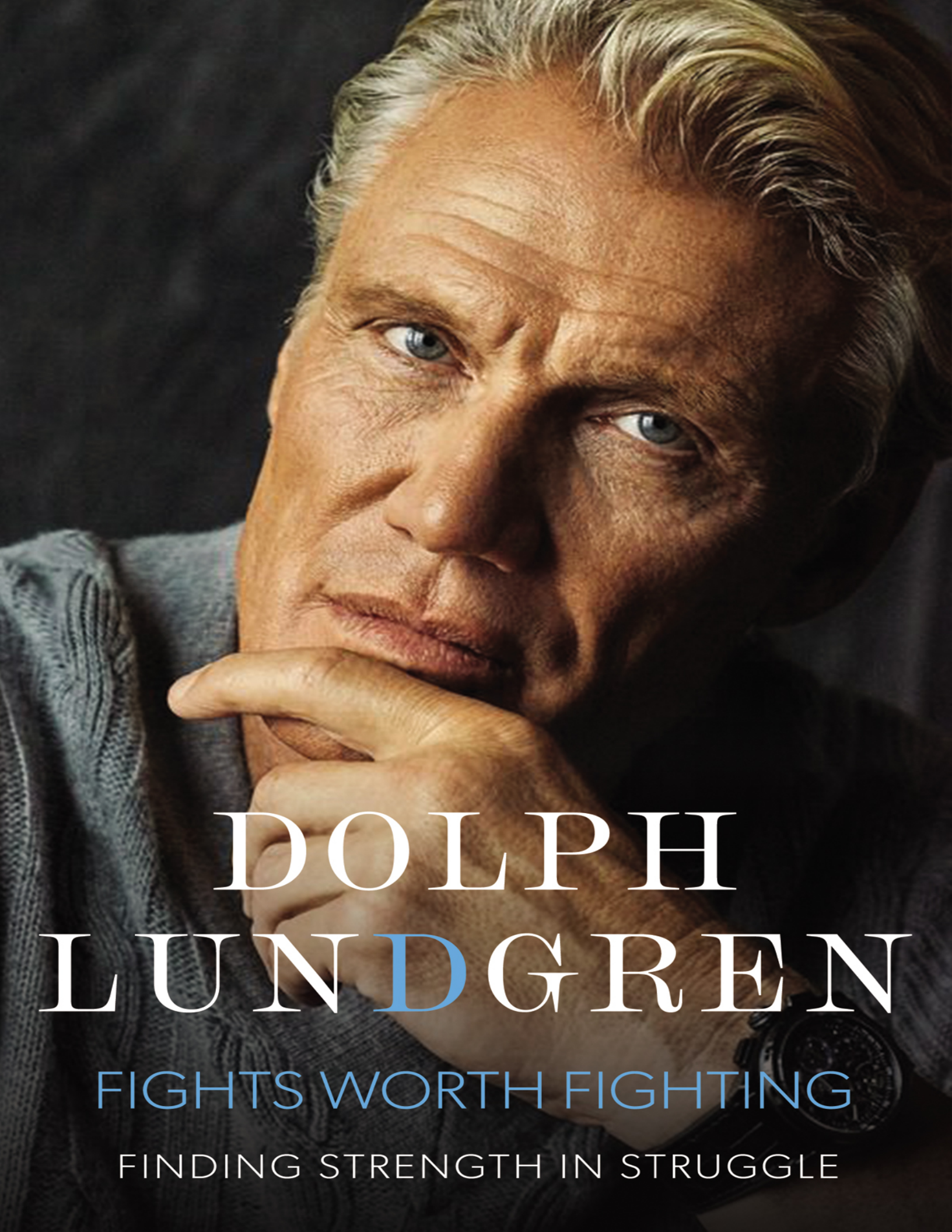
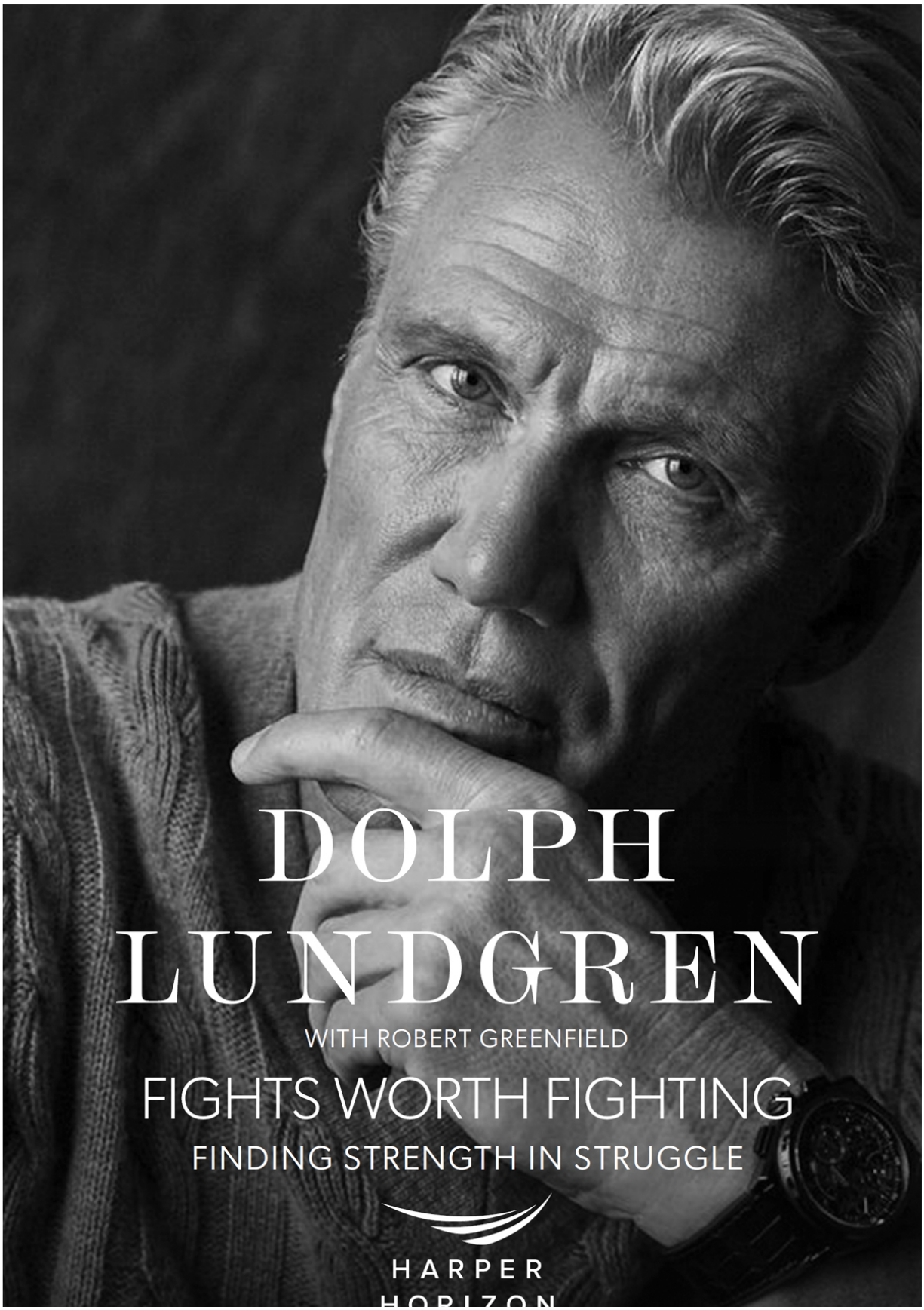


DOLPH LUNDGREN

FIGHTS WORTH FIGHTING

FINDING STRENGTH IN STRUGGLE


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LUNDGREN
WITH ROBERT GREENFIELD
FIGHTS WORTH FIGHTING
FINDING STRENGTH IN STRUGGLE
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Fights Worth Fighting

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To my mother, who taught me the power of unconditional love

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Prologue

A Wake-Up Call

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

LANGSTON HUGHES

Anyone who has ever visited Sweden during the short Nordic summer knows how fantastic it can be—when the sun sets for only a few hours and the nights are long and magical. In May 2015, I went back to visit my nineteen-year-old daughter, Ida, who was going to ride with me in my Ferrari during the European part of the Gumball 3000 Automobile Race. That year it started in the heart of the capital, Stockholm, and ran through Oslo, Copenhagen, and Amsterdam. Then all the drivers and our cars were flown to San Francisco so we could continue on to Los Angeles, before finishing the race in Las Vegas a week later. A tough schedule, but I was excited. A lot of my old friends and family would be there for the opening of the race in front of the seventeenth-century Royal Palace.

