Chapter 3

Response

Tommy Brewer was sedated and lying peacefully in the hospital bed. Amongst the hum of the machines tracking pulse and buzzing every 15 minutes to check Tommy's blood pressure there was a strong smell of antiseptic. When Whitaker arrived, Briggs was already there with another young man in his early 30s. Malcom "Scott" Kincaid sat beside Brewer's bed. Scott stared at the bandages wrapped tight around Brewer's head and neck. It was hard to look at. Just earlier this week, Tommy had been a blur of motion in the ring, applying fluid submission holds, sharp rope work, and moving like the ghost of Owen Hart. Right now, he looked fragile. A stark contrast to Scott's own heavy, gorilla-like frame hunched in the small plastic visitor's chair. Scott's eyes were red, and the anxiety on his face was palpable.

Earlier in the week, Tommy had worked on applying different submission holds while Scott had worked to sell the submissions. Tommy was good at creating the appearance that he was torquing an opponent's ankle. Scott and Tommy had been perfecting the appearance all week under Briggs' supervision. Scott had to remind himself to breathe extra hard and imagine that he had dropped 45-lb plate on his foot to show the appropriate level of pain and struggle.

Tommy had leveraged much of his former martial arts background to sell his move set with Scott. Briggs had complimented Tommy's ability to utilize a single leg suplex on Scott to snap the bigger man onto the canvas. "That's going to get a 'pop'" from the crowd, boys," Briggs announced enthusiastically. Scott groaned and rolled as Tommy sprang up and immediately went for an armbar submission hold. While Tommy was not applying full force, Scott pretended to be in agony and flailed as much as he could for about twenty seconds before tapping out. "That's a good way to end the match," Briggs said to both men. Tommy released the hold, and both men nodded at Briggs. Tommy helped Scott up, and they fist-bumped with satisfied grins on their faces while covered in sweat. Scott noticed that Briggs had been paying a lot of attention to Tommy and him. Scott had enjoyed working with Briggs and learning from him. Scott thought Briggs would be a good person to try some new maneuvers with as both he and Briggs had similar frames and styles. If Scott was a Gorilla, then Briggs was definitely a Bull.

In the armory that night, Briggs had been correct. The crowd responded well to Tommy's and Scott's bout. These two had a lot of potential in them if developed right. The

crowd was already treating Tommy like a hometown hero, which meant they were more than happy to boo Scott right out of the building. It was the perfect dynamic.

As Scott sat by Tommy's bedside, he caught Briggs watching him, a look of quiet surprise on the veteran's face, as if he'd never seen this side of him before. Scott remembered for a moment that his appearance projected a strong intimidating impression until people got to know him personally. A few beeps from the monitors broke Scott's thought.

Scott had planned to meet up with Tommy that night after the event, but he got delayed talking with the other talent and speaking with a few spectators in the parking lot. By the time Scott made it to the diner, Tommy had already sustained injuries and was being loaded in the ambulance while cops were cuffing Turner. A waitress told Scott the story and which hospital Tommy had been taken to. Scott called Briggs first, and Briggs proceeded to call Whitaker.

"How are you holding up, Kincaid?" Whitaker asked. Scott didn't look away from the bed. His jaw clenched, a muscle feathering near his ear. "Should've been there," he muttered, his voice barely a rasp. "I was out in the parking lot running my mouth with the crowd while Turner was doing this." He finally looked at Whitaker, eye red and hard. "There was no reason for this, Whitaker. None." Scott's face shifted to a look of rage. "The bastard, blindsided Tommy from behind according to the waitress like he did to you earlier tonight."

Whitaker scratched his chin, and said, "I don't know. This doesn't make any sense. He was fine earlier in the week. Something must have happened in his life. Yet, that does not excuse the behavior tonight." Briggs nodded and chimed "Howell will find out what is going on. I won't let this shit happen to my guys." Scott looked at Briggs appreciatively with determination in his eyes.

