

Prologue

Logan

Fifteen years earlier
Las Vegas, Nevada

“FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT!”

The rowdy chants of the crowd filled Logan Brassard’s ears as he slowly circled his opponent. Fisher was older, taller, bigger and stronger. But Logan wasn’t scared. After years of getting the snot beat out of him by grown men—including three ex-cons—not much scared him anymore.

“You little shit,” Fisher jeered, his voice tinged with laughter. “You really think you can take me?”

“I know I can,” Logan snarled.

Fisher spat into the grass and shook his head at Logan, circling him menacingly. “I’m gonna demolish you, kid. Gonna send you running back home to mommy. Oh, wait. You don’t have a mommy, do you? You don’t have a mommy *or* a home. Poor wittle baby.”

Logan put up his fists. “We talkin’ or fightin’, asshole?”

Fisher laughed scornfully as the crowd’s chants grew even louder and more demanding.

“Fight, fight, fight, fight!”

Fisher made the first move, lunging forward and swinging at Logan.

He ducked the blow and threw a punch of his own, smashing his fist into Fisher’s acne-scarred cheek.

Fisher stumbled backward as cheers erupted from the crowd.

Logan swung again, hitting him in the stomach. When Fisher doubled over, Logan tackled him around the waist and slammed him to the ground.

“*Oof*” Fisher grunted as the wind was knocked out of him. Before he could catch his breath, Logan began pummeling him in the face and ribs.

The crowd roared with approval. “Bruiser, Bruiser, Bruiser!”

Fisher shouted curses and swung wildly until his fist connected with Logan’s jaw.

The blow stung, but in the heat of battle Logan barely even noticed. Gritting his teeth, he repeatedly landed vicious jabs as blood squirted from Fisher’s mouth and nose. The crowd egged him on, cheering and hollering as Fisher tried to block his hits.

Logan kept punching in a fury until the referee called the fight. He was pulled to his feet by Wyatt, the sixteen-year-old juvie who ran the weekly fights. He raised Logan’s right arm in the air and gleefully announced, “We have a new champ!”

The crowd went berserk, half cheering and half groaning as high fives were slapped and money changed hands.

Fisher stumbled to his feet, holding his bloody nose. “I want a rematch!”

Wyatt grinned, counting a wad of cash. “Sure thing, Fish—”

“LOGAN!” an angry voice cut through the air like a boom of thunder.

Shit, Logan thought as a big, burly, light-skinned Dominican man came shoving his way through the crowd. He worked at the group home where Logan lived. His name was Santino Joaquin Peña Tavárez, but that was a friggin’ mouthful so everyone just called him Mr. T.

Wyatt and the other boys took one look at Mr. T and scattered like junkies fleeing the cops.

“Hey!” Logan called to their retreating backs. “Where’s my money?”

Before he could take off running after them, a massive hand seized his arm and jerked him around. Suddenly he found himself staring up into Mr. T’s scowling face.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“I gotta get my money!” Logan exclaimed.

“I don’t think so.”

“But I won the fight!”

“Congratulations, slugger. Let’s go.” Mr. T grabbed Logan by the hood of his sweatshirt and began dragging him across the grassy soccer field toward a white van parked along the curb. “You must have lost your damn mind, sneaking out of the house to meet up with those hoodlums. You know you have hockey practice—”

“I don’t wanna play hockey,” Logan protested.

“Tough shit, *carajito*. You’re playing.”

“You can’t make me!”

Mr. T stopped suddenly and turned to face Logan. His gray eyes were hard, his expression stern. “Look here, boy. Coach Fulcher runs one of the few youth hockey leagues in Nevada. I had to pull strings to get you a spot on the 10-12 team—”

“Who asked you to?” Logan shot back. “I never said I wanted to play stupid hockey!”

“Yeah? What else you got going on?” Mr. T jabbed his thumb in the direction of the field. “That little fight club is only gonna land you in jail or the morgue. Is that what you want?”