After a session of heavy karate training with my old instructor Brian Fitkin, who still had a dojo in Stockholm, I started seeing blood in my urine. Because I thought a kick or a punch might have been the cause, I went to a hospital, where they did a CAT scan of my abdomen. Afterward, a doctor called me into his office to tell me the results. The first thing he said after I sat down was, “We found a tumor in your kidney.”

I could feel all the blood drain from my face, but before I could ask him even a single question, someone called him on the phone. He listened for a

little while and then finished the call by saying, “Look, I can’t talk right now. I’m giving someone a cancer diagnosis.” He hadn’t let me talk before, but then I was speechless. *This* was how I learned I had kidney cancer? Not the best medical bedside manner. I walked out of his office in shock.

Now I had to suffer through a week on the road—with my daughter sitting right next to me. All I could think about was that I had cancer and my life could soon be over. I didn’t know how to tell her or anyone else, so I kept it to myself. The diagnosis was just too devastating.

As soon as I got back to Los Angeles after the race, I went to see a kidney specialist at Cedars-Sinai in Beverly Hills, which has always had a reputation as one of the best hospitals in the world. He decided to perform surgery to remove the tumor. A week later, after the tumor was biopsied, the surgeon told me, “The good news is we got it all out. The bad news is that even though it was at an early stage, this is a very aggressive form of cancer, so you’ll have to have a CAT scan every three months for the next five years.”

I did that for the next five years—and then it became once every six months. After everything had shut down in March 2020 because of COVID-19, my then-girlfriend (now-wife), Emma Krokdal, and I decided to go to Sweden because the film industry was still operating there and I wanted to be working. It was another beautiful Nordic summer, and because the doctors at Cedars-Sinai had told me the tumor was gone, in my mind, at least, I was now cancer free.

Nonetheless, I started feeling sick to my stomach frequently, which I thought was acid reflux. I went to see a doctor at a hospital in Stockholm, and she ordered another CAT scan and an MRI. I was in a hospital gown, and as they were putting me into the MRI unit, two nurses wanted me to take selfies with them. They actually botched the MRI and then forgot to send it to Cedars-Sinai for two or three weeks, so I had to take it again. That was all a bit of a mess. I really wish I could say something better about the Swedish medical system, but if I had lived over there, I would possibly now be long since dead.

This was also the big week I was going to propose to Emma. She and I were having lunch in a restaurant one day when the doctor called me and said, “We found three tumors in your kidney right next to where you had the surgery.” From the way she told me this, I could tell how serious it was, and I suddenly felt ice-cold all over. But when I asked if I could come see

her in thirty minutes so that she could show me exactly what they had found, she said, “Sorry, but I have to leave for the day. Best of luck to you.” In other words, just another nice, insensitive Swedish doctor.

By then, I didn’t trust the Swedish medical system at all, so I had the scan sent to my surgeon at Cedars-Sinai. Once I was back in Los Angeles, after another biopsy, the surgeon told me I had one big tumor and six smaller ones in and around my kidney. I had another surgery, but because they had to cut through my abdominal muscles this time, the pain afterward was pretty bad. I couldn’t lift weights for about six weeks, but after that I was able to slowly start getting back into shape.

Even though I was now aware of how serious this cancer was, I decided to go back to Birmingham, Alabama, to finish directing *Castle Falls*, an action movie about three desperate characters who have ninety minutes to go into a decrepit old hospital to find $3 million—which had been stashed there by a gang leader—before the hospital is blown to pieces. We had originally started shooting seven months earlier, but only for half a day in March 2020 before the Alabama Department of Public Health shut us down because of the COVID outbreak.

About a week after we had started shooting again in October, the surgeon from Cedars-Sinai called me and said, “There’s one thing we didn’t catch the last time around. There is now also a malignant tumor in your liver. We think it’s about two or three centimeters around, but we have a surgeon here who specializes in the procedure to remove it.” Although the cancer had now spread to another part of my body, I thought that because they had removed the tumors from my kidney, they could do the same with the one in my liver.

When I got back to Los Angeles after completing the film, I went into Cedars-Sinai for a pre-op, and the surgeon kind of dropped a bomb on me and Emma by saying, “Well, because the tumor is now about the size of a lemon, we can’t remove it surgically because it’s too big.” This was around the time when I had begun working with a Canadian producer on a documentary film about my life. I also drew up a brand-new will to specify in detail who would get what and started to plan my own funeral: where I would be buried and what it would say on my headstone. All of this was certainly a surreal experience.

Because surgery was now not an option, I had to begin systemic immunotherapy. This consisted of my taking two different drugs by infusion

at Cedars-Sinai every three weeks to boost my own immune system to help it fight off the cancer. Early in 2021, I started having stomach problems, so the doctors switched me to a cancer drug I could take orally. That was when I began developing really bad sores on my feet and in my mouth. All I could eat were pancakes, applesauce, and food that was bland and soft, so I began losing a lot of weight. Because I also had constant diarrhea, I had to sleep in a separate room from my then-fiancée, Emma, which was really awful for both of us. At one point, I had lost more than twenty pounds.

Although I was now seeing my oncologist at Cedars-Sinai once a month, Emma and I soon realized he was not a very caring person, at least to us. Maybe Sweden wasn't so bad, after all. When Emma asked him one day if I would have to take this drug for the rest of my life, he didn't really answer her but instead said, "What do you mean by the *rest* of his life?" thereby making it plain to us that, in medical terms, my future did not look good to him at all.

By then I had already been taking these drugs for seven months, but the cancer nodes in my kidney just kept right on growing. Although the doctors probably should have done another biopsy to check on them, they never did because they feared this might cause the cancer to spread even further. Although we later learned there are different mutations of that kidney-cancer gene, to my knowledge, they never tried to find out which one I had.

During the summer of 2021, I developed blood clots in my lungs, a side effect of the oral cancer drug. Because this was very dangerous, my doctors put me on blood thinners and a lower dose of that cancer drug—even though I probably should have still been on the maximum dose because of my size.

All of this notwithstanding, I still went to London that August to film both *The Expendables IV* and *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom.* Cedars-Sinai had set me up with a doctor in England who seemed a lot more caring than my oncologist in LA. He had me do a CAT scan, and probably because my doctors in LA had reduced the dose of my oral cancer meds, the tumors were now bigger than before. Emma and I thought I only had a tumor in my liver, but this doctor told us that I now had cancer in my liver, both lungs, my spine, and in and around my left kidney.

The doctor then said, "Why are you even doing these two movies? You should go to an island somewhere and relax. You should be spending time with your family." Having finally gotten the message, I called the doctor

one night after Emma had gone to the gym and said, “Okay, doc. Let’s just talk about this man-to-man. Give it to me straight. What’s the real prognosis here?”

He said, “Well, I think you probably have about two or three years left to live.”

From the tone of his voice, I could tell he thought it was going to be more like a year or two at most. Because nothing else had worked, the doctor then put me on a new oral cancer drug. He said this was the last resort for my kind of cancer and that people could usually take this drug for up to a year.

Even though I was still having side effects—with sores in my mouth and everything else—I went ahead and did both movies. They were very tough shoots, but I had to ask myself, *What would I rather do? Just sit around waiting to die or make these movies?* Getting to work with some truly talented actors while playing characters I really enjoyed made me feel that I was still alive.