The three men stayed with Tommy until morning until he woke and made sure he was alright. Tommy would have to stay at the hospital for a few days. Scott offered to get him home when he was discharged, and all three men offered to bring him food and supplies for a few days afterward while he recovered. Tommy was single and lived in a small one-bed apartment in North Kansas City across the river. Briggs lived closest to him. Briggs' wife Becky, knew how to keep people well fed. Becky Briggs, Sarah Whitaker, and Lisa Kincaid organized the meal trains and creature comforts, moving like a well-oiled machine. These men and their families took care of their own. But the week wore on them all. Especially Scott. He and Tommy trained well together. They were complementary.

SMACK.

A hard yell echoed through the gym. A 170-lb rookie landed flat on his back, the wind driven from his lungs in a violent rush. The entire facility went dead silent, every eye turning to the ring. Briggs nearly sprinted over. He checked on the young man and then shot a piercing gaze at Scott. “What are you doing, Kincaid?” Briggs growled. “I’m sorry. I pushed him too hard overhead. That is on me. I was distracted,” Scott admitted. Briggs helped the young rookie out the ring. A few men came up to help the stunned man to a bench to equilibrate. Briggs motioned to Scott to come over, and he motioned to Whitaker to join.

“I know you’re upset, Kincaid. You’ve got to do better. You cannot be hurting others. You have got to pay attention. Even if you’re angry,” Briggs scolded. “I know,” Scott said. “Why don’t you practice with me and blow off some steam,” Whitaker volunteered. Both Briggs and Scott starred at Whitaker in surprise for a long moment, before Briggs spoke. “No. You practice with me. Gabe can be the ref. You need to exorcise the poison out of your system, and you need someone that can reflect your aggression back at you,” Briggs explained. Briggs removed his shirt, folded it despite being drenched in sweat from the humidity, and placed it on a chair.

Briggs stepped through the ropes, his massive chest expanding, as he took in a breath. “Ring the bell, Gabe.” Whitaker tapped the turnbuckle twice saying “Ding-ding!”

Scott didn’t wait. He crossed the ring like a freight train, abandoning all pretense of a lock-up, and lunged directly for Briggs’ midsection. While Briggs did not dodge the youngster’s attack, he did turn his thigh to block most of the momentum, briefly stopping Scott. “You need to do better, Scott,” Briggs taunted, as he brought down both hands clasped together hard between the Scott’s shoulder blades to knock him down to his knees. Briggs took advantage of the situation and wrapped both arms around Scott’s waist and pulled the younger man in close before, squaring up, and driving his strength through his feet to lift Scott cleanly off the canvas and pancaking him down with a Gutwrench slam. Whitaker reacted with an audible “Ooaf” watching the two men.

Briggs quickly changed positions and hooked one arm under Scott’s in an attempt to turn him over for a pin. Scott felt annoyed at his sloppiness, and knew Briggs wasn’t pushing hard yet. Scott braced his core bridged, and as he drove his hips up, he locked his own arms around Briggs midsection. Scott torqued hard to reverse positioning with Briggs but failed. Briggs got the better positioning and let Scott fall to the canvas. “Let’s try that again from a proper start,” Briggs said cooly.

Scott took a big breath while lying flat on his back. His chest expanded and highlighted his broad upper frame. Briggs extended a hand to help Scott up, which Scott took graciously. “Again!” Briggs barked. This time, both men circled the ring, before Scott

engaged in an elbow-and-collar tie up with Briggs. Briggs sent Scott into the ropes with an Irish Whip. Scott let the momentum carry him as he let the hemp ropes absorb his mass. He was agitated. Briggs saw the frustration in Scott's eyes and the disorganization in the young man's gait. Scott hooked his massive arm for the clothesline and only caught air. Briggs had anticipated and ducked accordingly. He was already behind Scott and wrapped his forearms around the large man. Scott felt the squeeze as he went airborne backwards. Briggs' German suplex was graceful and brutal simultaneously. Briggs did not let go. Briggs held tight, dragged Scott up, squared his feet, and lifted the young man again bringing him down onto the canvas shoulder first. Scott let out a gasp as the mat smacked hard against his shoulders. Briggs released the hold and immediately rolled to his side and popped back. Scott, rolled backwards, and sprung upward ready for the next sortie with Briggs.

