

Chapter 4

Ryan's flight lands at LAX just after 5 PM, giving him the distinct pleasure of sitting in bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic on the 405. *Great*, he thinks, settling into the back of the town car Philip Cox has sent for him. *At least I'm getting the full LA experience.* It hasn't taken him long to remember why he hesitated to come back in the first place.

This is Ryan's second time in Los Angeles. The first was with Jake years ago, at the advent of the league, to promote the Blood Games. Ryan insisted on coming three days early to take in the sights and sounds. Jake ended up avoiding the nightlife and sticking to the hotel room most nights; looking back, Ryan wishes he'd joined him.

"Staying long?" the driver asks politely.

"Hope not," Ryan mutters.

The training center is nestled up in the Hollywood Hills, along narrow winding roads that make Ryan nauseous. He eventually stops trying to maintain his bearings and closes his eyes. He feels claustrophobic, unsure of his surroundings. Soon, mercifully, the narrow roads open up to a sprawling facility spanning acres of space. Ryan wonders how much Philip Cox paid to construct the lavish campus, but he doubts he'd believe the figure if someone told him.

A security guard in a bright red jacket is waiting for him at the front entrance. Ryan sits in the lobby, fidgeting in the too-soft armchair, waiting like a child sent to the principal's office. Ryan hates waiting. Fortunately the wait is not long, as within minutes Philip Cox is striding through the lobby towards him.

Cox is in his mid-seventies, but looks to be in his fifties thanks to decades of care from the best doctors money can buy. His expensive suit is almost as flashy as the wide smile he greets Ryan with. Ryan knows little about the man, except that he was once a Hollywood studio bigwig who purchased his own franchise in the Blood Games some years ago.

“Ryan Eastwood!” Cox booms. “You look well, my good man.” Ryan extends his hand but quickly realizes Philip Cox is a hugger, awkwardly accepting the embrace.

“Honored to meet you,” Ryan mumbles as they break apart.

“Please, I’m the one who should be honored,” Cox dismisses. “You’re *the* Ryan Eastwood! The Butcher of the Backwoods!”

Ryan balks; it’s been a long time since he’s heard that nickname. He could have lived his whole life without ever hearing it again and been perfectly okay with it. If Cox notices the *faux pas*, he doesn’t let on, continuing without breaking stride.

“You must be exhausted from your travels. Hungry?”

“No, thank you,” says Ryan, even though he is. He doesn’t want to spend any more time here than necessary.

“Straight to business, then,” Cox chuckles. “I like that.” He leads the way forward, beckoning Ryan into the annals of the building.

As they traverse the campus, Cox points out some of the features of the facility in passing. “Through there is the main gymnasium; you’ll see that tomorrow for Media Day. Here are the pools if you feel like taking a dip. Back that way is the cafeteria. The video room is through here, the armory is down those stairs, and...ah, here we are.”

Cox’s office is an executive suite lined with bookshelves and plaques, with a beautiful windowed view of the outer courtyard. Ryan finds the space gaudy and ostentatious, but he does not admit this out loud. Instead, he settles into a chair opposite Cox’s desk, already uneasy.

“So,” says Cox. “I suppose you’re wondering why I summoned you out here on such short notice. I didn’t elaborate much in my message...I believe I mentioned that I have a job opportunity for you?”

“That’s right,” Ryan says. “And I’ll be honest Mr. Cox, I would have said no right away if not for the very generous money you’re offering. I’m here out of courtesy more than anything.”

Cox smiles. “I had to offer you a ridiculous amount to get your attention. And don’t worry, I intend to pay every cent. When I found out that the most decorated fighter in the history of the Blood Games was living in some small town struggling to make ends meet, I was appalled! You’ve earned all the fame and fortune in the world with what you’ve accomplished.”

“My sponsor sure doesn’t think so,” Ryan says bitterly. “They dropped me earlier this year.”

“Ah yes, I heard something about that,” Cox muses.

“You talked to my sponsor?”

“Didn’t need to. You’ve been in the news quite a bit lately. Seems that modern pundits don’t think you were all that great of a player after all.”

“They said *what?!?*” Ryan snaps angrily, his pride wounded. “How can they think that? I had the most wins of anyone, the most kills—”

“Against softer competition, they say.”

“Did they even watch my matches?!” Ryan demands. “What the hell do they know?”

“I agree with you completely, my boy!” Cox laughs, throwing up his hands. “That’s why I called you in the first place: to let you prove them wrong!”

Ryan's eyes narrow. "I'm not a fighter anymore. I'm done with the Blood Games."

