

## Chapter Nine

### LEARNING THE HARD WAY

The newspaper article about the boxing club had stirred up a great deal of interest in the neighborhood. Saturday morning practices that spring became a spectator sport and Hanson allowed it to happen. It was a way of bringing the community together, much as he had forged a team from the group of boys that had seemed so independent at first.

Now there was a set of bleachers for the adults to sit and watch, and Mr. Wayne had even produced a coffee pot to keep them happy. Cheering wasn't discouraged during sparing matches but betting was forbidden. It gave Brian a feeling of pride when he heard the men calling out to them as they slugged away in combat.

But the article brought about other interest as well. One Saturday morning Brian and Sean arrived for the practice and there was a blue car parked in the lot out front. Brian's heart skipped a beat and he almost turned to run.

"What's the matter?" Sean asked.

"That cop is here...," Brian said. "Let's go around back."

How could he explain to Sean what this man meant? He should have said something months ago, but the words had failed him. Now Pullman was inside waiting for whatever reason and Brian didn't want to talk to him. Whatever the man said would be lies, lies intended to get him in closer, lies so that he could...

"There is this cop," Brian began as they reached the back of the building. "Gabe was hustling him, but then this guy is nothing but a big perv himself and he kept fucking with Gabe to get what he wanted. I never met him before but I saw him outside the funeral and he was looking at me. I'm scared of him, Sean. I'm scared that he will try and get to me the same way he did to Gabe. Somehow he knows things about me and I don't know what to do about him."

"Fucker," Sean said. "Look, we're all your friends here, no one can touch you. Anything weird happens I'll tell Hanson what this guy is really all about and he'll get the ax."

"I don't want to talk to him," Brian said.

"You just go in the locker room, no one is allowed in there but the boxers. Change into your stuff and get busy, just ignore him and maybe he will leave. If he doesn't I'll tell Mr. Wayne he's bothering us, that ought to do it."

"Don't get yourself in this mess, Sean, I mean that. The guy is crazy. A perverted cop is just plain sick. I don't even want him to know your name."

"It's too late for that, we were in the newspaper. But I'll protect you, don't you worry about that. Come on, let's get inside," Sean said.

The door at the back opened quietly and Brian immediately saw Pullman standing across the room with Hanson. The men were conversing about God knows what so Brian made a straight line for the locker room door with Sean at his heels.

"Fuck, what is this all about? I didn't think he'd ever come here," Brian said. He opened his locker and started to change with Sean right beside him.

"Brian?" Hanson said as he came through the door. "Hey, thought I saw you come in. I got a guy out here that wants to meet you and Sean. He saw you in the paper...what's the matter?"

Brian was pale and shaking now. He quickly sat on the bench beside his locker and Sean stood in front of him.

"He won't talk to the guy, Coach," Sean said. "The man's a cop and we don't talk to cops."

"That's ridiculous, Sean. Brian...look at me. What's the matter boy?" Hanson sat down on the bench and put his arm on Brian's shoulder. "Tell me what this is all about."

"I...I can't tell you. He's a bad man, that's all I can say," Brian said.

"Has he done anything to you?" Hanson asked.

"Not me, but...I can't talk about it."

"I don't understand you boys some times. You don't have to speak to him if you don't want. But you both need to come and see me after practice, ok? The man is just a cop, guys...he isn't here to threaten you."

"Then you don't know him very well," Sean said.

Hanson left shaking his head and returned to the boxing arena, the door clicking shut behind him.

"I can't go out there," Brian said.

"We have to," Sean said. "Hanson will get rid of him."

"And that will just make Pullman angry, he's never gonna stop trying to get to me."

But when they finally walked out into the practice area Pullman was gone and Brian breathed a sigh of relief. He and Sean began their warm up exercises and spent two hours working the bags and sparring on the practice mat. Every so often, Brian would catch Hanson looking at him but they never spoke.

They stopped long enough to watch two of the new boys fight a match up in the ring. Brian managed to watch with some enthusiasm but he was still contemplating what he should tell Hanson when practice was over. He finally decided that the truth was his only way out of the dilemma.

After practice, the boys washed up and followed Hanson across the street to the school. The building was locked up tight and Hanson produced a key to let them in. Brian listened to the sound of their footsteps echoing in the empty halls as they walked towards the office.

Hanson pulled a quart of orange juice from the small refrigerator behind his desk and produced three glasses. Brian sipped his juice as Hanson sat down and stared at him.