Scott caught Briggs' stare. The piercing green eyes filled with energy and intensity. Just like the first time, Briggs had noticed him at the gym. It was 8 PM, and gym was drenched with the scent of sweat and iron along with sawdust and vinyl from the ring. Two men were practicing in the ring while Scott was deadlifting on the platform. His hands were covered in chalk dust, and he had just loaded another pair of plates onto the bar. AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" was blaring through Scott's headphones, and he was zeroed in on making the barbell *his bitch*. He thought about the tension spanning the bar, the exact angle of his hips, the kinetic transfer of power from the floor as pushed through his heels. 450 pounds in total were sitting on the floor in front of him. This was his time. His oasis amongst the chaos of life. His happy place where he could feel the iron and the thrill of moving heavy weights. While Scott had dreamed of playing in the NFL, this gave him the thrill of knowing he could push his body to elite levels of strength. He knew how to hit and how to drive.

Scott braced his core, gripped the bar close to his shins, and drove the power through his thighs, his calves and straight through his heels into the floor as the bar bowed slightly. The weight ascended as Scott stood tall bringing the bar to mid-thigh. Scott brought the bar down controlled. Again. He lifted, and the plates clanked each time they hit the platform. Again, and again, he repeated the process. Feeling the fire, the sweat, the tension, and pleasure in success.

Scott gripped the knurling, pulling the slack out of the bar, when a sharp, panicked yell sliced through guitar riff blazing out of his headphones.

"Ahh! Put me down, put me down!"

The sound wasn't' a theatrical groan; it was the high, breathless shriek of actual distress. Scott didn't hesitate. He let go.

The 450 pounds of iron slammed against the deadlift platform with a seismic crash. Scott ripped his headphones off and bounded toward the ring closing the distance in three massive strides. He slid under the bottom rope, standing to his full height just as the lifter was wobbling, desperately trying to muscle a panicked, flailing rookie over his head. The lifter's back was bowed dangerously, and the rookie's left arm was twisted a sickening angle.

"Put him down!" Scott barked, his voice carrying the deep, booming authority of a lecture hall professor who had lost his patience.

The lifter blinked, his arms shaking, and let the rookie collapse to the mat in a heap. The young wrestler rolled away, clutching his shoulder and gasping for air.

"What's your problem, man?" the lifter panted, glaring at Scott. "I almost had him."

"You almost tore his rotator cuff and blew out your own L4 vertebrae," Scott said flatly, stepping between them. He pointed at the lifter's stance. "You're treating him like a static deadweight instead of cooperative load. You're just trying to muscle him up by his ribs. You don't have the leverage, and you have zero stability."

The lifter crossed his arms, defensive. "Oh yeah? How would you do it, big guy?"

Scott didn't boast; he simply shifted into teaching mode. He gestured the rookie to stand back up, locking eyes with him to make sure he was ok.

Scott stepped in, explaining the mechanics aloud as he positioned himself. "First, you don't grab the waist. You treat the body like a barbell. You need your hands under the parts that allow you distribute his mass most effectively to prevent the load from dipping." Scott slid his left hand firmly under the rookie's upper thigh, near the groin, and placed his right hand flat under the rookie's sternum.

"Second, a two-point hold is unstable. We need a truss system." Scott looked at the rookie. "When I pop you up, lock your elbows and press your hands down onto my shoulders. Create a triangle. It's the strongest structural shape in engineering. That third contact point balances your center of gravity so I'm not fighting to keep you level."

Scott looked back at the lifter. "And finally, you don't lift with your front deltoids. You drive the energy from the floor through your posterior chain, and into your arms."