"You misunderstand me," says Cox. "I don't know if you've heard, but we lost our last battle pretty badly to the Washington Herons."

"Sorry to hear that."

"I'm rebuilding the organization from top to bottom. Fighters, coaches, trainers, everybody. We've been a losing franchise for too long. The culture has to change."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Everything, my boy!" Cox beams, eyes gleaming with excitement. "Few people have the ability to see beyond the statistics and the kill counts. You need more than raw numbers to be a successful fighter in these Games. There's some quality that can't be quantified, something innate that can't be coached. Incredibly rare, and even rarer to find. But I think you know what it is."

Ryan knows what Cox is getting at. He's looking for killer instinct, that indescribable superlative that determines whether a man lives or dies. Ryan has seen it firsthand. He's witnessed many capable fighters go down before their time because they lacked it. He's also severely underestimated some of his own teammates who could reach

that next level under threat of death. But he also knows that it's as elusive to recognize it as to define.

"I'm no better at finding it than anyone else," Ryan answers honestly. "The only way to know if someone has it is by putting them in that situation and seeing what they do."

"But you've assembled some remarkable teams from scraps," urges Cox. "When you and your brother ruled the league, you had a knack for finding those diamonds in the rough."

The mention of Jake brings discomfort to Ryan, because he knows that Jake was the true leader of those squads, not Ryan. Jake knew how to bring the best out of people. Jake could assess someone's true worth before they knew it themselves. Whatever Cox is looking for, Jake is the man he should be after, and Jake won't be any help from the grave.

"I need a staff that really knows players," Cox continues. "The Blood Games may have changed, but the players have not. You know how to find things that others can't. And I want you to whip these players into fighting shape."

"So what? You want me to be a trainer?"

"I want you to be the head coach of the Los Angeles Warriors," Cox says with a wry grin.

Ryan is taken aback by this. “I’ve never coached before.”

“So what?” Cox shrugs. “You survived the sport for nearly a decade. That alone makes you qualified. There isn’t a soul alive that I would trust to run this team more than you.”

“You don’t even know me,” Ryan frowns. “How can you trust me?”

“*Experience*,” Cox smiles. “It’s rare in the Blood Games, but you have it. You’ll be able to cut through the red tape and really relate to these players. I don’t want another bureaucrat. I want you.”

Ryan understands Cox’s pitch now. He sees Ryan as some kind of athlete-whisperer, assuming he’ll know how to get the best out of his men. But Ryan’s not so sure he can do that. He has been away from the Blood Games for a while now; all the intricacies of the sport may be lost on him. Besides, relating to players has never been his strong suit. The only way he was ever able to lead was by example, and being relegated to the sidelines wouldn’t allow him to do that.

But before he can say as much, another man in a red employees’ jacket pokes his head in the door. “Mr. Cox,” the man says, out of breath, “the Daredevils match is about to start.”

“Oh!” Cox exclaims, looking alarmed. “Thank you, Eddie.”

Cox reaches for a remote on his desk and hits a button. The shades on the windows draw shut, as a large flat screen descends from the ceiling, taking up most of the far wall.

“Have you ever watched the Daredevils play, Ryan?” Cox asks as he swivels his chair to face the television screen.

“I haven’t watched *anyone* play in nearly a decade.”

“These guys are incredible,” Cox swoons, turning the channel to ESPN. “Best team I’ve seen in my life, hands down. You of all people should appreciate this.”

A deathmatch is about to begin. Ryan’s eyebrows shoot up at the size of the crowds packed into the stands around a stadium. A massive fighting arena sits at the center of the building, but it’s nothing like the battlefields Ryan remembers. It looks more like an over-sized paintball course, with ramps, cover areas, bunkers, and trenches filling the space.

“That seems dangerous,” Ryan remarks as the camera pans over the thousands of raving fans. He has never heard of an indoor deathmatch before. “What if a stray bullet enters the stands?”

“That’s part of the fun, isn’t it?” Cox laughs. “Like sitting track-side at a NASCAR race. Yeah, there’s a death every once in a while, but you get what you pay for.” Ryan isn’t sure what disturbs him more:

fans literally dying to watch a live fight, or Cox's apparent apathy towards it.

"Ah, here they come!" Cox exclaims, giddy as a schoolboy, as a group of young men exits the locker room and walks out onto the sidelines. Twelve fighters clad in combat apparel marching in unison through the tunnel as smoke and lasers herald their arrival. The fighters are larger than Ryan remembers from his day, looking more like first-rate linebackers with their bulky tones and towering statures. Each one wears a purple-and-gold jersey over their armor, emblazoned with a grinning devil on its chest. Ryan immediately recognizes it from the grocery store mere days earlier.

