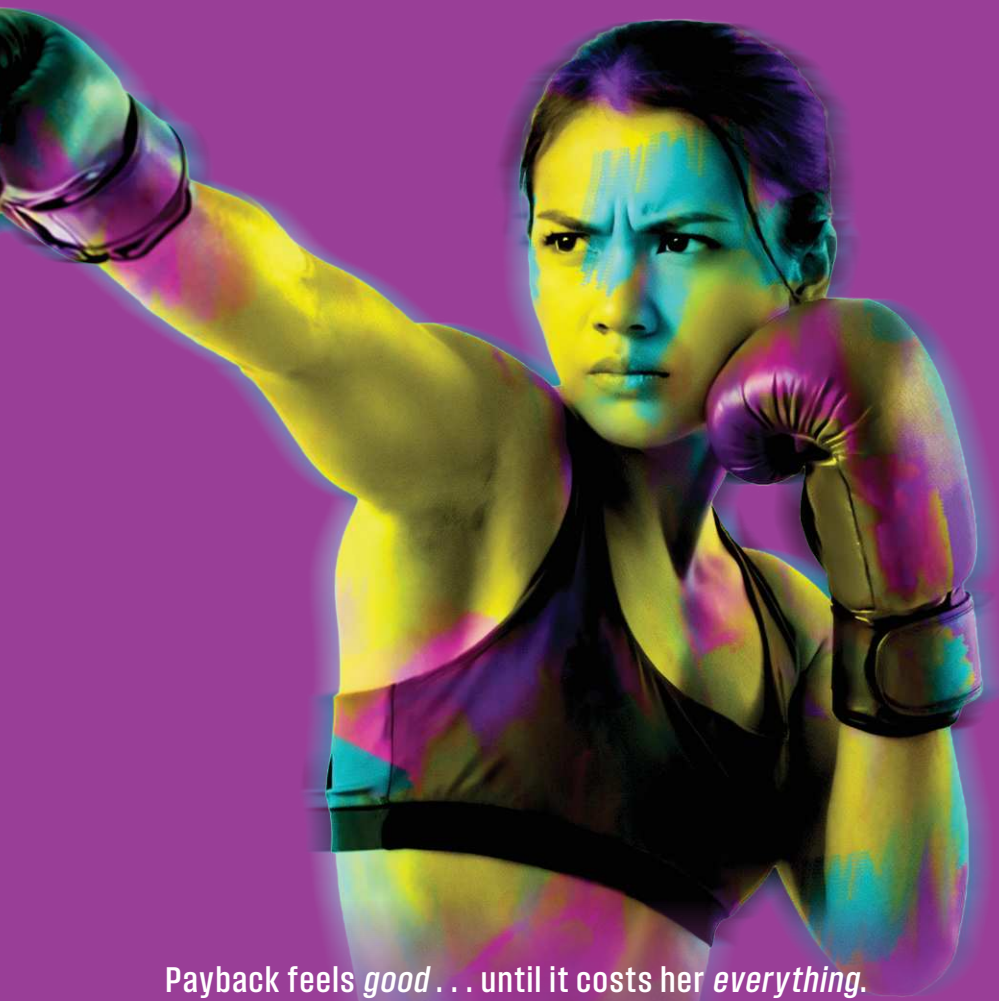
12 ROUNDS



Payback feels *good* . . . until it costs her *everything*.

# SELF-DEFENSE

EVAN JACOBS

CHAPTER 1

# BULLIED

Emilia!" Nicole Barnes yelled. "Where's your big mouth now?"

Nervously, Emilia Alonto kept walking. She and Nicole had science class together. They went to Pine High School. Emilia was a freshman. Nicole was a sophomore.

She wanted to beat Emilia up.

Nicole was short and stocky. Her blond hair fell below her shoulders. She always made fun of Emilia for being tall and thin. It had happened every day since the school year started. Now it was November. Emilia was tired of it.

"What does your mom think of the way you treat people?" Emilia had asked Nicole earlier that day. "Or am I the only lucky one you insult?"

Right away, Emilia knew she should have kept quiet.

"Talking about my mom? Really?" Nicole asked. "You're dead! I'll find you after school."

Emilia had tried to apologize. Nicole ignored her. Now she was following Emilia and Kacey home.

Kacey Chen was Emilia's best friend. Unlike Emilia, Kacey didn't talk much. They were different in other ways too. Kacey was a junior. She also was much shorter than Emilia.

Tim Costa and Anya Santos were Nicole's friends. They walked with her.

Kacey and Emilia sped up.

"Turn around, Emilia!" Nicole shouted.

Nicole ran up and pushed Emilia. Tim and Anya laughed. Then Nicole grabbed Emilia's arm. She twisted Emilia around.

A bunch of students were following them now. Many had their phones out.

*Great!* Emilia thought. *They're going to record me getting beaten up.*

Emilia's fists tightened into balls. *Hit her!* she thought to herself. *Do it before she hits me.*

In her head, Emilia argued. *No. I can't. I've never hit anyone in my life.*

"Talking about my mom?" Nicole asked. "I dare you to say it again."

"Look," Emilia started. "I said I was sorry. You pick on me—"

"So what?" Nicole interrupted.