"I admit I don't know a whole lot about your lives outside of school and the team," he began. "But this thing with the cop needs to be explained. You said he hasn't done anything to you, so what's the beef all about?"

Brian cleared his throat, feeling the acid from the juice churning in his stomach.

"Pullman is one of those guys who likes boys, Coach. He was doing things with Gabriel and paying for it. A couple weeks before he...he died, Gabe told me that he couldn't do anything to stop Pullman, that no one would believe him."

Hanson was clearly shocked by what had been said. "And you know this is true?"

"Gabe lied and said he'd been busted for shoplifting and Pullman offered to forget the arrest if they did things together. I saw Gabe get out of Pullman's car in the alley behind his house. But they did it a lot; Gabe was prostituting himself with that guy. The cop gave him money and cigarettes for..."

"Enough," Hanson said, holding up his hand. "I don't need you to describe what they did."

The look on his face was grim and Hanson's fists were clenched. "Damn," he said, pounding a fist on the desktop. "All the boys on the team are at risk with this guy around."

"I'm afraid he's following Brian around now," Sean said.

"Does he know about your relationship with Gabriel?"

"I'm not sure what he knows, but I saw him at the funeral, he was looking right at me," Brian said. "I haven't seen him since then, and then today...well it was a shock."

Hanson ran his fingers across his scalp and the boys could see he was getting angrier by the moment. "The fact that he has a badge and a gun makes him twice as dangerous, I'm going to need some help with this."

"There's no evidence of what he's been doing," Brian said. "I don't hear anything about him in the neighborhood and you know how people like to talk. He hasn't been seen hanging around or at least I haven't seen him. There would be talk, that's all I can say."

"The kids in your neighborhood play dangerous games," Hanson said.

"That's why we box, Coach," Sean said. "Neither of us has ever done anything on the street, I assure you."

Hanson forced a smile. "I know you two are good kids. That's never been a question in my mind. But this creep is dangerous. We have to deal with him. You boys wait out in the office while I make a call. Don't go anywhere. I'm going to drive you home today."

"I can't tell my parents about this," Brian said.

"I'm afraid I'll have to be the judge of that, guys. His coming to our practice puts more than you two in jeopardy. He's putting all the boys at risk. Now, go outside and wait, I'll just be a few moments."

Brian and Sean left the office, shutting the door behind them. Hanson picked up the phone and dialed a number. He was furious that the bastard had just walked in off the street. Pullman had feigned being a CBBL supporter, probably getting all his information straight out of the newspaper article. His badge had been reassuring, but now this...

"Hello, John? We need to have a serious talk right now," Hanson began.

Twenty minutes later Hanson took the boys home, making sure that no one followed them along the way. He waited until they both went into Brian's house and then he drove north through the city.

"What do you think he's going to do?" Sean asked as Hanson pulled away.

"I don't know," Brian said, "but I sure wouldn't want Hanson mad at me."

But if Hanson was planning something he never said another word to either of the boys. Brian decided he just wouldn't go anywhere alone and Sean agreed. They stuck to one another like glue, and if anything, Brian decided their friendship was better than ever. It gave him great relief when several weeks past without seeing Pullman anywhere in the neighborhood. But neither of the boys was ready to let their guard down knowing the man was out there somewhere.

By early spring Hanson was smiling as he announced there was going to be match against another club.

"I had a call from Arlington, Virginia," he said. "The coach down there has a group of boys much like you and he thinks it would be great for us to get together. They are in a county sponsored program for juvenile offenders."

He let that sink in for a minute. "These are going to be some tough kids for you to handle. I'm saying this because they will believe that they have something to prove. But in the ring all that matters is skill. I think you're up to it, and so does Mr. Wayne."

The boys all looked at one another. There were now fifteen boys in various stages of learning the boxing skills. Brian judged that half of them were ready for outside competition but it still put a lump in his throat. Hanson had told them that fear was a positive feeling. It never paid to underestimate your competition.

"I will make up a roster of fights and there will be two levels of competition," Hanson said. "Some of you feel like you are ready to take on the world, but I caution you that this will be unlike anything you have done before. These Virginia boys will come here to win, but I think we may surprise them. And now Mr. Wayne has something he wants to tell you."

Mr. Wayne walked to the front of the group and smiled shyly. In all the months of practice time together this quiet man had rarely spoken to the group. But he had seemed to be everywhere just when he was needed. He had equipped them and wiped away the tears as each boy struggled to learn the craft. It was Wayne that stopped their bleeding and helped them from the ring when they fell. Brian knew that every boy there had the deepest respect for this man even though they knew little enough about him.