I also didn’t want to hurt Emma by telling her what the British doctor had told me. We went to Norway to spend the winter holidays with her family. Later, I learned Emma had thought that might be my last Christmas. And the truth was, I had thought that as well.

By then I had realized that I was in for a new and very serious adventure. But even in my wildest imagination, I could never have predicted the three years that followed. I was about to enter the main event of my life as a warrior.

A fight definitely worth fighting.

Because this time, my life was in the balance.

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Chapter

Freeze and Survive

Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent.

CARL JUNG

Even before my first cancer diagnosis in 2015, I had begun to realize the way I had spent so much of my life in the extreme, or, as I later learned, in "escape behavior," wasn't very healthy at all—overworking, overtraining, sexual affairs, combat sports, as well as all the drinking and drugs I had done during the 1980s. This was behavior characteristic of someone suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Later on in therapy, I realized I was experiencing this because of what had happened to me as a young child living in Sweden.

I think I remember the first time my dad hit me. I was around three or four years old. I was walking in front of the TV when he kicked me, and I flew into some bookshelves and hit my head. I remember there was blood and my mom was screaming. My dad had a lot of problems, and he always took them out on me and my mom but never touched my brothers or sisters. Gradually, as my dad began having more and more emotional issues, it all got even worse.

When I was about six, I started going to grade school, and I remember him beating me up for stuff that really wasn't a big deal. It was just because he was unhappy in his work or because I had broken something, like most kids do. He never liked the holidays because of all the pressure; I especially

remember one Christmas, which was a big deal in Sweden back in the sixties. Everybody would get dressed up, with the men and boys in suits and ties and the women in nice dresses. We were all at the table for dinner, and someone had poured me a Coca-Cola. For some reason, I pulled my glass away and the Coke went all over the white tablecloth. My dad said, “Okay. That’s it. No more Christmas. You all go to bed!” And that was it. No presents. Nothing.

When he got upset, my dad would also beat my mother. Sometimes he would even tear out some of her hair, leaving her with a bald spot, so she had to wear a hat when she went outside. He did the same thing to me a few times but a lot more often to her. The thing about him was he didn’t really drink alcohol, which in Sweden back then was definitely unusual. But he certainly had some demons from his own childhood—as my therapist later put it, “We are all the victims of victims.” I believe he had a bipolar disorder.

My dad, Karl Hugo Lundgren, was brought up in northern Sweden in Nyland, a small town on the Ångermanälven River in Vasternorrland County. In those days, Nyland was quite a booming town because when industrialization first began in Europe, it created a major demand for timber. Scandinavia had a lot of it, so small towns grew very quickly before the end of the nineteenth century. Today Nyland, like the rest of Sweden, has become depopulated, with fewer than nine hundred residents.

My dad’s father was from a very poor family. He grew up with eight or nine siblings, and I think his mom passed away when he was young. It was obviously a hard life for them all, and my grandfather had to help support the family. Because he was a good shot, he started out as a seal hunter even farther north in Sweden than Nyland. In the winter, he would be out on the ice on a sled with a rifle that had no scope but just open sights. When a seal would come up for air through a tiny hole in the ice, my grandfather would shoot it in the head. Then he would cut through the ice to get the seal up on his sled so he could take it back to town to sell the skin.

This was how he supported his family. He was a tough guy who drank a lot and was also a womanizer. After my grandfather had been in the army for a while, he became an overseer at the sawmill in Nyland and wore big boots and riding pants and carried a riding crop. He was a pretty harsh character. As a boy growing up, my dad had probably been beaten a lot by him. I’ve heard that as a small child, my dad was locked in a dark closet for

hours as punishment. All this went on during the Great Depression in the 1930s, when many children in rural Sweden died from disease and starvation.

Even as adults, my dad and his father were never very close. Everyone in my dad's family was estranged for some reason I never knew. My dad did not go to his mother's funeral. He was at his father's funeral. Very strange. Some of my dad's siblings didn't come to their father's funeral. I'm speculating, but I think there might have been some form of more serious abuse in the family, perhaps sexual. Some dark secret that caused them all to split up and go their separate ways as adults. Some of my own siblings have never met their cousins. I have because I lived in Nyland with my grandparents, so I was a bit closer to them.

I've seen pictures of my father from the 1920s and '30s in one of those little sailor outfits that boys sometimes wore back then, and I think he was a pretty sensitive kid. He had three siblings, but the family could only afford to educate one of them, so he was chosen as the one who had the brains to go to Stockholm to get a higher education.

At age twenty-three, right after World War II, my dad left Nyland and went to Stockholm to study at the Royal Institute of Technology. He had to work at the same time but graduated and became an electrical engineer at Sveriges Radio, the publicly funded, main government radio station in Sweden. My dad had always liked American music, and he became a deejay playing artists like the Mills Brothers and Louis Armstrong. Because none of those shows were ever recorded, I don't know what he sounded like on the air. I also don't know if he ever actually spoke or just played records.

Then he started working for an engineer and entrepreneur, Olof Tjerneld, who owned two radio factories. He began dating the boss's daughter and eventually married her. His wife and my mom, Birgitta Tjerneld, came from an upper-class family and was an only child. She went to an all-girls school in Sweden, and then her parents sent her off to England to study. She spoke four languages and was well educated but always very shy.

A few years after my mom and dad met, my grandfather Olof went into the hospital for surgery for what might have been a bleeding ulcer. He was only in his mid-fifties. He never came back out, as he passed away from complications after the surgery. My mother was only twenty-two then, and I

think she was looking for a strong man in her life; my dad also helped my grandmother run the business of the radio factories.

Whatever childhood traumas he may have been carrying—along with all the pressure from his family to succeed—my dad had always been a violent loner. Was he happy in marriage? I think he was unhappy, period, in his life. In their own way, though, my mother and father loved each other and stayed together for a long time, so I guess somehow they completed each other's personalities.

Before my dad ever met my mom, he was married for six months to another woman. I heard that he beat her and she left him and took my half brother, Bert, with her when he was an infant. My father similarly began mistreating my mother when they went to Scotland on their honeymoon in 1955. They had rented a car and stopped at several restaurants and pubs but could never get a table. Of course, they were speaking to each other in Swedish, and then one day they stopped at this little inn and waited for an hour in the restaurant with no service before the Englishwoman who was in charge came up and said, "Sorry. We don't serve Germans here." The Second World War had obviously hit all of Europe very hard.

Then something went wrong with the rented car, and my father got upset and didn't speak to my mother for a week—and this was while they were still on their honeymoon. Brutal. I don't know if he started physically abusing her then, but he probably did very soon thereafter, because by the time I was three, he began hitting me. Was it because of something I had done? No, I don't think so. Sometimes, he just couldn't control his emotions.

Until I was about five, I lived in a two-bedroom apartment with my mom, dad, and sister Annika, who was two years younger than me. Around the time my youngest sister, Katarina, was born in 1961, we moved to a house about two miles down the road in the same suburb outside Stockholm. Two years later my younger brother, Johan, was born. Once a month or so, my half brother, Bert, from my dad's earlier marriage would come and visit. Spanga was an old neighborhood that had been built in the 1930s, and my dad would walk from our house for about twenty minutes to the station to get on the commuter train for work. Once my mom also started working, she did that same routine. It was a nice, middle-class area of Stockholm.

My mother was about five foot eight, quite well built, and very pretty. She was a classy-looking woman. My dad, who was about six foot four and weighed around 220 pounds, had been a cross-country skier when he was younger while also competing in rifle target shooting. Some of the girls in my grade school said he looked like a movie star, wearing his dark hair slicked back and always in a suit and tie. During World War II, he had been drafted and sent to serve on the Norwegian border after Norway had been conquered by the Nazis in the spring of 1940.