Logan glared defiantly at the big man.

“Well? Is it?”

Logan glared another moment before dropping his gaze to the front of his sweatshirt. It was splattered with Fisher’s blood. This was the second shirt he’d ruined in less than two weeks, and he knew he was gonna catch hell for it. But he didn’t care. He didn’t care about much of anything.

Shaking his head, Mr. T pulled out a handkerchief, grabbed Logan’s hands and started cleaning his bloody knuckles. “You like fighting so much? Hockey’s the perfect sport for you.”

“Hockey’s dumb,” Logan grumbled resentfully. “And nobody plays hockey in Vegas.”

“Maybe not now. But someday we could get a pro hockey team and you could play for them.”

Logan screwed up his face as Mr. T hauled him over to the white van. Instead of opening the sliding back door, he unlocked the passenger door and barked, “Get in.”

Logan clambered up into the front seat and stubbornly folded his arms across his chest.

Mr. T climbed behind the wheel, slammed the door and shoved the key in the ignition. “Put your seat belt on.”

Logan grudgingly obeyed.

When Mr. T started the engine, a bouncy bachata song poured out of the speakers. Bachata was his favorite kind of music because it reminded him of the islands. Logan couldn't understand some of the words, but he liked the rhythm. Mr. T said it was because he had a quarter Latin blood in him.

Mr. T lowered the volume and glanced at Logan. "We have to swing by the house so you can change for practice and grab your gear. I called Coach Fulcher to let him know we're on our way. He ain't too happy about you being late to the second practice of the season, but he's willing to let it slide this time."

"Why?" Logan grumbled. "Cause he feels sorry for me? 'Cause I'm an orphan?"

"No, because you're a good skater and he agrees with me that you have potential. Don't make him regret taking a chance on you." Mr. T pulled away from the curb and merged into the afternoon traffic.

Frowning, Logan turned his head to glare out the window. His jaw was throbbing from Fisher's punch, but that's not what was bothering him. What was bothering him was that he hadn't gotten his prize money. He really needed that cash. He'd been saving up to buy a new telescope for Jupiter, a girl who lived at the group home. Her real name was Meadow, but he called her Jupiter because she loved astronomy and was always carrying around a telescope that her parents gave her when she was little.

Last month when Logan got into a fight with another boy at the group home, Jupiter's telescope got broken. It was an accident, but he'd felt pretty guilty about it—especially after he saw her crying in her room that night. He'd decided right then and there to buy her another telescope. It was the least he could do. Now he just had to find a way to sneak out again to get his money from Wyatt.

Mr. T stopped at a red light and looked at Logan. "Listen, *mijo*. I know life has dealt you a crappy hand. You've been through more shit than most adults I know, and you definitely deserve a lucky break. That's why I signed you up for hockey. You might not believe this, but playing hockey could be your ticket to a better life. If you work hard and prove yourself, you might even make it to the pros one day. Just imagine that, Logan. Imagine yourself playing in the NHL, making millions and winning championships. Wouldn't that be amazing?"

"I guess." Logan stared down at his bruised knuckles, mulling over Mr. T's words. "I don't think I'll be good at it."

"Of course you will," Mr. T said with a grin. "You were born in Canada and your old man was Canadian. Hockey's practically in your blood."

Logan wasn't so sure of that. Frowning, he flexed his fingers and curled them into a fist. "The other boys on the team..." He trailed off, frowning harder.

"What about the other boys?"

They had moms who would take them to hockey practice and bake cookies to raise money for the team. They had dads who would come to their games and cheer for them. Who would Logan have?

Nobody, that's who.

Mr. T sent him a sideways glance. "I rearranged my schedule so I can take you to practice every week and attend all of your games." His expression softened at the surprised look

Logan gave him. "I'm gonna be there for you, *mijo*. I'm gonna be sitting in the stands and rooting for you all the way. *Te lo prometo*. I promise."

Logan felt a lump rise in his throat. He choked it down, not wanting to look like a crybaby.

