



Below The Belt

By Sarah Mayberry

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To outfit his new gym, trainer Cooper Fitzgerald is looking for fresh boxing talent. Male boxing talent, that is. So what on earth is he thinking by taking on Jamie Sawyer? She's stubborn, difficult, aggressive—and far too hot for the kind of close contact training requires. But her skill in the ring is turning his professional head.

Too bad his isn't the only head that's turning. Jamie and her skimpy little shorts have all the guys forgetting the power she packs in a punch. And when Jamie offers Cooper her irresistible body—no strings attached—he's down for the count. But can Cooper keep the line between trainer and sex buddy...or is he setting himself up for another knockout?

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Editorial Review

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Cooper "the fist" Fitzgerald adjusted the collar on his silk shirt and tweaked the cuffs on his jacket. Despite how well-made and well-cut the suit was, it felt wrong. He'd spent half his life in workout clothes, covered in sweat—he wasn't a suit kind of guy and probably never would be. But he'd come courting, and he was smart enough to know that he needed to look the part if he was going to convince Ray Marshall to leave his current trainer and join Fitzgerald Fighters' Gym.

Before hitting the doorbell and announcing his arrival, Cooper squinted at the sleek, modern house Ray had just bought. Situated on the beachfront of the increasingly exclusive Sydney suburb of Bronte, he figured the place was worth well over 1.5 million. But he already knew that Ray wasn't hard up for cash. If Cooper was going to woo him to his stable, it was going to be about more than money. It was going to be about offering him the one thing that all fighters wanted: immortality. Just like every fighter who'd ever donned leather and sweated his rounds in the ring, Ray wanted to be remembered. Ali, Sugar Ray, Tyson—no one would ever forget their names, even if Tyson was as infamous these days as he was famous. And Cooper knew he could make Ray unforgettable. He had all the raw ingredients to become a legend of the sport rather than some guy who'd gotten lucky with a few heavy purses. Together, they could fly high.

It was getting to the "together" bit that was going to take some fancy footwork, since Ray had been with his current trainer since he started.

Aware that he was stalling, Cooper hit the bell. He was nervous. Like the suit, this was the part of setting up his own establishment that made him feel the least comfortable. He was a fighter, not some slick sales guy with a line of patter. Hell, he was only thirty-four. Not young by boxing standards, but if his body hadn't given out on him, he'd still be in the ring, giving up-and-comers like Ray a pounding. When he'd bought the gym last year, it had been with the long-term in mind. No way had he planned to be training at this age. That was supposed to come later. *Much* later.

He glanced at his hands. A scar ran across his left knuckles. He rubbed it absently. He missed fighting. Stupid to pretend otherwise. But there was no point spending the rest of his life thinking about what might have been. The doctors had given him a clear choice after he'd detached the retina in his left eye in his last fight—keep fighting and go blind, or retire.

Some choice.

"Hey, man, good to see you," Ray said as he opened the door. He gave Cooper a one-armed hug around the shoulders, the muscles of his big arms hard against Cooper's back.

A heavyweight, Ray was an inch taller than Cooper, with a broad-nosed, heavy-browed face and olive skin. He wore his dark hair shaved close to his scalp, a style that made it easier for training and disguised the fact that it was rapidly receding.

"Good to see you, too," Cooper said. Before he'd retired three months ago, he and Ray had trained together for a while. There was plenty of mutual respect between them, a good foundation for a future partnership.

"Come on in and check out my new pad," Ray said with a big grin.

Cooper followed him along a white carpeted hallway, the plush pile so deep and thick underfoot that he was almost in danger of breaking an ankle in the stuff. The hall opened into a huge living room with a high ceiling, slick black-leather-and-chrome furniture and lots of windows. The glare from the morning sun pouring through all the glass was almost unbearable and he squinted his eyes in self-defense.

"Yeah, I know, I gotta do something about that. Get some curtains or something," Ray said. "Let's check out the pool."

They passed through a state-of-the-art kitchen to a terrace that was dominated by a lap pool and a separate structure that housed a shiny gym bristling with high-end equipment, all of it visible through a wall of windows. Ray waved Cooper into one of the chairs arranged in a conversational grouping near the house.

"You want coffee?" Ray asked.

"Sure. Why not?" Cooper said.

Ray stepped toward the house and opened the sliding door a crack.

"Yo, Jimmy—coffee would be great, thanks, if the offer's still good," he called.

Cooper sat back, resting his right ankle on the knee of the opposite leg. Man, but his collar felt tight. Resisting the urge to run a finger under it like a kid at church on Sunday, he surveyed the rear of Ray's house.

"Great place, bro," he said.

"I like it," Ray said, laughing at his own understatement. He shook his head. "If you could have seen where I grew up..."