The Swedes, who remained neutral throughout the war, had troops on the border just in case the Nazis ever decided to attack them as well. Both my grandfather and my dad served on the Norwegian border. My dad was there in the summer of 1942 when Stalingrad was under siege from the Nazis, and I remember him telling me how bitterly cold it had been up there during the following winter. That's when the German Seventh Army was annihilated at Stalingrad, the beginning of the end for Hitler's Reich. Of the five hundred thousand soldiers fighting in Stalingrad, only five thousand—1 percent—finally made it back to Germany after the war. My dad also said that they all knew that if the Germans ever did attack Sweden, the Swedish soldiers probably would not have had much chance of stopping them because they were right there on the front lines and their old equipment was no match for what the Germans had.

My dad was fascinated by World War II and was always reading about it when I was growing up. By then, he had also become friendly with an African American sergeant in the US Army in Germany who would come visit us whenever he was on leave so he and my dad could hang out together. He had actually seen combat during World War II and would tell my dad stories about it. An avid history buff, my dad wrote articles in various newspapers about infantry tactics and things like that. And although he had just been an ordinary conscript during World War II, he eventually became an artillery captain in the infantry during his time in the reserves.

He also told me how the Second World War had shaped the way people in Europe felt about us as a country, because Sweden had not been invaded by the Nazis and had escaped all the devastation that came along with that. To some degree, I think many people in Sweden had a bad conscience about what happened, because unlike Denmark, Norway, and Finland, Sweden had not joined the Allies in their fight against the Nazis. Because Sweden had not been attacked, you could see their point and why they had chosen

not to take sides. Still, a lot of Swedes were quite helpful during the war by taking in Jewish refugees and sheltering Allied pilots who had been shot down over Swedish territory, then helping them get back home.

During the war, the king of Sweden was definitely pro-German, but a lot of other government officials were trying to keep the country from being drawn into the war, so they finally let a combat division of German troops be transported through Sweden to Norway. This led to a big public outcry, but the king had threatened to abdicate if this was not allowed. So even though there were Swedish troops guarding all the train stations when it happened, a lot of people still saw it as Sweden bowing to the Germans and not taking a moral stand. This whole controversial affair helped shape postwar Sweden's "bad conscience."

When I was growing up, my dad was always well dressed and had a top job in the Swedish government; he could be really charming as well. I also think he was having romantic affairs. I remember hearing an argument between him and my mom, who was crying, and I'm sure it was because he had been seeing another woman, no doubt one of many.

As I mentioned, I have now come to realize that my father was bipolar, maybe even borderline schizophrenic. When I began therapy later in my life, I spoke to my therapist about it, and he said my father's disorder could now be treated with medication—so he could have had a perfectly normal life. But back then, my dad refused to admit he had any problems and kept right on behaving the exact same way. In the end, it ruined his life. He lost his job, his family, and all of his friends and died alone in a mental hospital in London at age seventy-seven. I was in London at the time, and my brother and I arranged for him to be transported home to Stockholm and planned his funeral. His siblings didn't show up.

When you get abused at home like I did as a child, you have two choices, just like an animal—fight or flight. You can either run away, which was impossible for me because I was still just a little kid; or you can fight back, which I couldn't do because I was a scrawny kid who got sick all the time, and my dad was as big and tall as I am now. But as I later learned in therapy, there was a third choice: you freeze. It's like a gazelle being taken by a lion. You just freeze and go dead with all your emotions bottled up inside you. And so whenever my dad was hitting me, I would just lie there and take it. I wouldn't even cry.

For a little kid, that's similar to what soldiers experience after being under fire during combat and can result in PTSD, with symptoms that include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the events. I now understand that this is what happened to me. One of these symptoms is "escape behavior"—you're trying to escape from something you cannot get away from because it's locked up inside you. (We'll look more closely at that in the next chapter.)

By the time I was twelve, I started acting out. I broke into a store to steal a motorcycle and then started running away from home to live in someone's garage, where I could hang out drinking Aquavit or beer or whatever kind of liquor one of the other kids had stolen from their dad. I was also sniffing glue, which was about the worst thing anyone could do to an adolescent brain that was still developing. No matter how many times I did this, my dad would always find me and take me back home for another beating.

The other thing that made my situation so tough was that in those days, there was nowhere I could go for help. There were no child-help hotlines in the 1960s. By then, my dad was working for the Swedish government doing budget management in the Ministry of Finance. He was a big shot, and because nobody would have listened to me or my mom, I never even tried to tell anyone outside what my life was like at home. As you already know, fighting back was also out of the question. But because I had decided not to cry when my dad beat me, I think there were times when he got scared he had hurt me too much. That was my way of fighting back, by taking the pain and not making a sound. He probably thought I had passed out and only then would he stop hitting me. This capacity for taking pain would serve me well later, both in the boxing ring and on action-movie sets. This high pain tolerance has certainly been helpful, even though that was a horrible way to acquire it.

I had asthma as well. When I was two years old, I got really sick with what they called "false" croup back then. If you got "real" croup and had trouble breathing because it had affected your windpipe, doctors would perform surgery to insert a breathing tube into your throat. I had the less severe version. Many years later, my therapist told me it could have been triggered by my dad's beatings: the near-death experience of a small child being hit by a big man.

The lasting effect of my asthma was that I couldn't play sports until I was about thirteen or fourteen years old—which only made my dad think I was even more useless. I was a scrawny kid who got sick a lot. In Sweden in the summer, all the pollen comes off the trees and plants really quickly because summer is only about two months long. I would always get sick from the huge deluge of that stuff and not be able to breathe very well, so I couldn't run around outside or play sports with all the other kids. Instead, I would be home reading books and comic magazines or drawing pictures by myself. A lot of it was about action—soldiers, cowboys, and tough guys. Perhaps I was doing research for my future film roles.

Sometimes when my older half brother, Bert, who was about eighteen or nineteen and going to engineering school, would come home, he and my dad would sit together and work on his math problems. Because my half brother had grown up outside our family, he was never beaten by my dad. I would just sit there and copy everything they were working on, like integral calculus and differential equations. Even though I didn't really know what all that was at nine or ten, it eventually helped me because I was already familiar with more advanced math when I started high school, then college.

My entire childhood was a bit of a nightmare, but I had to find a life for myself in there somehow. I kind of created my own universe inside my brain while partially physically disassociating from my body. This probably also made me a creative person who enjoyed escaping into music, painting, and doing high school plays.

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2

Chapter

Escape Behavior

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

HELEN KELLER

I did everything I could to escape my dad by hanging out with other kids my age who were also delinquents. Some of them came from really good families and had never been beaten at all. At the time, Sweden was going through its own kind of social revolution. After World War II, Sweden had trauma about being neutral in the war and not taking a moral stand, so they were now trying to prove how special and progressive the country was. And then at the end of the ’60s, all the traditional social boundaries started slowly breaking down. There were a lot of drugs and a lot of hippies, and I got pulled into that in the suburbs outside of Stockholm where I was living.

There were no girls for me whatsoever in that scene. It was all just wild boys, some of whom went to jail and some of whom are now dead. Some died from overdoses or committed suicide. It was not just me; the particular school I was in, the Sundby Skola, had a lot of issues with delinquent kids and drugs. I don’t know why, but they did.

When I was a young child, I was smart in school and could answer all the questions the teacher asked, so I found my identity in being the smartest kid in the class. But by middle school, because my grades were now terrible, the leaders tried to control me by putting me in detention. The head

teacher would call my dad, and he would show up at school and get upset, and then when we got home, he would beat me again. I think some people at the school might have realized he was a little crazy, but no one did anything about it.

By the time I was thirteen, I had started getting bigger, and I think my dad decided if it went any further between us, he would have to beat up someone who was no longer a kid but a young man. He might find himself in a real fight. Perhaps on a deeper level, he may have known that he was the real cause of my situation. Whatever his reasons may have been, he didn't want this to go on. He also probably felt I was going to self-destruct if he didn't act, because that was definitely where I was heading at the time.

That was when he came up with a plan to send me up north to live with his parents. When he spoke to my grandparents about me, he blamed everything on my mom. All of it was her fault. She was weak, and that was why I was out of control. Because he had already been divorced after having beaten his first wife, I think his parents might have suspected he had some issues. They may have even felt responsible for causing them by the way they had brought him up, so they agreed to take me in.

