached the door and he pushed her through, firmly closing and bolting it behind them. The girl made it to a bench and sat down gingerly with the help of the boy. looked at them.

“Who are you?”

She looked up at him, “Thank you for your help.”

“What was that? Where’d he go?”

“He went for the car.”

“Why?”

“It’s not safe for her,” the boy said softly. A noise sounded at the back door. Benaiah stood.

“PJ, run!” The boy split for the other door, unlocked it and shot out. Jeremy backed up quickly so he was hidden from sight by the lockers just as three men in black came running in. Jeremy popped out from behind them, taking them by surprise. He took them down easily enough. That was his job, that was what he was used to, and he was the best. Benaiah stumbled back in surprise.

“Who were they?” She didn’t answer his question. “Will there be more? You can’t wait in here for the old man,” he said decidedly, taking her arm and leading her toward the door. She resisted. “We’ll find him outside.” She complied. Jeremy proceeded to lead her outside through a back route. They stepped into the dark night. It was eerily quiet after the mayhem inside. A soft breeze shuffled the leaves on the pavement. He handed her a phone as they stayed in the shadows.

She took it silently and dialed a number. Waiting. Jeremy looked left and right, trying to discern movement.

“He’s not answering,” she said.

“Who’s after you? Are they associated with Lowber?”

“How do you know Lowber?” she asked sharply. That was all he needed to hear. He grabbed her arm again.

“Come on.”

“I can’t leave. I don’t know where Simpson is.”

“We can meet up with him...” She pulled away, her eyes firm and cold. He looked at her. “If you’re on Lowber’s enemy list, you need to get off these premises. He is no one to wait around for.” She was studying his eyes. She made a decision and moved forward.

He led her to a blue truck and helped her in, then ran around to the driver’s seat and sped out of the parking lot. They weren’t tailed, but Jeremy still took all the precautions. Eventually the truck turned into a quiet community with small houses and large trees. It was the sort of neighborhood that enjoyed solitude. Jeremy pulled into the driveway of a small dark house partly covered by several large, leafy trees.

He helped her down from the raised truck seat. She winced, even at the slightest movement. They made it slowly through the front door and then into the bathroom. She sat on the counter and leaned back against the mirror, shutting her eyes. She heard him moving around the room.

“I heard your name...but I forgot what it was.”

“Benaiah.”

“I’m Jeremy.” He gently began to examine her face. “So Benaiah, what is it that you do when you’re not subjecting yourself to a good beating?”

She paused before answering. “I work at a Law Firm. I’m studying to be a Human Rights Attorney...you’re a fighter...what else do you do?”

“That *is* what I do.”

“Professional?”

“Well, not in the ring,” he glanced at her for a moment, and then decided to finish. “I guess some people might call me a thug.”

“Some people like the police?” she asked in surprise.

“Yeah. Some people like them.”

“And what would the others call you?”

He didn’t answer.

“How are you connected to Lowber?” he asked instead.

“Why are you helping me?”

“There are a few things in this world that I hate, and one of them is injustice.”

“You’re a thug.”

“By the laws of this society, maybe,” his eyes grew hard, “but justice means a lot more than rules and regulations. There are a lot of people out there who use the law to take advantage of others. I’m not claiming to be a good person...I just try to do what’s right.” He was cleaning her hands. She was thoughtful.

“I’m sorry I called you a thug.”

“That’s what I called myself.” Pause.

“How are you connected to Lowber?” he repeated his question, this time more gently. She looked hesitant.

“I’m not. I beat his fighter.”

“Richter’s not his.”

“He booked him for this fight.”

“Against...you?” He wanted to understand. Her eyes misted over and she looked scared. Jeremy’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I can help you...I wanna help you. You just have to trust me.” She looked down for a moment.

“I’m an Advocate.” He waited for her to continue. “I fight for people.”

“But you didn’t win anything. How did taking that beating help anybody?”

“There is more to this world than what you can see or touch,” she replied quickly.

“What do you mean?”

“About a year and a half ago I had a dream. I watched a teenage girl get brutally mugged in an alley—every night for a week. The next day I slipped down an alley and saw that same man hitting a girl. She was already unconscious; by the time I got there he was kicking her on the ground. I didn’t even think. I just attacked him. I’d been taking kick-boxing classes for the exercise. He was stronger than me and not afraid of someone fighting back. But I was stubborn. I got him off balance with a lucky hit and his head hit a dumpster. He was knocked out. As soon as he was out she got up.”

“And you had a new career,” he finished for her.

“No, you don’t understand. She hopped right up. All she had were a few bruises. There was blood on the pavement, but her lip and forehead had healed.”

“Maybe you saw wrong.”

“I saw exactly where he hit her and how hard... somehow, when I fight I have the ability to change circumstances.” She was waiting for him to respond. “You think I’m crazy.”

“I don’t know what to think—” A sharp knock on the door interrupted him. They both started. He raised a hand for her to stay put and crept quietly to the door. Benaiah heard a familiar voice.

“Where is she?” Then his face appeared in the doorway.

“Simpson!”

“You did it!” Simpson’s voice was emotional. Jeremy leaned in the doorframe. Simpson ignored him. “The money’s all back. It was confirmed fifteen minutes ago.” Benaiah grasped Simpson’s shirt in one hand and closed her eyes in relief. “You did it, Beni. You saved them!” A tear slipped out her left eye.

“Come on, kid. Let’s get you home.”

“Your left hook is weak. Every decent fighter is going to exploit it.”

“So train me better.”