Without another word, Scott dropped his hips, drove through his heels, and exploded upward.

The kinetic transfer was flawless. The rookie popped up effortlessly into the air. Scott locked his arms out, holding the 200-pound man high above his head, perfectly

parallel to the mat. The rookie's hands pressed firmly into Scott's massive shoulders, completing the structural triangle. There was no shaking, no bowing of the back. Scott's bones were perfectly stacked, wrists over elbows over shoulders over hips.

He held him there for three seconds, as steady as a concrete pillar, before guiding the rookie safely back down to his feet. Both the rookie and lifter were amazed and electrified by what Scott had just done. Scott continued to coach the two wrestlers for the next several minutes. Across the gym, leaning against the doorframe, Briggs stood perfectly still, watching the giant who lectured like a professor and lifted like a god. Under Scott's tutelage, both wrestlers were able to lift each other successfully and safely and high-fived Scott to show their thanks. Scott rolled out the ring to let the two wrestlers keep practicing. He felt energized being able to help and was ready to get back to his own lifting.

It did not go unnoticed by Scott that two men had been watching him that seemed more established. One man with green eyes, and with a similar frame to himself, the other with blue eyes and equally large and intimidating presence, but leaner and narrower.

Scott was getting more chalk for his hands, when he noticed the two men standing next to the deadlift platform that had been watching from afar. "That was impressive what you did back there and how you jumped in and coached those two," Briggs complimented. "Where did you learn that how to do that?" Briggs inquired.

"Oh, it was just basic physics and body mechanics. Nothing too special." Scott explained as he stepped toward the deadlift bar. "That was pretty cool to watch!" Whitaker exclaimed. "I don't think we have properly met yet. I'm Gabe Whitaker, and this is my buddy, Nathan Briggs." Both Briggs and Whitaker extended their hands. Scott stood there for a moment, realizing that these two men wanted to chat for a moment, and that he should probably engage instead of lifting the bar. He dusted his hands to remove the bulk of the chalk and shook both their hands firmly, while introducing himself. "My name is Malcom Kincaid, but I go by middle name 'Scott'. It's nice to meet both of you. Are you both lifters and coaches here?"

Briggs smiled, "We are owners, lifters, and trainers. I did not realize we had such a skilled individual amongst our patrons. Are you a professional lifter or wrestler?"

Scott chuckled, "Hell no! I lifted in throughout my youth and enjoy lifting heavy things when I can to destress outside of work. I grew up watching pro wrestling on TV, but no, I have never trained or participated. I just understand some of the basic movements."

Briggs and Whitaker both looked at each other bewildered, and simultaneously exclaimed, "How?!" Scott noticed they were equally curious and excited. He knew this look well from his day job.

"Well, I studied mechanical engineering in college and graduate school. In fact, I still study mechanical engineering. I teach and have a research program at the UMKC campus near the Country Club Plaza." Scott explained. He scratched his chin and continued, "Actually, I haven't been in KC very long. My wife and I just moved here from Houston before the term started, so I could take up a faculty position."

Scott enjoyed seeing the look of confusion and bewilderment on the two men's faces. It happened every time he confessed to being an academic. The realization was taking a moment to register. In the outside world, Scott looked like a lifter, and regular guy. The idea of him teaching in polo shirt or collared shirt with a tie was his alter ego during the day for his job. He enjoyed the duality of his roles as it made him feel like he was his own superhero in keeping his two lives and two identities completely separate.

"Wait, you're a professor?! And you lift here? Why?" Whitaker asked both stunned and trying to figure out why an academic would come to this gym.

"Simple," Scott explained. "I like old school gyms, and I try to avoid places where I might run into my students. I just want to lift, and a colleague told me about this place when I started." Scott smiled, and continued, "This place was exactly what I was looking for. I go unnoticed, and can lift, and this is a place where people are focused. Though, I was not expecting the ring when I first started. That's pretty cool."

Both Whitaker and Briggs just stood there dumbfounded, and amazed.