Although I did not want to leave my friends behind and knew I was going to miss them, I was okay with going up north. Because I was just thirteen and a half at the time and part of me thought of this as a kind of adventure, I tried to make the best of it. On a deeper level, I was happy that I was getting away from Stockholm, because if I hadn't escaped from my home environment, I probably wouldn't have been around much longer. I would've ended up dead, like some of my party friends.

Because my dad was bipolar and could sometimes be completely okay, he wasn't angry or lecturing me during our journey by car up north. It was like nothing bad had ever happened, and we were now going to have fun. Like, "Hey, look at that church!" and "Let's talk about history." He obviously knew that part of the reason I was going through my hardships was because of the way he beat me and the reason for that was his issues, but he didn't want to bring up any of that. Instead, he just acted like everything was fine and the real reason I had to go to Nyland was to get away from all the wrong friends I was hanging out with in Stockholm.

It was almost like there were two separate beings inside him and on some level he was trying to save me. Maybe he really did love me, and I reminded him too much of his younger self—I had seen pictures of him

when he was a boy, and I had a feeling he'd been a very sensitive kid. Maybe he realized there would be some kind of real catastrophe if I stayed around him any longer. My mother had no say in the matter, but I'm sure she was relieved as well to see me getting a second chance at a real upbringing.

Nyland was about four hundred miles from Stockholm. Because we made the drive during the winter, it began getting dark around two in the afternoon, so we stopped to spend the night about halfway there. We finally arrived in Nyland after dark the next day in the middle of a snowstorm. The weather was really harsh up there, but when you're thirteen, you don't even think about that, and mostly I was excited by this new environment.

When I moved to Nyland in 1971, both my grandparents were in their seventies and living in a big house the sawmill company had leased for them in the small town of around three thousand people. In those days, Nyland had two schools, a police station, a fire station, a post office, and a bank. All that is now gone, but in those days it was a thriving little community that was completely different from the city I had come from. People in Nyland had a different consciousness. They were a lot more conservative, and there was far more social control.

The town had a small courthouse and a local council that dealt with misdemeanors and could fine people for what they had done. Instead of using the jury system, a number of judges would hear the case, and because my grandfather was considered to be such an upstanding citizen, he was one of them.

Was I happy to be living there with my grandparents? Not in the beginning, because I didn't want to leave my friends. I had my own room in the house, but I'd also had one while living with my parents. One difference was that because my grandparents were from another generation, they left me alone in a lot of ways. And so while they were strict with me, I still had more freedom than I had ever known before. The main difference was that my dad wasn't there to create conflict. Over time, both my grandparents slowly became more loving, especially my grandmother. She became like a second mother to me, which I thought was great.

Nonetheless, for the first six months I was there, I still smoked cigarettes and tried to find guys I could party with. But then I realized all the guys everybody looked up to in Nyland were the hockey players and the athletes and those who were really studying. So I did a complete one-eighty

and started going in that direction myself. When I graduated from junior high school there, my grades were pretty good. I had started playing hockey right away and later practiced judo at the senior high school in Kramfors, a larger town about forty-five minutes away by bus. That was where I did really well academically and later got the scholarship that brought me to America for the first time. Around age fifteen, I also discovered karate. From then on, martial arts became a major part of my life.

A good friend of mine bought a book called *Karate* that was full of pictures of buffed guys doing martial arts, lifting weights, and breaking bricks with their hands. "Yeah, we'd like to try that," we said to each other. Personally, I wanted to feel strong and not like the little kid who had been beaten up by his dad. I also think the philosophical aspects of martial arts, the Zen Buddhist concepts about strength, respect, self-knowledge, and inner calm, really attracted me. They seemed like qualities that could help me improve my life.

I was now starting to change my lifestyle pretty much without any help from anyone else—still "acting out" but in a more positive way by practicing karate very seriously. Sometimes I even went out for a night run barefoot in the snow, wearing nothing but my karate uniform. I know that sounds crazy, but when you're a teenager and your hormones are raging, you sometimes do those kinds of things. It wasn't all about trying to get strong so I could kick my father's ass. Although the reason I had first started doing karate was the desire to be able to defend myself, I already knew I was never going to actually beat up my dad. He was now older, more mellow, and much less violent. So those night runs and all the rigorous karate training instead helped me exorcise my own demons.

During that entire period, I had very little contact with my parents; I'd go home for a few weeks in the summer and maybe for Christmas, but that was it. Because my grandparents really did care a lot more about me than my dad ever had, I didn't even want to go home. Although I missed my mom, my sisters, and my younger brother, I was happy in Nyland. And in the '70s, it was a twelve-hour train trip to Stockholm. So it wasn't all that easy to go back.

I was fourteen when I lost my virginity in Nyland. Mats, a good friend of mine and a martial arts training partner who later became a career military officer, had this very cute and forward younger sister, Louise. She seduced me, and we had sex in a field next to my grandparents' house. It

wasn’t all that great, and being with a woman sexually back then was always a problem for me. It was something I thought I couldn’t really do, which I think came from not having been able to protect my mom as a little boy. Whenever I would hear my dad beating her, I wanted to help her, but I knew I couldn’t run in to stop him because if I had, he would have beaten me too. I was simply too small to be able to do anything.

So along with everything else, I also had sexual performance anxiety. I wasn’t really a sexual person. I mean, I was sexual in my *mind*, but not in real life because I could never relax. While my dad was beating me, he would tell me how useless I was.

So maybe the reason I could not enjoy the pleasure of having sex was because I never thought I deserved it. Maybe this has happened to a lot of guys, but it was a big deal for me. I actually never had a proper girlfriend until I met Grace Jones in Sydney, Australia, when I was twenty-five years old.

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3

Chapter

Young Americans

Go West, young man.

HORACE GREELEY

In 1975, I graduated high school with straight A's. Even as a teenager, I always felt that I didn't want to live in Sweden. I don't exactly know why, but my dad didn't like the socialistic system there, and that had grown on me as well. Although we had a troubled relationship, I still looked up to him. I also wanted to escape from who I was in Sweden and didn't want to be that abused, allergic kid anymore. I wanted to go to the US partly because my dad had always said, "If you want to do something special with your life, you can't do it in this damn country. You have to go to America." Because there was no way I could have ever afforded to pay for my own airline ticket—this was long before the deregulation of the airline industry—I started looking for academic scholarships.

And so I applied for a scholarship from The Sweden-America Foundation to study chemistry in America. Along with another smart kid from my school, I was accepted into the program and ended up at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington, where I spent a year as a sophomore. As a high school graduate from Sweden's school system, I was one year older than a US graduate and thus deemed a sophomore. Not that it mattered to me; I just wanted to get to America.

When I landed in Pullman, which is basically on the prairie in the middle of nowhere, Jimmy Carter was president, and I realized that Americans weren't feeling all that proud of their own country. I also felt that because nobody there knew me, I could now become an entirely different person. Back then, I was still going by my first name, Hans, and even though some people had problems pronouncing it, I just loved it. I didn't have any girlfriends, but I was a bit of a novelty on campus because I was Swedish. And I can still remember paying for my room and board by pulling out a couple of five-hundred-dollar bills no one there had ever seen before. I had gotten them from a bank in Sweden and brought them with me to America. Those five hundreds also made me feel a bit special.[1]

John, my roommate in the dorm, was a really nice guy and made me feel at ease. I was only eighteen but was now going to be in America for ten months, so I did feel a bit lonely. John was a physical education major who sat on his bed smoking weed almost every night. Because I was a foreign student, I was always scared that if he got busted for doing this, they might deport me, so all I ever did was study chemistry and try to get good grades.

