

# FIGHTING CHANCE

By B.K. Stevens

## Chapter 1

From the minute he walked out to the center of the gym, something about him felt wrong.

Not that he looked all that intimidating. He was Bobby Davis, the announcer said, from Kelly's Dojo in Richmond. He seemed about the same age as Coach Colson—mid twenties—but was several inches shorter, with sort of a baby face and hair this weird dark orange, slicked back hard from his forehead and combed to a precise point at the back of his neck. He dyes his hair, I thought, and every morning he must work in a ton of mousse and comb for ten minutes straight. And his black belt wasn't tied right—just a bulky double knot, instead of the tight, neat square Coach always insisted on.

So it wasn't the way he looked that bothered me. The thing was, he didn't stretch out at all. He just planted his feet shoulder-width apart, folded his arms over his chest, and stood there watching Coach, his mouth twisting in a half-smile, half-smirk. That's dumb, I thought. Everybody should warm up before a sparring match. This guy definitely should. He'd barely won his first two fights, and Coach had aced both of his. So why was Davis taking it easy, looking smug?

Coach wasn't taking it easy. He was swinging his arms, rolling his shoulders, shaking his legs. He can't wait to get started, I thought. Well, that's typical Coach. On either side of them, in the other two masking-tape circles we'd marked on the floor last night, little kids and middle-school students traded kicks and punches while referees tried to keep them from hurting each other. Floor judges watched from their folding chairs, and parents crowded in with video cameras, shouting encouragement. Coach paused to catch his breath, turned to us with a grin, and started bouncing in place.

I sat on the home-team bench with the other five members of the Ridgecrest High martial arts club, waiting for the match to begin. Derrick turned to me and frowned.

"Damn, Matt," he said. "Why is he even out there? The other coaches aren't competing. And the way he's jumping up and down—he's acting like a kid."

I lifted a shoulder. "It's his first chance to compete as a black belt, and it's the first tournament the school's ever hosted. Naturally he's excited. Me, too. I never thought we'd draw this many people."

I glanced around the gym—over a hundred competitors, most in white uniforms, some in black, a few in red or dark blue. At least twice that many spectators crowded the bleachers, cheering while they shoveled down popcorn and nachos from the concession stands. We'd drawn people from as far away as Lynchburg, Coach had said, even a guy from Roanoke.

Berk sat forward on the bench, his fingers tapping against his knees, his whole body bristling with excitement, like an electrical current was running clear through him and his skull might light up any minute. "Coach shouldn't have any problem winning this

one. It's almost too bad. I wanted him to get at least one real fight, so we could see what he's like when he's up against someone good. This guy can't do anything but block."

"And kick," Joseph said. "His front kicks—those are very fast."

"But they don't have much power," I said. "They seem to be his only kicks, too, and he doesn't use his hands enough. He didn't try a single combination. Plus he always seems a little off balance, and he shies away from close contact. Black belts should be more aggressive. They should have more moves they can draw on."

"Like you'd know," Derrick said, and snorted. "So you're top belt now. So what? You think that makes you an expert?"

Derrick still hadn't gotten over it that I'd been promoted to green belt at our last testing, and he hadn't. "Top belt in a six-person club is no big deal," I said, "and obviously I'm no expert. All I'm saying is, Davis scored all his points with last-minute front kicks. For a black belt, that seems pretty limited."

"He's scared," Derrick said. "*That's* why he only kicks. He's afraid to get close enough to get punched. And okay, so he looks built, but he's short. *I* could take him out."

No, you couldn't, I thought. Skill matters most—Coach had told us that, lots of times. Size doesn't matter half as much, he'd said. But Derrick's a football player, the best tackle our school has. To him, everything comes down to size. You'd think he might've changed his mind when a skinny fifteen-year-old girl from Appomattox beat him in his first match. Naturally, though, Derrick said he'd lost because the referee did a lousy job, because floor judges always let girls win. He couldn't have lost because he's a sloppy fighter who's never practiced hard enough to get better.

I glanced down at the yellow pad Coach had left on the bench, at the notes he'd jotted during our matches. The words stood out on a page bordered with doodles of ducks, of two flowering trees, of a lopsided house with a chimney. "*Derrick,*" Coach had written. "*Needs to work on speed—shouldn't count on strength. Forgets to protect midsection. Weak techniques.*" That summed Derrick up, all right.

The match got started. Coach Colson and Bobby Davis faced each other as the referee gave instructions: Light contact only, no uncontrolled moves endangering either fighter, no hand contact to head, face, or neck. Coach looked intense but smiling. Davis stared straight at him, eyes narrowed to thin slits. They wore similar protective gear—helmets, blue chest pads, gloves, leg pads, foot pads. The referee nodded, they touched gloves and backed away from each other, and the referee raised his hand and brought it down.