Back in the present, those same green eyes were narrowed and sharp. Briggs saw the hesitation in Scott's stare, saw him mentally drifting, and punished him for it.

Briggs charged. He didn't lock up. Instead, he dropped his center of gravity, drove his shoulder straight into Scott's midsection, and tackled the large man through the ropes. Both men spilled out onto the hard floor of the armory with a bone-rattling thud.

Scott gasped, the wind knocked completely out of him as the cold concrete bit into his spine.

"Pay attention!" Briggs yelled, looming over him. "The guy I met at the gym protected people. You? Right now, you're just a danger to yourself and everyone in this room!"

Scott felt the taunt and the rage boiling inside of him. Briggs was already up and pulling Scott up from the ground from underneath the arms. Scott was dazed and trying to regain his composure as he felt Briggs slide around maneuver Scott's head under his arm. "Vertical Suplex" Briggs growled under his breath, and he grabbed the top of Scott's training pants with his opposite hand. Scott felt the pull and posted off of Briggs' thigh and went completely vertical. Briggs held Scott suspended vertically mid-air for a moment, before

slowly moving toward the ring steps. Those still in the gym just watched and gaped and the two giants going at it. Seeing *The Commander*, also known as *The Bull*, effortlessly lift the equally large mechanical engineer sometimes referred to as *The Gorilla* was mesmerizing, and rare. Scott felt the tight and firm grip Briggs had on him as slowly and deliberately ascended the ring steps and walked along the ring apron. Even while inverted, Scott noted that Whitaker seemed genuinely shocked at the display of power from Briggs. Briggs was not usually this aggressive with him. Briggs called the drop, and guided Scott down to take the bump. While coordinated and smooth, it had the right effect of looking painful and devastating to everyone watching in the armory. Scott braced his core and absorbed the impact across his back on the ring apron like Briggs had taught him years ago.

Briggs immediately hopped off the ring apron and shoved Scott under the bottom rope, sliding in right behind him before Scott could even reach his knees. Briggs did not wait for him to regain control. Briggs brough a knee straight into Scott's chest, knocking the wind out of him again, with an audible heave. Scott felt himself hit the canvas. Before he registered the moment, Briggs had grabbed both his ankle and applied figure-four submission. Briggs locked in the maneuver tight and firm and twisted Scott's ankle. Suddenly, Briggs arched his back toward the mat while lifting his hips. The surge of pain was like a thunderbolt through Scott's calves, quads, and lower spine. *He's applying a real submission!* Scott thought between surges of pain. The sharpness increased as Briggs breathed deep and thrusted his hips higher.

Whitaker's face showed a look of shock. Scott was in pain, surprised, and confused. But only for a second. Briggs' tactic had worked. The pain, and attack from a man that had become his mentor was just what Scott needed to clear the fog of his emotions and what had been done to Tommy. Scott gritted his teeth, braced his core, and lifted his chest off the mat by pushing his hands hard into the canvas as if he was trying to do a push up. Scott gained enough control, that his brain started working on the physics again. The pain was overwhelming, but Scott's will was stronger, and he was not about to let Briggs submit him in front of these bystanders. Scott rotated his hips hard, and the force was enough to break Briggs' balance so that both men tumbled sideways. Scott could not see the half smile that formed on Briggs' face as he fell, but Whitaker did.

No more. Time to focus on mechanics and take *The Commander* down. The mechanical engineer was back. Scott stopped thrashing and started analyzing the situation, treating the combat like an equation. He mapped Briggs' mass, energy, and targeted his weakness.

Relying on his deep core and precision strength, he waited for Briggs to charge at him, before catching *The Commander* under one arm and hip tossing him onto the canvas.

Briggs landed flat on his back. Scott capitalized and dropped an elbow right onto Briggs' sternum expelling an audible "oof" from Briggs. Scott jumped back up, and Briggs slowly rolled to the side.