I also studied tae kwon do and boxing. A karate punch had broken my nose once in Sweden. Now it got broken a second time while I was boxing. Despite this, I realized how much I enjoyed combat sports and felt I could become really good at them. The pain I had endured from my dad's beatings made it easier for me to relax and not worry so much about getting hurt when I fought. But if someone did hurt me or even tried to hurt me, a certain instinct or aggressive reflex kicked in, and I would shift into high gear. My mind would go sort of blank, and I would disassociate from my body. I ended up just reacting to my opponent's moves, ready to do damage with my fists and feet without planning or even thinking about it. It's what they call "being in the zone" and "killer instinct."

After a few months, some of the guys in my dorm convinced me to try weed. We all got high at a rock concert by the British group Supertramp. I just sat there listening to the music and looking up at the night sky—sort of; the event was inside a planetarium—feeling spaced out but also feeling pretty good. It was then I realized I could escape from my negative thoughts by self-medicating or partying. More of that would come later when I was in New York.

Once every couple of months, I would get a letter from my mom in Sweden, and I would write her back. I ended up spending the Christmas

holidays of 1976 with my roommate John's family in Seattle. His father had been a tank commander in the Korean War. He was still a bit shattered from his combat experience and drank. John and his brother had their own problems and kept right on smoking weed, but they were all really nice to me. The thing was that right from the very start, I loved America. Most people were so open and friendly. It seemed like such a big country that I could become somebody else here, and I felt certain there could not have been any better place for me to live.

I also remember going with John to see a new boxing movie starring a newcomer named Sylvester Stallone. Watching *Rocky* was a powerful experience for me because during the final fight, the entire audience got to their feet and began cheering for this classic American underdog. I was really moved by it all, but of course had no idea that this incredible character's franchise would become such a big part of my own life as well.

After finishing my scholarship, I went back to Sweden and signed up at the Royal Institute of Technology, where my dad and older brother had also gone. I actually wanted to become a medical doctor, but I would have had to wait six months to begin my studies because there were already too many medical students enrolled. My second choice was chemical engineering, the same as my older brother, Bert. I began studying at the Royal Institute and then did my compulsory year and a half of military service in the Swedish military.

During the Cold War, Sweden was a neutral country, but until the 1990s, there was still conscription. Because I was studying chemical engineering, I was drafted to serve as an NBC (nuclear, biological, and chemical) defense specialist. As an officer candidate, I had the option to volunteer for service in the Coastal Rangers, who operated like Navy SEAL units in the Swedish archipelago and coastal regions, and that was what I chose to do.

Along with about thirty other guys, I first had to undergo a selection course where the trainers made us march and do physical training for three straight days. After waking us up early in the morning, they would make sure there was no food or water in the forty-pound packs we each had to carry, and then we would march for thirty or thirty-five miles. Sometimes, we would also be carrying heavy equipment like mortars.

None of us were getting much sleep at night, so only about a third of those I had started out with actually made it to the end. At some point, the trainers had us charge across an open field while carrying forty-pound

packs and wearing gas masks, and I somehow stepped into a hole and twisted my left ankle very badly. The officer in charge asked me if I wanted to withdraw, but I just laced up my boot tighter and kept going for another day and a half.

At the time, I was in really good shape from doing karate, but the morning after making it back from the selection course, I jumped down from the top bunk in the barracks and my left leg collapsed. I was lying on the floor and realized, *Oh shit, all this has been a* lot *harder on my body than I realized. My ankle is in really bad shape!* I had another two or three weeks of continuing physical training on my injured ankle. Then I went home for the weekend and slept for two days and nights straight; my mom and dad thought I might have been dead or something.

I ended up being sent to another Coastal Artillery unit in Vaxholm, about thirty-five minutes outside Stockholm, for my ranger training. I was there for a few months doing the basic physical and firearms training course for ranger certification. Although my ankle was still bothering me, I kept right on going. About twice a week after we were done at six in the evening, I would walk to the ferry, take it to the mainland, get on a bus, and go to the karate dojo to train in Kyokushin karate with Brian Fitkin. At around ten at night, I would take the bus and the ferry back and then go to bed at about eleven after having gotten up at five that morning.

> **Brian Fitkin (my karate instructor):** While Dolph was in the Coastal Rangers, I was never really aware of what he had to go through just to get to class. All I knew was that he usually arrived at the very last minute. But in terms of showing up, no matter how difficult it may have been for him to do so, Dolph always did and had been like that right from the start. He was very dedicated and so obviously loved doing karate that he made it very easy for me to train him.

I kept that up for a while until one day, while I was out on a forest run, I stepped into a hole again, and the pain in my ankle got even worse. The regimental doctor gave me some medication but then said, “You’re not going to be able to make it through the course here with this injury, so I have to send you back to your original unit. You’ll also never be able to do any sports again, Lundgren.” *Bang!* Just like that, everything for me was destroyed.

I went back to my original unit, which was really, really disappointing, but by doing rehab exercises every day, I somehow managed to recover pretty well. About two months later, I was selected to fight for Sweden in 1979 in the Second World Kyokushin Open Karate Tournament in Tokyo.

There are ten levels of colored belts in Kyokushin karate. At the time, I had a green belt (intermediate level). Just to enter the tournament, you were supposed to be a brown belt, which was a level higher than mine. But my sensei, Brian Fitkin, said I was good enough to compete. I was very happy that he gave me another student's brown belt so they would let me fight.

Brian Fitkin: I was in charge of the Swedish team that participated in the second World Kyokushin Open Karate Tournament in 1979, and I selected Dolph along with people from other clubs to be on the team. Now, I've seen it written that he only had a green belt and was going into a competition against fighters who had black belts, but that was not the case.

Back then, Dolph did only have a green belt, but I thought that psychologically, it would be good for him to wear one with a slightly higher grade because when other fighters looked at him before a match, they would think, *Oh, he only has a green belt*, and would feel brave and confident about fighting him. And so I thought, *Okay, let Dolph go in there with a brown belt and they might have to think twice about how to fight him*.

More than anything else, it was a tactic designed to make other fighters take Dolph seriously. Obviously, he could have gone there and fought whether he had a white belt, a green belt, or a black belt. But he was still very young, and I thought wearing a brown belt would give him a little bit of extra respect in the eyes of his opponents.

The tournament was fought in the 10,000-seat Budokan Arena in Tokyo. The rules of "Knockdown Karate" permitted full contact to both the body and head with kicks, but no punches or elbows to the head and no protective equipment.

Although Brian was there with me, I was still very nervous. My first fight was a walkover because my opponent was sick. In the second round, I fought a guy from Singapore and ended up knocking him out with a knee kick to the face. Although back then I didn't have any real plan as to how I should fight, I realized right away that the knee kick was one of my best weapons because I was so tall and the people I faced would come in low and hunched over to minimize the area where I could hit them. I could bring my knee all the way up to my chest, which was often level with their head. The surface right above the knee is a powerful striking weapon but also quite tough and hard to hurt. So my best attack was a *jodan hiza geri*, a knee kick to the head.

After I had knocked this Singaporean out, I felt really bad for him. I had split open his mouth, and he had to be carried off on a stretcher. I remember him looking around, his eyes wide in shock—with blood pouring out of his mouth. I won my next fight as well but not by knockout. It was a decision because the guy I faced just kept backing up a lot. In those matches, I would fight one round of three minutes, and there could possibly be two more extensions. Because of the draw, I now had to fight the big man Makoto Nakamura, who was not only a second-degree black belt but also the favorite to win the tournament.

Back then, I weighed about two hundred and five pounds, and he weighed about forty more than me. I had watched him knock out this big Hawaiian with a punch to the throat. That was illegal but the judges let it go, which I felt wasn't fair. He really hurt the guy with that punch and then ended the fight by knocking him out. In the process, Nakamura also knocked a tooth out of the guy's mouth. I knew he was definitely bad news.

Now I was facing Nakamura, and to make it worse, Mas Oyama, who had a tenth-degree black belt and had founded Kyokushin karate and was like a god to me, was sitting right there at ringside. Although Nakamura was a lot bigger than me, I was in really good shape and felt fairly confident. Brian Fitkin told me to be really careful with the guy because "he fights dirty." He was right because as soon as the judge said, "*Hachime!*" ("Fight!"), Nakamura tried to punch me in the throat. That was when I noticed that he always carried his left hand low.