Mr. T reached over and ruffled his black hair. "Damn, boy, you need a haircut. Out here looking like Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*."

Logan grinned, which made his jaw hurt worse.

A few minutes later, they reached the group home. The plain stucco house sat on a quiet street shaded by big trees. It was nothing special, but it was the closest thing he'd had to a home since he was five.

As they pulled up to the house, the front door opened and a man and woman walked out. They were followed by a small black girl.

Jupiter.

Logan leaned forward, staring alertly out the window.

Jupiter was walking behind the couple with her head down. Her dark hair was neatly braided into two pigtails and she was wearing a frilly pink dress. Logan had never seen her in a dress before. He didn't even know she had one.

Mr. T pulled into the driveway. Logan barely waited for the van to come to a stop before he jumped out and called, "Jupiter!"

She turned her head in his direction.

They stared at each other across the large yard.

When Jupiter stuck her tongue out at him, Logan grinned. Maybe she wasn't mad at him anymore for breaking her telescope.

The man and woman led Jupiter to a shiny black car parked in front of the house. As the man put Jupiter's bag inside the trunk, Mr. T came around the van and stood beside Logan.

"Where's she going?" Logan asked a little anxiously.

Mr. T smiled. "She's been adopted, *mijo*. Her new parents must have gotten special permission to pick her up from here."

"So they're taking her home?"

"Yes. They're taking her home."

Logan's throat felt strangely tight as he watched Jupiter climb into the black car. Before the door could be shut, she suddenly darted out of the backseat and raced across the yard, her puffy pigtails bouncing as she ran straight toward Logan.

His eyes widened when she reached him and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him hard.

After a shocked moment, he slowly lifted his arms and hugged her back. As he did, the weird tightness in his throat got even worse.

He didn't like to be touched. He should be pushing Jupiter away. But he didn't want to. Not even a little bit.

He was almost disappointed when she stepped back, wrinkling her nose at his sweatshirt. "You got blood on you," she said in her scratchy little voice.

"I know," Logan grunted. "I was fightin'."

She rolled her eyes in disgust. She was nine, a year younger than him. But she was really small for her age, the top of her head just barely reaching his shoulder.

He smiled a little, stuffing his hands in his jeans pockets. "So...you're leaving?"

She nodded.

Logan glanced across the yard at the man and woman. They were watching him and Jupiter with soft smiles. They had attractive faces and their clothes looked neat and clean, though not expensive.

"Are they nice?" Logan asked.

"Very nice," Jupiter asserted.

"That's good," Logan said gruffly. "I wouldn't want 'em to be mean to you or anything."

"Me neither."

"They got any other kids?"

Jupiter shook her head.

"So you won't have to share a room with anyone." Logan smiled. "That's good."

"I know." Jupiter hesitated like she wanted to say more but couldn't find the right words. He felt the same way.

Finally she mumbled, "Well...bye, Lunkhead."

He swallowed hard at the nickname. "See ya, Jupiter."

She turned to Mr. T and stuck her hand out. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Meadow." He smiled warmly as he shook her hand. "If you're ever in the neighborhood, stop by and say hello."

She nodded and smiled shyly, then looked at Logan one more time before turning and walking away.

Logan had the strongest urge to run after her. Which was stupid. He didn't even like her all that much. She was just a dumb little girl.

So why did he feel sad about her leaving?

He watched her climb into the backseat of the black car. She immediately turned around and looked out the rear window, staring at Logan.

He stared back.

After the longest moment, she lifted her hand in a small wave.

Logan swallowed again and waved back. Then he stood watching as the car pulled away from the curb and drove off down the street, taking Jupiter out of his life.

Mr. T clapped him gently on the shoulder. "You know, a lot of girls go crazy over hockey players."

Logan looked up at him. "They do?"

"Oh, yeah. Most definitely." He gave Logan a conspiratorial smile. "Become a big hockey star and maybe Meadow will find you again someday."

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