Whitaker smiled as the two men circled each other. Scott engaged in a tie up with Briggs. Scott knew Briggs would go high, so he shot low. Scott hooked Briggs right leg as Briggs tried to grab his head, but Briggs was too slow. Scott had the leverage. He pulled Briggs onto his shoulders and let the momentum carry Briggs backward to slam him face-first into the canvas.

Scott grabbed Briggs by the head and pulled him up by the head. Briggs tried to strike at Scott's midsection, but Scott anticipated the attempt and dodged. Both men were breathing heavy, and Scott felt the eyes of everyone left in the gym watching. Scott launched Briggs into the opposite turnbuckle with an Irish Whip, but Briggs countered. Scott expected the attempt. The Mechanical Engineer took advantage and sprung the trap. As he let the turnbuckle catch him. He knew Briggs would charge again. And he did.

Scott sidestepped, moving with fluid, mechanical precision, letting Briggs dive between the ropes into an empty space. Briggs fortunately grabbed the ropes to stop the momentum from taking his shoulder into the ring post. Scott grabbed both of Briggs' ankles and thrusted them high invert Briggs and catch him around the waist. A perfect setup for Scott, to powerslam the large man in the middle of the ring. Briggs was too tired and slowing down. He sprung up slow and made a feeble attempt to regain leverage. Just as Scott anticipated, Briggs used the ropes as a catapult to launch himself at Scott. Scott sidestepped and brought a knee into Briggs' gut. Not hard, but enough to stop the momentum and charge. Scott captured both of Briggs' arms and locked in a tight double-underhook.

The familiar grip triggered an immediate memory.

It was a late night a few months after Whitaker and Briggs had asked Scott about training to participate in the local wrestling circuit with them. Scott could not believe he had agreed but enjoyed the new experience. The gym was empty except for Scott and Briggs. Scott had been treating the ring like a laboratory, trying to engineer the perfect finishing maneuver.

"You're rushing the drop," Briggs had instructed, wiping the sweat from his brow. To Briggs, the ring was a 20x20 grid where physical law was enforced, and a move was a tactical deployment. "You have the mechanical advantage, Scott, but you're missing the psychology."

Scott adjusted his black wrist tape, his broad forehead furrowed in thought. “The double-underhook neutralizes their arms and gives me total leverage over their center of mass. The physics are sound.”

“The physics are fine, but a finisher isn’t just an equation. It’s a statement,” Briggs corrected. “Don’t just hit the piledriver. Hoist them up and hold them. Give it a half-pause, like Whitaker does for his Cornerstone. Let them realize they have absolutely no control over what happens next. Center it so it is clean, devastating, and feels like a calculated, irreversible decision.”

Scott had nodded, absorbing the lesson. He had hooked Briggs’ arms, hoisted the veteran up for a classic double-underhook piledriver, and found the exact balance point. In that moment, the move transformed from a simple lift into a terrifying display of inevitable power.

Back in the present, the gym was dead silent.

Scott’s heavy forearms flexed as he hoisted Briggs completely off the canvas. He held the veteran suspended mid-air for his signature setup, *Structural Failure*. He hit the half-pause perfectly, adjusting his grip mid-air for absolute precision.

The tension in the armory was suffocating. Every wrestler and lifter watching expecting Briggs to get driven through the mat with a brutal snap driver drop.

Instead, Scott bent his knees and carefully guided Briggs safely back down to his feet.

Scott released the hold and stepped back. He was covered in sweat, chest heaving, but his eyes were clear. The blinding rage was gone.

Briggs rolled his shoulders, a rare, genuine smile cracking his stoic features. “There he is. There’s The Architect.”

Whitaker leaned over the top rope, letting out a long whistle. “I’m not gonna lie, boys, I thought we were about to need an ambulance tonight. Glad to see the math department is back in session.”

Scott finally let out a short, tired laugh. The heavy guilt of not being there for Tommy still lingered in his chest, but the poison was gone. He looked at Briggs and Whitaker, feeling the profound weight of their brotherhood. He had his foundation back.