"Listen to 'em," Cox sighs as the crowd chants in unison: *Hotshot! Hotshot! Hotshot!*

"What are they saying?" Ryan asks, straining to hear.

"You don't know Jason Sestero?" Cox gasps. "Most talented fighter I've ever seen...present company excluded, of course. Calls himself 'Hotshot'."

Another graphic pops up to identify Jason, the captain of the Daredevils. The camera cuts to him: a tall, handsome, 25-year-old All-American who looks like he can rip a grown man in half. He swaggers

ahead of the pack, smiling for the crowd, feeding off of their chants. Ryan is already intimidated by him.

From the other end of the stadium emerges the green-and-yellow team, which the broadcast informs Ryan is the Dallas Stallions. The cheering is noticeably quieter for their entrance – there seem to be far more purple and gold jerseys in the crowd. These men look more like the fighters Ryan is accustomed to seeing: scrappy and fit young men, sure, but nothing like the athletic freaks of nature on the opposite side of the arena.

Ryan watches as each of the twelve fighters on either side is handed a placard by a fight official. Each of them then splits off to walk along the perimeter of the battlefield on either side. “What are they doing?” Ryan asks. “Why are they splitting apart?”

“New league policy,” Cox explains as the fighters get into position at their assigned spots. “Random points of entry for every player. Makes things way more exciting, don’t you think?”

Ryan is horrified. “Exciting?” he asks. “That’s just asking for unnecessary violence.”

“That’s the idea,” Cox shrugs. “The league doesn’t like stalemates. And look what it’s done for the sport!” The camera pans to the crowd once again, who are working themselves up to a fever pitch

as the fighters prepare for the starting gun. A timer overlay appears on the screen, preparing to count down from 60:00. As the Daredevils and the Stallions lower into runners' stances, Ryan realizes something else that seems off.

“Where are their weapons?” he wonders aloud, just as a loud *bang* echoes through the stadium and all twenty-four fighters sprint onto the battlefield.

The broadcast perspective switches between multiple drones hovering over the action. Ryan can already tell how outmatched the Stallions are in the first fifteen seconds of action. The Daredevils are stronger, faster, and more confident. Ryan watches as a Daredevil and a Stallion both dive into a bunker, running towards a shiny object lying on the ground: a rifle. Ryan realizes that weapons are scattered around the arena, waiting to be collected by the first person to arrive. And all throughout the battlefield, fighters are clamoring to be the first to get their hands on one.

One drone follows Hotshot exclusively, the quickest of the bunch. Hotshot makes a sudden swerve off his initial line, bee-lining directly at a Stallion who has appeared to his left. The Stallion is headed for a rifle that's leaned up against a wall just a few yards away.

But Hotshot isn't interested in the weapon. He levels the Stallion with a hard shoulder to the chest, and in one clean motion he grabs the enemy fighter's head and snaps his neck like a twig. The crowd roars in approval as the score indicates 1-0 Daredevils, just twenty seconds into the match.

The same story seems to be replaying itself all around the battlefield. The Daredevils are strong enough to win hand-to-hand combat with any one of the Stallions, and they seem far less concerned with obtaining a gun than the Stallions do. Ryan watches as three more Stallions are killed before a single bullet is fired; necks are snapped, skulls are stomped in, throats are throttled. Then, once the deed is done, the Daredevils simply pick up the weapons their counterparts were trying to reach and resume the hunt.

By 58:00 the score is 5-1 Daredevils. The sole death on the Daredevils' side came courtesy of Hotshot, who'd hurled a grenade at two nearby fighters and obliterated both of them, one of which happened to be his teammate. The surviving Stallions are outnumbered nearly 2 to 1 and are far too spread out to coordinate a battle plan. They retreat into whatever bunkers or hidey-holes they can reach.

Ratatatat! Before Ryan even registers what's happened, Hotshot raises his rifle and fires a quick succession of bullets at two retreating

Stallions. He nails them both in the back, killing them instantly. A twenty-yard shot at minimum with no scope and he's made it look easy. The crowd again voices their approval as the score becomes 7-1.

"This is where the fun begins," Cox proclaims, but Ryan doesn't really see the fun in an 11-on-5 slaughter. The action settles as the remaining Stallions hole themselves in and the Daredevils group up to discuss strategy. They don't even bother to take cover, standing right out in the open.

"Why don't they just wait out the clock?" Ryan asks. "No way the Stallions make a move here."

"That's not Hotshot's way," shrugs Cox. "He doesn't allow survivors. The Daredevils have never allowed an enemy fighter to walk out alive."