"*Shee jahk!*" he yelled.

Berk held out his cell phone to film the match. For the first minute, not much happened. They both seemed cautious, sizing each other up. Coach used his sharply focused side kicks, Davis used his limp front kicks, but they both blocked effectively. Nobody connected. Nobody scored. Then, his eyes still fixed on Coach, Davis let his arms droop, exposing his midsection. There's an opening for you, Coach, I thought.

Sure enough, Coach spotted it and moved in, aiming a side kick at Davis's stomach. But at the last possible second, Davis brought his right arm up fast, knocking the kick aside so hard he threw Coach off balance, making him hop backwards to keep from falling over. I saw Davis's mouth twitch, like he was trying not to smile.

“Coach nearly got him that time,” Berk said. “Davis really let his guard down.”

“Yeah, he did,” I said, but felt puzzled, almost uneasy. The way Davis had been watching Coach, the way he’d brought his arm up at exactly the right moment, the way he’d fought a smile afterwards—it was almost like he’d let his guard down on purpose, like he’d been testing Coach to see how he’d react. But why would he do that? No reason, I decided, and focused on the match again.

They’d gone back to circling each other, to kicking without connecting, to taking turns blocking each other’s moves. Right before the first two-minute period ended, Coach took advantage of Davis’s post-kick wobble to use the combination he’d drilled us on—roundhouse kick, right jab, left punch. Stepping in close after the kick, he landed a solid punch to Davis’s chest. For a moment, Davis looked a little surprised, a little mad. Then he shrugged.

Coach bounced back, turned to us, grinned, and bowed, bending deeply at the waist, sweeping his right arm high into the air. All six of us shot up from the bench.

“Way to go, Coach!” Berk shouted. Next to him, Suzette jumped up and down, clapping, and Berk started forward like he was going to hug her. Then he pulled back, settling for giving her a thumbs-up.

“Point!” Graciana cried, her long black ponytail flipping back over her shoulder. “Point!”

“About time,” Derrick said, and sat down.

It was pretty cool—like Coach had been holding back, passing up chances for easy points, waiting to score with that particular combination so he could show us how effective it is. Now, that’s a teacher, I thought. “Great combination, Coach,” I called.

Joseph seemed to be having the same thoughts I was. “Most instructive,” he said. “Mr. Colson said we should try to score such way—roundhouse kick, right jab, left punch. Now he has performed one, to demonstrate us how to aspire.”

Derrick drew his head back. “To demonstrate us how to aspire? What’s that—Latin? What the hell are you saying?”

“You know exactly what he’s saying,” I said. “Don’t be a jerk, Derrick.” Joseph’s from Kenya. His family left five or six years ago, after his father got killed, and moved around until the Episcopal Church found his mother a job in Ridgecrest. In some ways, Joseph’s English is probably better than mine. It’s definitely better than Derrick’s. He’s got a formal way of putting things, though, and sometimes his vocabulary’s off—natural enough, I guess, if you learn English in a classroom instead of at home. There’s no point making a big deal whenever something comes out strange.

Coach Colson didn’t bother to sit down during the one-minute break between rounds, just stretched and smiled. Bobby Davis didn’t sit down, either. He still stood with his arms folded, watching Coach like he was measuring him. On the wall behind them hung a huge yellow banner, with glossy black letters saying, “Ridgecrest High School—Twenty-Five Years of Serving Our Community.” It’d been there since September and looked limp, almost tired, as if after so many months of hearing people shout and smelling people sweat, it wanted to roll up in a closet and rest.

I glanced up at the bleachers, at the Ridgecrest High cheering section. Of course, Dr. Lombardo had come. She'd been principal for ten years, and I don't think she'd ever missed a school event—not a junior varsity volleyball game, not a chess club ice-cream social. She'd announced a few weeks ago that she was resigning to become superintendent for the whole district, but she still came to everything at the school. Mr. Quinn, our guidance counselor, sat next to her, talking to some coaches. Four or five teachers had shown up, too. And most guys from the basketball team had come, including our captain, Paul Ericson. I was especially happy to see Paul, especially since I'd done well. Even with basketball season over, even though he'd be graduating soon, it still felt good to impress him.

Then there were families—Berk's mother, Joseph's mother and sisters, Derrick's father, Suzette's parents, Graciana's parents. My own parents had said they'd come, but I'd told them not to bother. There won't be much to see, I'd said—I'll probably be eliminated after one four-minute match. They'd glanced at each other, and said, "If you're sure, Matt," and looked relieved.