"I just want to say that you boys are ready for this match-up. Oh, those boys from down south been hoopin and hollerin on the streets like they was real tough, but you goin to take them down a peg.

"I've been watching you a long time now an you are better than I was at your age. Back then I got my ass...well, I got beat myself too many times. But it was because I was like them Virginia boys...I just thought I was tough.

"Now you have gone and learned it the right way with your sweat and your brains. I see you thinking as you fight and that is why you win. I don't see no losers here, just damn good boxers. So you ask the Good Lord above to guide you before stepin in that ring and no matter the outcome, you all come up winners."

The boys all applauded his speech and Wayne smiled, embarrassed at the attention as Hanson stepped up. "You may not know it but that is high praise coming from this man. Mr. Wayne was one of the best fighters this country has ever seen back in his day. I'm proud to say he coached me when I was a boy not much older than you are now."

So now they knew what many of them had suspected for quite some time. The relationship of coach and fighter had been drummed into their skulls for months. Mr. Wayne had made Hanson a winner all those years before and they were fortunate to have him on the team.

Practice ran longer now in preparation for the day of reckoning, as Sean and Brian thought of it. The roster said that Brian and Sean, Mark and Stan, Jason and Bill would be in the first level of competition. They sweated it out in the ring and in the savage assaults made against the bag.

Hanson had passed the hat to the regular fans in the bleachers and throughout the neighborhood. From the modest sums he gathered each boy found himself suited in matching blue nylon trunks and expensive footwear. It was the final step they needed to feel like a real team. Hanson's Boxers had finally become the Curtis Bay Boxing League.

The Friday night before the match, Sean and Brian helped the group of CBBL supporters set up the garage for the fight. There were now bleachers hugging the walls on

three sides of the ring and two separate sections of benches on the floor for the fighters. The whole team would sit and watch the events as they unfolded. This was to be a learning experience for each of them.

Admission was a dollar and Mr. Wayne's coffee suddenly zoomed from free to fifty cents. Some of the mothers provided baked goods and the school even gave them a printed program to pass out.

By eleven-thirty Saturday morning the bus from Arlington arrived and they got their first look at the opponents. Arlington's team had eleven kids between the ages of twelve and sixteen, and at first glimpse they looked a lot like the boys of the CBBL. There were more black kids than white but they had been warned that this would happen. Hanson had said that they would have no trouble with this, and he didn't make it a suggestion either

He was kind of hoping for a black opponent, it would make the fight more interesting. The two black boys on their team were more aggressive, although they were too new and much too young for Brian to fight during practice. If this was going to be a test of skill then he wanted it to be the hardest match-up of his life. Otherwise, why bother?

The program said Brian was up against a boy named Jamaal Anderson and he looked over at the other side to see if he could spot the guy. And they were looking back too. Hanson and the opposing coach shook hands, he was also black. Hanson introduced Mr. Wayne and Brian saw the Virginia coach shake hands and smile.

Now why hadn't they known know about Mr. Wayne before? Hanson had once told them that prejudice had kept the boxers of African descent out of the mainstream for decades until guys like Joe Lewis and Mohammed Ali had stepped onto the world stage. Mr. Wayne had been in the generation of African-American fighters that made it all possible.

Brian was in the third round of the competition, with Mark up first and Sean second. If he had gone first the both of them wouldn't have been so nervous, but then Hanson had his reasons he was sure.

Sean had spent the night before in Brian's bed.

"I won't be able to sleep all night," Sean had said when he first arrived.

"And keep me up? Not gonna happen," Brian said. "We'll sleep if I have to knock you over the head."

He didn't have to resort to violence, just love. And after that, with a cup of hot cocoa, they both slept like logs.

Maybe he was more nervous than he thought, but after Sean drifted off Brian suddenly remembered that he hadn't said any prayers. God didn't need to see him on his knees so he lay there with Sean's arms around his chest and the boy's warm breath on his neck.

"Lord," he thought. "Give us strength in combat and in love. Help me to understand why I love this boy so much it often hurts more than a punch to the midsection. Guide us both tomorrow and teach us to accept the outcome no matter how hard it might be."

Brian was more worried about Sean. He always stood ringside when the boy sparred. It was support and worry that kept him rooted to the spot until the rounds were over. He didn't need to worry so. Sean was a competent fighter, often surprising with a change up combination of jabs.