That makes no sense to Ryan. *Why bother endangering your own fighters for pride?* Never in his career has he heard of such a tactic. Surrender is not allowed in the Blood Games, of course, but this seems excessive, even for an already-bloody sport. He watches in shock as Hotshot directs his team to split up in pairs to hunt down survivors. They fan out across the expanse, weapons scanning for movement.

“This shouldn’t take long,” Cox muses. “Usually the score’s a little closer and the enemy can put up a fight. But the result is always the same.”

Hidden cameras in the bunkers and trenches reveal the scattered Stallions awaiting their deaths, quivering with fear, guns valiantly held forward to mount a defense. Ryan aches for these young men, knowing they’re trapped and about to be hunted down. The Daredevils spread a wide net, encircling the arena, preventing any Stallion from keeping all the action in front of them. It’s all over but the crying.

The first three kills are brutal and quick. Two of the Stallions manage to get shots off before meeting their end; the third never sees the bullet that takes his life from behind. Only two Stallions remain, huddled together in a bunker with decent fortifications. The Daredevils quickly pinpoint their location and surround the bunker, shouting instructions at one another, devising the best way to finish the job.

Ryan has seen stalemates like this before. He’s been way ahead in a match, only one or two enemies remaining, but heavily fortified in order to ensure that an assault on their position would likely result in death for all involved. He assumes this will be the end of the match, as no Daredevil would dare risk their life just to secure needless kills before time runs out.

But Ryan is wrong. Hotshot points at one of his teammates and barks an order. The fighter in question hesitates only a moment before complying. He procures a grenade from his belt and, holding his pistol in the other hand, charges into the bunker. The hidden camera inside captures the action: the Daredevil is sprayed in the face as soon as he comes into view, but his momentum carries his body into the main area, dropping the grenade.

The Stallions realize what's happened and make a run for it. One of them is consumed by the blast. The other is lifted off his feet and out of the bunker, where he is shot down by the awaiting Daredevils before he even lands.

12-2 Daredevils. 46:50 left on the clock. Game over.

“Beautiful sacrifice play!” Cox giggles with glee as the crowd roars with delight. “Only Hotshot would be brilliant enough to draw something like that up.”

“He just threw away a teammate for no reason!” an appalled Ryan shouts at the screen. “He didn’t need to do that! Three people just died, and for what?”

“Oh, what are you so worked up about?” Cox asks playfully. “It’s the Blood Games. It’s bloody, it’s cruel. That’s the point.”

Ryan seethes silently in his chair as Hotshot and the remaining Daredevils celebrate their win. He has never seen a fighter so uncaring about his teammates' well-being. Rule number one of the sport has always been to watch each others' backs, no matter what. To not only disregard your team's safety, but to actively throw it away for mere style points? It fills Ryan with righteous anger.

Cox senses Ryan's agitation and flips off the television. "If it's any consolation," he says, "it's pretty rare for things to come to that. Usually it's a straightforward hunt, man to man."

That doesn't make Ryan feel any better about the situation. He stewes silently in his chair, planning his escape. He can't wait to get the hell out of this city and never look back. Cox must sense this, because he changes course abruptly.

"Anyway, here is your proposed contract," he says, sliding a sheet of paper across the desk towards Ryan. "One season of your time is all I ask. I think your insight could really help our new fighters develop into proper killing machines."

Ryan picks up the contract and glosses over it, not really taking in any of the words. He doesn't need to read the fine-print to know what his answer will be. "I appreciate your offer, Mr. Cox, but I have to

decline,” he says as politely as possible. “I want no part in this team you’re building.”

“I completely understand,” says Cox. “But do me a favor since I’m paying your way. Come back tomorrow and speak with some of the prospects I’ve invited to our Media Day. They would love to meet you.”

“I don’t want anything to do with them,” Ryan says, adamant.

“These are the men that will be marching into battle in a few short months!” Cox implores him. “You’ve just seen what’ll happen to them if they aren’t ready. Your guidance could save their lives one day.”

Ryan ponders this. For all of the anger he feels towards Hotshot in this moment, he’s nearly forgotten the anguish of the trembling men awaiting their inevitable demise. He does not like pointless suffering. He also noticed plenty of subtle mistakes in the Stallions’ strategy, things that he would have done differently in their shoes. Cox is right: he does have insight that could have saved their lives if he’d been part of their coaching staff.

“I’ll stay for one day,” he finally decides. “And not for you...for your fighters.”

Cox grins widely, as though he already knew what Ryan’s decision would be. “They’ll be thrilled.”