No big surprise. When they come to my basketball games, they try to act interested but check their watches every two minutes, and afterwards they talk about how it's sad people boo and stamp their feet when players from the other team take foul shots, about how much more respectful people were when they went to school. I could imagine how they'd react at a martial arts tournament—my mother covering her eyes whenever someone connected with a kick, my father frowning about how violent it seemed. So when they'd stayed home, I'd been glad.

As things turned out, though, I'd lasted through three matches, getting a second-place trophy. And now, especially since everyone else in the club had family here, I felt almost sorry my parents hadn't seen me win.

I shrugged it off, glanced at the other side of the bleachers, and spotted Marie Ramsey, this Goth-type girl who'd basically haunted my social studies class last year, sitting hunched up and silent in the back row, staring at the floor. At lunch, too, she always sits alone, drawing in this sketchbook she carries around. I wouldn't have expected to see her at anything related to sports—and, as usual, she was alone, staring at the floor. Well, her sister had committed suicide barely two weeks ago, and everybody said her whole family's messed up—her father's in prison, her mother's a drunk, and her brother has a long record of minor-league crimes. Maybe Marie just needed to get out of her house, and she hadn't much cared where she went.

The break ended. Coach Colson and Bobby Davis came to the center of the ring again, touched gloves again, squared off again. This time, Coach didn't hold back. He moved in close, scoring two quick points with his side kick, knocking Davis's blocks aside easily. Davis changed his approach, too.

“Look,” I said to Berk. “Davis is bouncing around more, and his stance seems better.”

“It's the competition,” Berk said. “He's down three points and wants to fight back. He still hasn't scored, though.”

Coach tried a front kick without connecting. He's getting tired, I thought. I saw sweat working down his cheeks, saw his face growing redder.



Davis still hadn't broken a sweat, and losing all those points didn't seem to bother him. His mouth curled into a mocking grin. Suddenly, almost casually, he landed a gentle front kick, roundhouse kick combination, catching Coach first in the stomach, then in the ribs.

"That was *good*," Graciana said. "That was *hard!* *Right* past Coach's block! And he didn't even put his leg down between kicks!"

"It's only one point," I said. But Davis had never tried anything but a simple front kick before. Where had that combination come from, and why had his stance improved so much? I sat forward, pressing an elbow against my leg, resting my chin on my fist, straining for a closer look.

At least, finally, Davis seemed to be getting tired. I saw his hands drop to his sides. Coach obviously saw it, too, and saw his chance. He moved in. He's going to use that combination again, I thought—roundhouse kick, right jab, left punch.

This time, before Coach could connect with the kick, Davis stepped lightly to the side. When Coach came in for the jab, Davis stopped him with a soft, sweeping block. He deflected the punch with his right hand, pushed it aside with his left, and followed up with a quick back-handed slap to Coach's face.

It wasn't a point, but it bothered me. This wasn't like the hard blocks Coach had taught us. This was faster, more flowing, much more effective. And the slap looked too soft to hurt but seemed almost like an insult, almost like a dare. I didn't like it.

Derrick didn't, either. He stood up. "What was that? A slap? Don't you know how to punch? You wimp. Fight like a man!"

The referee cautioned Davis about contact to the face. Davis nodded, one corner of his mouth nudging upward. Something's wrong, I thought. Coach grinned at Davis, turned to us, and shrugged. "No big deal," he seemed to be saying. But it *was* a big deal. I knew it, though I couldn't have said why.

They started up, and Coach moved in again, still with the same combination. This time, when Coach lifted his hand for the jab, Davis exploded with a precise, powerful side kick, catching Coach squarely in the armpit. That's a pressure point. I winced, imagining the pain. Gasping, Coach staggered backward, shaking his head numbly, exposing his throat.

And Bobby Davis stepped forward deliberately and spun around. There was a second when I saw him clearly, saw his eyes careful and businesslike as he marked his target. Then a spinning hook kick, then the impact between heel and throat, and then Davis stood squarely on the floor again, kick complete and perfect, stance solid, fists still lifted, practiced and ready.

I couldn't actually have heard Coach Colson's last gasp for air, not with the gym so noisy. I know that. But I remember the sound anyway. I know I heard Graciana's single, agonized scream, and saw Coach collapse to the floor, and felt Berk's fingers dig into my arm as he called out, already hopeless. Then, somehow, I was in the center circle, kneeling next to Coach, cradling his head in my arms.

"Where's the doctor?" I shouted. I looked up at the people in the bleachers, most still not realizing what had happened, many still hopping down the steps to get Cokes or chips. "Damn it, Coach *said* there'd be a doctor!"

The doctor got there in seconds, and he did his best. He sent someone running to call 911, prodded Coach Colson's throat with expert fingers, crouched on the floor to try to force air into his body. It was no good.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice heavy with regret. "His larynx is crushed. He's dead."