It boiled down to selfishness. What if Sean got injured? How would he deal with it? Brian didn't want love to make him weak. It didn't happen when they were sparring. Neither of them ever held back in that situation, they couldn't have.

And then it was Saturday and he was standing behind Sean, looking at the fine blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail that Mr. Wayne had tucked up under Sean's headgear. They had warmed up together in the alley behind the garage. The sight of the fire department's new ambulance parked back there was a bit disconcerting, but Hanson was taking no chances. Besides the guys at the fire station were big supporters.

Mark had gone first. He fought well against a white boy and took a great number of blows to the face and arms without complaining. The other boy won on technical points, but not by much.

Sean was ready and he eyed his black opponent waiting across the ring.

"Ring his chimes, Sean," Brian said.

Sean turned to look over his shoulder with a grin. Brian had seen that look before, usually right before the boy beat his ass. "I'll do it just for you," Sean said and then he climbed up into the ring.

Brian felt his face burn and tears welled up in his eyes. No, not now, there was no room for sappy emotion to intrude on his thoughts. But Sean had offered him something that meant a whole lot...he had offered to fight in Brian's name. If that wasn't love, what was it?

The first round each boy probed and jabbed at one another's defenses, looking for a way past the gloves. Sean figured out his opponent's body language and gave the kid a solid punch to the eye. The boy responded to Sean's extended arm with a blow underneath to the stomach and Brian winced. But Sean danced away, biding his time and watching the boy's eye swell.

By round two they were trading punches more frequently but Sean kept after that eye until he drew blood. The referee looked over at the Virginia boy's corner but their coach didn't seem disposed to stopping the fight. The round ended with a flurry of punches from Sean but he took as good as he gave until the bell.

Brian could see the redness on his stomach from where the blows had struck him repeatedly. The other boy couldn't know that of all of them on the team Sean had the least problem handling body blows. Lord knows Brian had tried that tactic against him only to see the evil grin on his face as he took the blows.

"You got that boy's eye," Brian heard Mr. Wayne say. "You open that up and he can't be seen much of you."

Sean rinsed his mouth out from the water bottle and spat in the waiting bucket. He tagged his gloves together, a sure sign he was going to put this kid away. The bell rang and they both rose from their respective corners.

The other boy made the grave error of reaching below Sean's defense and going back to target the stomach. Brian watched Sean's right arm go back and heard the smack as his glove hit the other kid right in that wounded eye. But then Sean swiveled his body as the boy staggered back and his left hit the kid in the chin.

The poor kid fell back against the ropes, blood pouring down the side of his face from the cut above his eye. Rather than press his advantage Sean backed off a little as the referee moved in and the Virginia coach threw his towel in the ring. Round three hadn't lasted a minute and the fight was over.

Sean stood tall as the referee raised his arm to signal the win. But he quickly went across the ring and shook the boy's hand as the coach attempted to stem the flow of blood. The crowd had been whooping and hollering but none of this reached Brian's ears until Sean climbed down and stood in front of him.

"Damn," was all Brian could say.

"Damn right," Sean grinned.

Now Brian was up. And Mr. Wayne strapped on his headgear as he looked across the ropes at his opponent. The black boy seemed the same size and age but he looked formidable. Mr. Wayne pulled the straps in place and looked Brian in the eye.

"Tough one comin at you, are you ready?" he asked.

"I prayed for a tough one, Mr. Wayne. Not gonna learn anything if it's easy," Brian said.

"You all right in my book, Brian, go get em."

He climbed in the ring and looked down on Sean. The boy would stand up outside his corner and it would be his voice that Brian heard every time, it was the only one that mattered. Brian expected his father might be in the crowd but he didn't stop to look around. No, there was nothing for him to do but focus on his competition.

The referee introduced them, Jamaal to Brian, Brian to Jamaal, clean fight and all that jazz, neither his ears nor Jamaal's were listening. Brian stared deep into the boy's eyes to see if he had the killer instinct and found him lacking. Jamaal's face sagged a little as he stared back. He was faking fear. Brian had been told it would happen just to throw him off. The boys touched gloves and backed away until the bell rang.

Like a flurry Jamaal came out swinging and Brian danced away from his punches, batting his gloves down to prove this wasn't going to be an easy take. So let him come on like thunder and wear himself out, Brian thought, I'm gonna rock his world. Then the boy landed a punch on Brian's chin and that woke him up.