The next time he attacked, I launched a high roundhouse kick and hit Nakamura in the head. *Whack!* I could hear the entire audience gasp and then go silent—but unfortunately, it was only a glancing kick. Had I hit him in the jaw, it probably would have knocked him out. For me, time stood still as he struggled to recover, but that ended as soon as he attacked again—by grappling while trying to punch me in the throat. My belt came undone, so we had a short break in my corner. Brian, who was now really angry, said, "If he does that again, just knock him out. Punch him in the face and fucking knock him out." I considered it, but since I knew it was against the rules I didn't want to do that because Oyama, the master, was sitting right there watching everything. So we fought on.

Brian Fitkin: Although I had been to Tokyo before to study with Mas Oyama, I had only ever learned the odd word in Japanese. Back then, it was still so difficult to get there in the first

place that I thought, *Oh, why even bother?* The first time I ever went to Japan, I actually had to sell my car to pay for my ticket and then went through Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and so never thought I would be coming back there again anytime soon.

Mas Oyama himself also had only the odd word in English, but his secretary was pretty fluent. So whenever he wanted to say something serious to me back then, he would call her into his office, and we would talk to one another that way. I do remember talking to him once during the tournament, and he was shocked that Dolph was not only fighting the heavy favorite, who then became the world champion, but had also actually managed to kick him in the head a few times even though the guy was huge and weighed a lot more than Dolph.

That Dolph was able to kick like that was extraordinary, but the kick was often too high and was still going up instead of coming down and across when it made contact. Nakamura's head would move, but Dolph hadn't got the full whack in or he would have put him down, and that was because he was then still only a green belt.

Because all the other fighters were so well trained, it was not that easy to even hit someone that way. It was also not common in any competition to see anyone knocked out like that. They might go down but not out. And while it might not seem this way from the outside, Dolph was only trying to win the match any [legal] way he could rather than hurt his opponent as badly as possible.

There were two extensions, and at the end, Nakamura was very tired while I was still doing okay, but the judges gave the match to Nakamura. Then Oyama stood up and called them all over, and they announced he had decided we had to fight one more extension. He basically changed the rules right there. So we fought one more round, and then they gave it to Nakamura again. But for me, it was a great experience because it was a close fight. When he was putting pressure on me, I was able to handle it, and it also felt really exciting to be the center of attention for the whole arena. The next day, Nakamura became the new world champion.

Until then, I had always doubted myself because of my dad's criticism, so this was the first time I realized I had a special talent in this particular sport. After the match was over, people came up to ask for my autograph, and later, when everyone went over to get their books signed by Oyama, I did so as well. I was very nervous and my hands were shaking a bit when it was my turn, but he just smiled and said, "Good fight!" in Japanese. And for me, that meant everything. Because maybe I wasn't such a loser after all.

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4

Chapter

Champion

The Martial Way begins with one thousand days and is mastered after ten thousand days of training.

MAS OYAMA

Back when Brian Fitkin first began fighting in the 1970s, he competed as a heavyweight. He was six feet tall and weighed about 185 pounds. Brian had grown up in a family of boxers in London. He first began training there during the late 1960s with a legendary guy from South Africa named Steve Arneil, who had brought Kyokushin karate to England after having studied with Mas Oyama in Japan.

Brian wanted to follow in his footsteps, so he went to Tokyo in 1969 and spent the next two years there. Because it was the cheapest way to get there, he spent five days and nights traveling through Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway and then went on from Vladivostok to Tokyo. There was no food available on the train during his entire journey, so I don't know how Brian survived, but even then he was tough.

Brian became one of Oyama's top students, and then he lived and taught in Hamburg, Germany, for a while until Swedish martial artist Johnny Grimstahl recruited him to become his chief instructor at a dojo in Stockholm. He came to Sweden in 1971 and ended up marrying a Swedish woman; he still lives there today.

Brian Fitkin: Dolph was seventeen years old and as tall as he is now but skinny when he first came to my karate club in central Stockholm. I think he had already started doing some other form of martial arts when he had been fifteen. With me, he began training five or six days a week in a class with others.

Right from the start, I saw someone who was very keen to learn all he could. The first conversation we ever had occurred when this tall guy who was in the beginners' class that I didn't teach met me at the top of the stairs in this dojo to ask if he could train with me and the more advanced students. Because I was quite strict, I said, "No, I'm sorry, but you'll have to go through the beginners' class to learn the basics as well as how to do it all correctly so you're set to come up into this group." And so even though I didn't really get involved in deep relationships with students that early on, I still remember meeting Dolph because of how strange his request seemed to me. But to be honest, he really was still a beginner back then.

Back when he was training with Steve Arneil, Brian would sometimes throw three thousand front kicks in a single session. The reason I know this is true is because one of the things we used to do at the end of our session every Friday when I was training with him was to throw one thousand front kicks. We would all stand there in lines with our hands up so we were kind of bouncing up and down as we did them while counting out loud from one to ten in Japanese. "*Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, Go, Roku, Shichi, Hachi, Kyu, JUU*!"

There were about ten people in each line, and the person next to you would do it as well until we got to the end of the line—and then it would continue on down the second line, and then the third, and so on, with everyone alternating legs as they kicked. We would keep going until we had finally gotten to a thousand kicks; that would take about twenty minutes.

Although we might start by aiming our kicks at the head of an imaginary opponent, they would start coming down to the level of the body after about five hundred. Even in the dead of winter when the temperature outside in Stockholm could be really low, we would be soaked with sweat after doing the kicks and have to open the windows to get some oxygen into the room. Sometimes people in the back row would collapse. And if someone gave up, Brian would say, "Oh, so-and-so just gave up. Let's start all over from the beginning." And then everyone would be really pissed off at that person because of what they had done. They would usually get their just punishment during the next sparring session.

The thing about a teacher like Brian is that he had to be a private person, and he could not show favoritism to anyone. Brian always had to be neutral in how he judged people by not giving them either too much praise or criticism. He somehow remained somewhere in the middle. Because I

was one of his better fighters and we then began working together in my movies, I eventually got to know him a lot better over the years.

But in the beginning, I was still very much intimidated by him. I'm now a fourth-degree black belt, but back when I still had only a white belt, I was fighting Brian one day while he was leading a class. As he looked away at one of the other students, one of my kicks hit him right in the head. He immediately went on the attack by taking a step toward me, only to slip in a puddle of sweat and then—*wham!*—he hit the floor. Of course, all the other students turned their heads to watch what would happen next. Well, I knew that was it for me.

Getting up slowly with a dark look in his eyes, Brian came right at me. After sweeping me off my feet, he punched me and knocked me down. I got right up, but then he knocked me down again. I could feel blood trickling down my face. All this went on for what seemed like an eternity. To this day, I still have a scar under my right eye from his punches; whenever I do a photo shoot, the makeup artist has to apply a little extra makeup under that eye to cover it.

Brian Fitkin: Dolph and I used to spar regularly in the dojo, and sometimes we would have to fight one another hard. By then he was eighteen or nineteen and both very tough and very strong, so it was not like I could go easy with him because if I had, we would have both been all over the place. Whenever I did hit him, I had to try to make some kind of impression on his body. But absolutely, what I really admired about him was that if he did go down, Dolph always got right back up again. He was very brave and would never complain. He would just take it, get up, and carry on. And in part that was because of what I was trying so hard to instill in all of them—part of our motto was to never give up. Never.

After all that happened, I told Brian I was sorry, but back then he still felt he had to assert himself by beating me up because other people had seen it. Many years later, he told me how impressed he had been by how I had refused to give up and just kept right on getting back up after having been knocked down again and again.

At the time, I very much needed to look up to and model myself after someone like Brian. So practicing karate with him became one of the ways I was trying not just to find a real role model but also to feel more in charge of my own destiny. I appreciated the way Brian carried himself as well as how he always spoke to people. I had real respect for him as a karate

teacher and looked up to him kind of like a father figure, which I think he was aware of as well.

