

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.

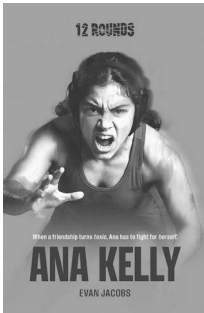
Nicole, Tim, and Anya laughed. Then they ran away.

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

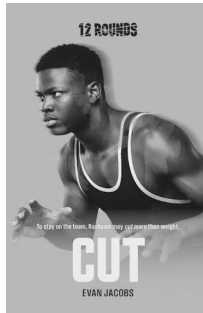
Only Kacey offered comfort. She put her hand on Emilia's shoulder.

"Are you okay, Em?" she asked.

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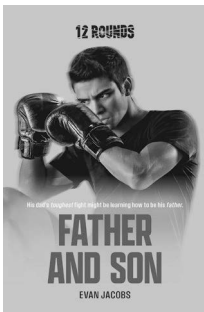
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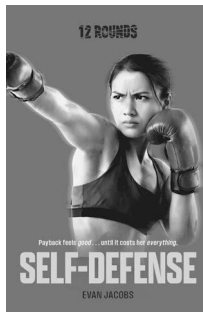
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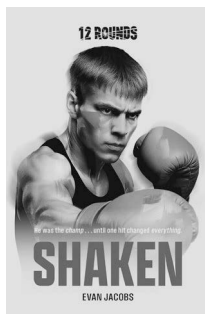
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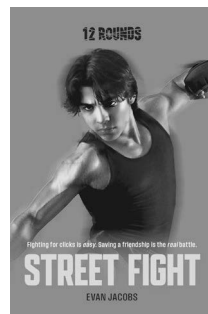
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SELF-DEFENSE



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?