Jamaal's arms pumped and his gloves flew but all Brian could see was the opening he gave with those slightly rounded swings. A bash straight down the middle and aimed at the chin staggered the boy so Brian did his one-two on Jamaal's face before allowing him to stand up straight. There was murder in the kid's eyes after that so Brian didn't grin, this was too serious.

They traded body shots until Brian understood that the boy had spent considerable time working the heavy bag and practicing body blows. But Jamaal was quickly tiring of his flash offense and so Brian cut him some slack to keep the fight alive. The round ended and he sat on his stool.

"What you holdin out for?" Mr. Wayne asked. "You gone all holy on me?"

"He's the one praying for an end," Brian grinned after spitting out the mouthpiece. He looked around for Sean and saw him through the ropes. He winked since they weren't supposed to talk during a fight.

"You keep your eye on his right, he gonna try and take you with a hook," Mr. Wayne cautioned.

There was little the man didn't know so Brian listened as he spat out the water. Mr. Wayne gave him a pat on the shoulder and it was time to renew the effort. A fresh minty mouthpiece and Brian stood up at the sound of the bell.

Jamaal was more cautious this time out. He was baiting Brian to stretch out and punch him so he could swing under with that hook. Hanson had explained the physics of

boxing and the geometry of the human body. Break the rules and you get hurt, bend them and you win. It was time to give Jamaal a bit of that lesson.

Jamaal thought Brian was going for a reaching blow and he cocked his arm low to swing the uppercut. Instead he had his arm pushed to the outside and a glove brought straight into his nose, but with an upward angle. The poor piece of cartilage and flesh seemed to touch his ear before it sprang back and Brian saw the tears streaming down his opponent's face, blinding him for the moment.

It could have been me, Brian thought, Jamaal wanted to take that very shot at him but got beat to it. The boy blinked to clear his eyes and Brian saw nothing but real fear. The kid was losing on points and he was afraid Brian had something that would knock his head off.

Brian took his best shots at Jamaal's midsection to keep him on defense and he could almost hear the points ringing up on the judge's scorecard. The bell saved Jamaal any further embarrassment.

"Boy, you sure got him worried," Mr. Wayne said, "He ain't thinkin straight so he is dangerous about now. Watch out for that right."

The bell sounded three minutes later and they went back at it. Brian could win this match on points but Jamaal was looking for a KO, his only way out of the situation. He favored his left jab, relaxing his right and saving it for the big punch. Brian kept knocking him about, never allowing him the chance to swing with that right.

Did he really think he could still pull it off, Brian asked himself? He saw the boy tense and raised his gloves to ward off the blow. But Jamaal had aimed at the nose, a foolish move, the chin might have been a better chance if he slipped in under Brian's gloves, but he wasted the shot and left himself open. Brian fended off the right hook and took aim straight at the middle of Jamaal's mouth.

In slow motion the glove traveled the short distance, maybe thirty inches tops, and collided with Jamaal's upper lip and the damaged nose. His mouthpiece flew out and Brian saw the blood spatter from his broken nose. It was the hardest punch he had ever thrown and Jamaal went back on his heels before his knees gave out.

Brian moved away, allowing the referee some working room. Jamaal was down on his knees and so Brian backpedaled into his corner. The referee shook his head and the fight was over.

Brian happened to look down at the judge's table and saw the big clock with only a few seconds remaining in the round. Jamaal had suffered all that for nothing. He should have let the bell separate them. He had done the wrong thing looking for that knockout blow to save the match. Foolish expectations always serve up defeat, Hanson always said, and now Brian understood what that meant.

The Virginia coach helped the boy from the ring and the medics took over. Even as the referee raised Brian's arm for the win he looked at the boy being helped onto a stretcher and taken out the back door. What had he done?

Brian slipped out of the ring and felt Mr. Wayne's fingers on the headgear straps.

"Where are they taking him?" he asked.

"You did fine, ain't no shame in what you did. But Lordy, I never seen you hit so hard."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"They are worried he might have concussion so they are gonna get an X-ray, that's about the size of it."

"I didn't mean to hurt him like that," Brian said. He felt Sean at his side but he seemed like a million miles away. "I didn't mean to hurt him," he repeated.

"You did fine, son." Hanson was there as well. "It just scared us, that's all; he needs to see a doctor."