She threw a punch at Emilia's head. Emilia moved out of the way. Nicole threw another punch. This one didn't miss. It hit Emilia in the stomach.

Emilia couldn't move. Pain shot through her body.

Nicole smiled. Then she threw another punch. It hit the side of Emilia's face.

Everything went quiet for Emilia. She fell to the ground.

Nicole, Tim, and Anya laughed. Then they ran away.

Emilia lay on the ground. All she saw were the legs of other students. They were the ones who'd watched what had happened.

Only Kacey offered comfort. She put her hand on Emilia's shoulder.

"Are you okay, Em?" she asked.

CHAPTER 2

# DAVEY

"How could this happen?" Emilia's mom asked. "Where were the adults? Why didn't the school do anything?"

Emilia sat in the living room with her parents. The family lived in a one-story, ranch-style home.

"Mom," Emilia said. "I've told you a million times. Nicole followed me home. The fight wasn't near school."

*Calling it a fight is generous,* Emilia thought. *Nicole fought. I talked myself out of it.*

Emilia's stomach still hurt. Nicole had punched her hard. The side of Emilia's head was bruised too.

Kacey had called to check on Emilia. Aside

from talking to Kacey, Emilia hadn't touched her phone. She didn't want to see what people might say.

"We should call the police," Mrs. Alonto said. "That girl should be expelled. Maybe she should be arrested."

"No, Mom," Emilia said. "Don't do anything. You'll make it worse."

"Emilia," her dad said. "We have to do something."

"Just let me deal with it!" Emilia cried.

"And let you get beat up again?" Mrs. Alonto snapped.

Emilia started to imagine all the problems her parents would cause.

*Mom and Dad don't understand. Maybe Nicole will get in trouble. So what? That won't stop her. She'll just be angrier. This will never end. I'm only a freshman. Yet high school is ruined.*

◎

After dinner, Emilia's dad asked her to go to the store with him.

She shook her head. “No way! Look at my face. I don’t want people to see me like this.”

“I need help shopping,” Mr. Alonto replied. “You always complain that I forget things.”

Emilia sighed. He was right. The teen decided to go. She didn’t want to be alone with her mom anyway.

*She keeps asking if I’m okay. I just want to forget what happened.*

Emilia’s dad drove to a strip mall. It was small. Her school was nearby. But there was no supermarket in sight. He parked the car.

“What are we doing here?” Emilia asked. “Where are we going?”

“Here,” Mr. Alonto said.

He pointed to a storefront. The sign said it was Davey’s Gym. Below the name, the sign read Boxing for Fitness and Mental Health.

“A boxing gym?” Emilia asked.

“You told us to let you figure it out. I told you I want to help. This is me helping you.”

He got out of the car. Emilia did too.

The gym was a long, open space. But its windows were tinted. It was hard to see anything inside.

"How did you and Mom find this place?"

"*We* didn't," her dad said. He walked toward the front door. "See if you like it. If you do, then I'll tell your mom. A guy I work with told me about this gym a while back. His son went here. He was having problems with bullies. Sounds to me like that's what Nicole is. You need to be able to protect yourself."

"Mom's not going to let me box," Emilia said.

"Let me handle that."

Emilia followed her dad. They went into the gym. It had a large ring with a blue mat. Near the ring, rows of heavy bags hung from the ceiling. Music played as some people hit the bags.

A tall man with short brown hair approached Emilia's dad. "You must be Mr. Alonto," the man said. His tone was direct.

"Just call me Antonio," Emilia's dad replied.

"Hello, Antonio," the man said. He pushed up his black glasses. "I'm Davey."

The men shook hands.

"Thanks for letting us stop by," Mr. Alonto said. "This is my daughter, Emilia."

Davey stared at her. He seemed to be looking for something.

"You've got quite a bruise," Davey said. He pointed to the side of her head.

Emilia didn't know what to say.

Davey continued. "May I ask you something?" He moved closer to Emilia. His dark brown eyes stared into hers.

"Okay," Emilia said.

"Why do you want to box?"

"I don't know," Emilia started. "Until my dad brought me here, I hadn't really thought about it."

"Well, you better know. Boxing is serious business. Don't do it unless you know why you're doing it."

Emilia hesitated. "I've been bullied," she said slowly. "I want to get even."

"What about after that?" Davey's serious expression didn't change. "Because there's always going to be another bully."

"I guess." Emilia was getting nervous. "I don't know what to say."

"That's okay," Davey said. "Maybe if you train here, you will. You won't just learn how to box, though. At this gym, you'll work on your mind too. How you think about things will change."

"Okay," Emilia said.

*Using my mind? For boxing? Isn't it just throwing punches?*

"This gym isn't just a place to box," Davey went on. "It's a place to work on yourself. What I teach you is for self-defense only. So you'll know what to do if you *have to* fight."

Emilia smiled.

*If I know how to fight, maybe I can beat up Nicole.*

# 12 ROUNDS

# SELF-DEFENSE

After Emilia is attacked by a bully, her dad takes her to a boxing gym. Emilia wants to use what she learns at the gym to get even with the bully. But as the gym's owner trains her, he tells Emilia what he's teaching her is for self-defense. Will Emilia listen to her trainer, or will her desire for revenge be too strong?

LEXILE HL240L

ISBN: 978-1-63889-632-6

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