

A close-up of a child's eye, looking directly at the viewer. The iris is a vibrant blue, and within it, a small, detailed image of a space station or satellite is visible. The surrounding skin and eyelashes are in soft focus.

the SPACE BETWEEN



EVAN JACOBS

Chapter 1

ROLLING

Remember to remain calm,” Sensei Chen said. “And breathe. Do that and you’ll keep a clear head.”

Sensei Chen spoke to Eric Davis and Greg Wall. They were “rolling” in the middle of Chen MMA Center. *Rolling* was a sparring session when two people practiced their mixed martial arts moves. There were kicks, punches, blocks, and chokeholds. None of the moves were at full force. Many of Sensei’s students watched the session.

The MMA center was always busy. Sensei’s students worked on heavy bags. Others jumped rope. Some rolled on the mats. Everyone worked hard to be good.

Eric worked harder than most. He was a 16-year-old sophomore at Starling High School. It was in the sleepy town of Deermont, California.

When Eric wasn't rolling, he lifted weights. He also jogged for cardio. Eating well was part of the plan too.

Eric wasn't the most popular at school. He was known for being into MMA. His main focus was jujitsu. The school's wrestling coach wanted him on the team. So did the wrestlers. Eric wasn't interested in wrestling. MMA allowed him to do more. He could fight standing up or on the ground.

Eric loved rolling. He enjoyed combat—using his body as a weapon. It took skill. The tougher the match the better.

There were a few ways to win. But submitting an opponent quickly felt great. Getting them to tap three times—no matter when it came—was the best part. To tap out meant an end to the match.

Eric loved to win. And he almost always did. There were many trophies at home to prove it. The MMA center also displayed tournament trophies. Eric had played a big part in winning them.

“Honesty. Integrity. Intensity,” Sensei Chen said. He addressed the students watching. It was Sensei's MMA creed. The three words were on every wall of the center. “Bring those traits to a match—always. You can never lose if you do.”

Eric and Greg were both black belts in jujitsu. Eric was a bantamweight. He weighed 135 pounds. Greg weighed a little more.

Their matches were exciting. They moved fast. Eric was on top of Greg. Greg was in a chokehold. But he somehow rolled out of it.

Greg turned. Suddenly Eric was on his back.

The students watching cheered. Many thought Greg was as good as Eric. Some even thought he was better. But whenever they rolled, Eric always won.

Greg pressed his weight on top of Eric. He was trying to impose his will. It would've worked on anyone else.

Eric stayed calm. *Breathe*, he told himself. He slowly wrapped his legs around Greg's. It was a leg lock. Greg tried to fight. His legs were strong. Eric didn't care. He knew his were stronger.

Then Greg made a big mistake. He tried to adjust himself. That's when Eric pushed himself off the mat. With all of his strength, he turned Greg over. Now Greg was on his back.

The students cheered for Eric now.

Before Greg knew it, he was in a chokehold again. Eric's arm was around his throat. It was getting tighter.

Eric could feel the energy in Greg's body. There was confidence before. Now he was tense. He couldn't breathe. Eric wouldn't let him.

"Match!" Sensei Chen said.

Eric and Greg immediately let go of each other. They both got to their feet.

The students clapped. What a great match!

Rolling wasn't about winning or losing. It was about practicing what you'd learned. Getting better was the goal.

The students at Chen MMA knew one thing. In a real match, Eric would've won. He always won on the mat.

Chapter 2

MICHELLE

Eric rode his bike home. He liked to relax after training. Riding slowly gave him time to think. Cars zoomed past.

There was still homework to do. It wasn't much. Algebra and chemistry.

"No intense rolling for a while," Sensei Chen had said. This was right after Eric and Greg had rolled. "We've got the county tournament coming up. I want everyone ready. Our team needs to be injury free."

Chen MMA had about 60 students. Most of them were teenagers. Ten to 15 of them would be in the tournament. Those would be the best students.

Deermont was in Steel County. The tournament would be countywide. The town was small. It had strip malls and schools. Industrial buildings surrounded it. Eric didn't know much about them.

Eric reached into his pocket. He took out his phone. No messages. His heart sank. He'd been hoping for a message from Michelle Thomas. They were dating. Four dates, four weekends in a row.

He'd thought they were together. They were a "thing." But Lance Espinoza told him differently.

"Bro," Lance had said, laughing. "I saw Michelle at the Dekker mall. She was totally macking with some guy from Dekker High School. I think he's on the water polo team."

Eric knew Michelle hung out in Dekker. It was the city next to Deermond. Her cousins lived there. She had friends who liked to hang out there too.

He'd called Michelle after hearing that. She didn't pick up. Now it had been two weeks. Eric still hadn't talked to her.

"Dude," Liam Axelson had said. "You should totally hose that guy. Let's go to Dekker."

"Yeah," Lance had chimed in. "We'll totally get him at the mall in front of everybody. Take him down!"

Lance and Liam had laughed about it. They'd talked about how Eric could get revenge. He could use MMA moves. It was payback time.

Eric had smiled.

He knew he could beat up Michelle's dates. There weren't too many people who would mess with him.

His friends had missed the point. They didn't notice

how bummed he was. Neither asked if he was okay. They just assumed he was. Eric was a tough MMA guy. Nothing was supposed to bother him.

Chen MMA kept him away from other activities. He didn't get involved in any of the school sports' drama. At the same time, he wasn't part of anything at Starling.

He didn't have a lot of close friends. It was hard getting close to people. Even Lance and Liam were only acquaintances. They played football and baseball. He mostly hung out with them at school. It was rare to see them casually.

Of course he didn't want to get Michelle back by fighting. He shouldn't have to. She was the one who had bailed. He'd been happy with her. If she didn't want to be with him, then screw her.

"You'll slaughter that guy," Liam had said. "Michelle will come running back."

"For real," Lance had said.

Eric had smiled and shrugged. No way would that work.

Now, as he rode his bike home, he still felt the same way.

the SPACE BETWEEN

HONESTY. INTEGRITY. INTENSITY.

Eric lives by his dojo's creed. MMA is his life. When his old girlfriend moves back to town, she shatters everything he believes in. Danielle now goes by Dan. Eric's honesty and integrity are questioned. What does it mean to live your truth, and what happens when others are cruelly ignorant?