Brian threw his arms around Sean's neck and he hugged back. "It's ok, Brian" he kept repeating, but that was hard to believe. Hanson escorted them out the back door so the other boys could get on with the program. Brian clung to Sean as his mind replayed the punch over and over again. They sat on the wall behind the garage and Hanson offered him water.

"He didn't see it coming, Brian." Hanson said. "He was wide open and you took the shot just like you were taught. But it was the hardest blow I've ever seen you throw."

"Glad you never used that on me," Sean said.

"I need to know if he is all right," Brian said.

"We best leave him to the doctors now, Brian," Hanson said.

"No, I gotta know he's all right," he said.

"Then I'll call the hospital and talk to their coach," Hanson said, "Sean, stay with him until I get back, will you?"

"Yes, sir," Sean replied.

Brian sat still for a minute and then took a gulp off the water bottle. Sean reached for his hands and started unlacing the gloves.

"What made you throw a punch like that?" he asked.

"Geometry," Brian replied. Jamaal would be all right, he had to be.

"What...geometry?"

"His head was coming forward as my arm extended. I was going for his chin but he pushed his upper lip and nose in the way. All I saw was his blood and the total fear in his eyes. Inside his head he was screaming, Sean, I could almost hear it."

Jamaal didn't make a sound, Brian knew that, but he'd almost felt a scream inside the boy and it frightened him. Hanson quickly returned and at least he was smiling.

"He didn't get a concussion, but you broke his nose and knocked out one of his front teeth. Jamaal spit it out in the ambulance," he said. "He'll be coming back in about an hour to ride home with his teammates."

"Can I see him then?" Brian asked.

"And what are you going to say, Brian?"

"That I'm sorry, it didn't have to be that way. I had him on points."

Hanson sighed. "Look, let me give you a short lesson in history. You beat him fair and square, you didn't cheat, you out boxed him. He was beaten by a better man and it will go down in his mind that he learned a lesson today.

"A black man has his pride, and Lord knows that at some places in our history it was all we were allowed to carry, other than the master's possessions. You go tell that boy he was beaten by a mistake and you take away his pride. He could be a fine boxer someday and you may meet him in the ring again, but you take his pride and he will quit.

"Those boys have a hard life on the street, Brian. You are lucky by comparison so don't screw this up. Give him a need to continue boxing and you will have made up for any error in judgment you think happened today. He will take that injury home and wear

it like a medal around his neck. He fought hard today and in his mind he is one step closer to the top. Don't take that away from him."

"I understand. Will he even talk to me now?"

"I'm sure he will. He may even ask how you did it. Are you gonna tell him?"

Brian smiled. "Never give away my secrets."

"Good, man. Now go back in there and cheer on your teammates. You're a hero to them now."

Hanson returned to the garage and Brian looked over at Sean. "Hero?"

"Yeah, buddy. Your adoring public waits within. Can I polish your armor?"

"No," Brian laughed, "But I got something else you can rub."

"Ooh...maybe later," Sean replied.

Brian sat on the bench surrounded by their fans and cheered as they lost two and won another. By the time the newer boys did their little one round bouts at the end, his father had arrived. Mom was never going to want to see him fight again, he knew that.

His father came late because he had just left work and was on his way home. Brian was glad he hadn't been there for the fight with Jamaal. It would have concerned him greatly. But Brian knew his father would hear about what had happened and he would have to face that music later on.

Jamaal finally arrived and Brian excused himself to go talk with the boy. His eyes followed Brian across the room. He looked like hell, a large bandage on his nose and gauze stuffed in his upper lip.

"Hi," Brian said. "You ok?"

There wasn't any fear in his eyes, but there was something else.

"You did a number on me," Jamaal lisped around the gauze.

"I'm sorry, but you look terrible," Brian said.

Jamaal grinned and that made his injury look more frightening.

"Boys at home will think I got hit by a truck. But I'm gonna tell them that a real boxer did this to me. You did fine."

"Maybe you can get a gold tooth someday," Brian said.

"You think? That would be the bomb," Jamaal laughed. "Ooh, that hurts."

"I think you did fine today too," Brian said. "I hope you get better soon."

"Me too. We got some unfinished business in that ring, don't you think?"

"Yes, it would be an honor to face you again," Brian said. And then he understood the look in Jamaal's eyes, it was respect.

They shook hands and Jamaal never looked back as he boarded the bus for home. Brian just hoped that he would have so much courage when he got his ass kicked. For it was going to happen someday, he already knew that.