Cooper understood. The best fighters were the ones who needed it as well as wanted it. They all had their hardluck stories, some harder than others.

"So, have you thought any more about my proposal?" Cooper asked, cutting to the chase. They both knew this wasn't a social call.

Behind Ray, he caught sight of a figure moving around the kitchen making coffee. Because Ray had used the name *Jimmy*, Cooper was surprised to see it was a woman. A really hot woman, he noted as she bent to retrieve something from a lower drawer. She was wearing a uniform, a plain back dress with a zip up the front and a white apron around her waist. When she leaned over he copped an eyeful of strong, athletic legs and a tight, round butt.

Some guys preferred their women skinny like greyhounds but he'd never had a thing for bones. He liked women with breasts and butts, and strong, athletic women particularly got him going. Perhaps it was the combination of textures, hard and soft, silk and steel...

He realized Ray was talking. He'd been so preoccupied with checking out the hired help that he'd missed half of it.

"...but I've got some reservations, I'd be lying if I said any different," Ray said. "And I've got a favor to ask, if we can cut a deal."

Damn. Had Ray just said yes to him, and he'd been busy staring at some bimbo's butt?

Focus, Fitzgerald.

"I want us to be straight up if we're going to do this thing, Ray, so let me know what your concerns are and we'll deal with them," he said, keeping his gaze firmly on Ray now, even though he could still see the woman out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, you know, it's the experience thing. You've got no track record. Sorry, man, but it's true. You were one hell of a fighter, and I'd kill to have half your form, but you're freshly minted as a trainer," Ray said.

Cooper nodded. "You're right. I'm new, I'm untested—which means I'm also hungry. I like to win, Ray. You know that about me. I built a career being a winner. And I've trained with some of the best guys in the business—guys you don't have a chance of getting near because they're in the U.S. now, or they've retired. I've got a lot of knowledge and experience to pass on—and I'm hand-picking my boys because I only want to work with fighters who I know have what it takes to go all the way. You're at the top of my list, that's why I'm here," Cooper said.

"Yeah, sure, I bet you say that to everyone you're talking to," Ray said, and Cooper could tell he was only half joking.

"I'm not talking to anyone else just yet," Cooper said. "Like I said, you're at the top of my list." Maybe it was a mistake to give away so much, but he hadn't come here to shadowbox. He held Ray's eye, and the other man slowly nodded.

"Okay. Okay. I'm interested," Ray said.

Cooper grinned, and Ray grinned right back at him.

"So what's this favor you mentioned?" Cooper said, jerking his tie loose and unbuttoning the collar on his shirt. They were on the downhill run now, he could feel it.

"I've got a friend, an up-and-comer. No fight record, just starting out. Loads of natural talent, strong, fast, great power. I said I'd put in a word with you," Ray said. His gaze slid over Cooper's shoulder as he spoke, and Cooper frowned.

Was it just him, or did Ray look a little...uncomfortable?

"Fair enough. Get him to come down to the gym tomorrow. I'll take a look at him, put him through his paces. If I like what I see, I'll certainly consider him," Cooper said. That was as good as it was going to get. He had a reputation to build, and untried fighters would not do it for him.

"Uh, yeah. Thing is, it's a *she*, not a *he*," Ray said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Sorry, Ray, but I don't follow women's boxing," Cooper said coolly, hoping Ray would get the hint and drop the subject.

It wasn't that he thought women's boxing was wrong or freakish the way some of the old-timers did. He simply didn't think there were enough women out there truly committed to the sport. It was different for men. Often boxing was the only way out for them, and that gave them a hunger, a commitment that couldn't be faked.

"If you saw her fight, you'd know what I mean. She's good—really good. I think she could go all the way," Ray said.

"Not with me," Cooper said, shaking his head. "I'm not interested in training women. I want real fighters, not a bunch of Barbie dolls playing around with boxercise."

The door to the house slid open as the maid appeared with a tray of coffee. His gaze honed in on her instinctively, taking in her straight brunette hair, pulled high in a ponytail, the fine bones of her face, her full lips and the supple grace with which she moved. Her eyes were an unusual light gray, almost silver, and were slightly tilted. Her body was everything he'd imagined— strong and curvy, her legs long, her shoulders square and proud.

"Women's boxing is huge now," Ray said. "Purses are bigger, and the Women's International Boxing Association has really stepped things up. With women like Laila Ali out there, it's only going to get better."

"Listen, I appreciate what you're trying to do for your friend, but I'm not interested in taking on someone who's going to bail when the going gets tough. Boxing is a man's sport."

The thump of the tray dropping abruptly onto the table drew his attention back to the maid. Coffee had slopped over the sides of both cups, but she wasn't...

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