Brian Fitkin: Although I never realized that Dolph had looked up to me as a father figure, you do gradually form very strong relationships with your students. It's a natural event because you see one another every day and go through hardships together, some of which I had put them through as their instructor. You see them respond. You see them progress. You see them develop, not only physically, but mentally, in terms of their character. As a result, you yourself grow as well.

I'm very aware of all this because that's also part of the job, so to speak. It's not something I ever felt I had to do like, "Oh, this is my duty." It was natural for me. It was just the way things develop when you teach karate. The bond you form with these people is one of the truly beautiful things about it. And when that begins to happen throughout the whole group, they're all working hard together and really feeling like a team. As opposed to being a father figure to anyone, what you want to do is serve as a kind of role model, which was the way I had felt about my own instructor.

The thing is that if you're going to learn karate, you have to overcome your fears and try to be brave, and that, too, is part of the training and part of the gift you get if you go through it. You overcome your own fears. And this comes back to being mentally strong because anybody can throw a kick and anybody can throw a punch, but it takes something special to actually go out there to fight and do it all for real.

The year after Tokyo, now having trained with Brian for five years, I was more confident when I went into the BKK British Open Knockdown Tournament in 1980 in London. This was considered the European championships. I was fighting as a heavyweight, and by then I had won some smaller tournaments in Sweden and Denmark, where I had worked on developing two very effective techniques. One was the low kick to the inside or outside of my opponent's leg, and the other was the knee kick to the head.

I had a hard fight in the first round with this big English guy whose nickname was "Beef" because he weighed about 250 pounds. He hit me right in the sternum. I could feel the crack in my breastbone, and it hurt for six months after that. I kept fighting after he hit me there, but now I had to protect that area as well. I finally got him with a knee kick.

I didn't knock him out, but I did knock him down and so won the bout on points. I won my next few fights, and then I knocked out an English fighter with a kick to the leg, and he had to be carried out on a stretcher. The guy knew I was injured, and he kept trying to hit me in my chest. He

almost did get me a few times, but whenever he came in to punch me there, I would hit him with a kick to his leg until he finally buckled and gave up.

In the final bout, I fought this really nice Black English guy. I was bigger than him, and I kept getting him with my kick to his leg and thigh, then I knocked him out with a left punch to his solar plexus. After that, I turned and ran over to Brian, who jumped up and held me for a moment. I could feel the tears stinging in my eyes. In those days, you could never show any emotion when you were on the mat. I remember finally realizing that my sensei really did care about me because of everything we had both gone through together. This was yet another reason why martial arts had now become so important to me.

After the fight, I went out with my buddies on the team, and a few young English ladies came along. By now I was twenty-two, and even though I had become a bit of a big deal in the karate world, my days were still filled with studying and training, so I hadn’t yet had a steady girlfriend. That night, I met this beautiful petite brunette named Paula, and we spent the night together. I was still nervous about having sex, and I remember lying awake in my hotel room watching TV as Ronald Reagan won the 1980 US presidential race with her sleeping peacefully on my arm.

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5

Chapter

In Grace’s World

That which we do not bring to consciousness appears in our lives as fate.

CARL JUNG

After completing my military service, I received another academic scholarship to attend Clemson University in South Carolina. I went there during the summer of 1981 and spent three months doing research on the filtration units being developed for the US space shuttle so the crew could shower while they were up there for days at a time. Along with a couple of American students, we would all go for a jog, take a shower, and then run that water through a micro filtration unit being prepared for the shuttle so we could measure its efficiency. I was now in the American South for the first time, and although it was definitely different, I liked it. I met a local girl with whom I had a little fling. After someone had seen me in the gym, the athletic department at Clemson wanted me to play on the football team, so I began practicing with them for a little while.

The university might have given me an athletic scholarship to stay there, but the way it had all come about in the first place was pretty funny. By then, I had already become pretty good at karate and now had a brown belt. Kyokushin is the kind of karate where you test your strength by breaking wood with your hands and feet. I had even seen a photograph of a Japanese guy breaking blocks of ice with his head. So a buddy and I brought two blocks of ice into Brian’s dojo in Stockholm, propped them up

horizontally on bricks, and then I broke them with my head while he took a photo.

Of course, I had a huge headache afterward, and when Brian heard about my ice-breaking adventure, he got really upset. My dad said, “Well, there’s got to be a better way for an engineer to use his head than this.” Later, when I showed the picture to my roommate at Clemson, he took it to the football coach, Danny Ford, and said, “Coach, check this out. This Swedish guy doesn’t even need a helmet. You *gotta* sign him.” In the end, nothing happened, which was probably best for everyone.

By then, I already knew I had to find a way to live permanently in America. On my way back home from Clemson, I went through New York City to visit some American Kyokushin karate fighters I had met in Tokyo. We went out one night in Manhattan, and I met a cute girl who was from Somalia, and we spent a few days together. Of course, I loved New York right away and knew I had to come back soon.

I then went back to the Royal Institute in Stockholm to finish my engineering degree and applied for and won a scholarship to study for the final year of my master’s degree at the University of Sydney in Australia. I spent almost a year in Australia. It was harder for me because the university had a different academic system where the students were on their own a lot. It was more the British style of education, with a lot less guidance from the professors and having to make my own decisions about what to focus on and how to study for exams.

By the time I got to Sydney, I was a black belt in Kyokushin karate. At the end of 1981, I had been awarded “Sho-Dan,” first-degree black belt, in Stockholm after two hours of technical examination followed by thirty full-contact bouts of two minutes each. So, one hour of fairly continuous sparring. I passed quite easily because of all the tournament fighting I had done. I was then in tremendous condition and won my last bout by a knockdown—with a knee kick, of course. From the day I first walked into Brian Fitkin’s dojo, it had taken me seven years to finally be able to wear my black belt, and now I was headed to Sydney to finish my master’s degree.

Down under, I started a small Kyokushin karate club at the university with about thirty other students. One of them was an ex–medical student who had gotten caught making drugs but was now trying to get back into academic life. He succeeded and eventually became the Australian karate

team physician. During our first sparring session, he said, “Mate, I know you’re a champion, so take it easy because I’ve had me nose broken and don’t need to get hurt that way again.”

Somehow during that first sparring session, I tapped his nose lightly with a back fist, and it broke again. Although that pissed him off, we remained good friends. Along with a few of my other sparring buddies, he worked doing security at music shows at night. When they asked me if I also wanted to make some extra cash, I signed right up and began doing security for people like Dr. Hook & the Medicine Show, Joan Armatrading, and Elvis Costello at the Capitol Theatre, an old-school, 2,000-seat venue on George Street in downtown Sydney.

I also worked as a doorman at the Jamison Street nightclub, which was notorious even back then for what went on there. Although I had never liked getting into fights, Aussie men loved to go out at night to drink and fight. So I ended up in a few scrapes because I had no other choice, and it was my job to get these guys out the door after they started hitting one another. Even as I was doing this, I was always scared of hurting someone and getting thrown out of the country.

I still remember one night when there was a big fight outside the front door in which I was not at all involved. But as I opened the door, I saw this guy who was bleeding lying on the ground. He looked really hurt, so I went to have a closer look. As I bent over to check on him, he suddenly bounced up and shouted, “You shouldn’t have hit me, mate. I know kung fu!” I tried to tell him that it wasn’t me, but instead of listening, he just swung at me. Even though I kind of deflected his punch, it still hit me pretty hard in the face.

As I backed up, one of my fellow bouncers, a new guy, shut the door behind me. Shit. Now, I had no other choice but to fight this guy. When he swung on me again, I blocked the punch and swept his front leg with my left foot. As he fell forward, I nailed him with a left knee kick to the head—an effective move I’d used many times in the dojo. Out cold, down he went. Because my jaw still hurt from his punch, I had to keep myself from continuing with a classic Brian Fitkin finishing move we used to practice, a heel stomp to the face. I came out of the adrenaline rush, realized what had happened, and pulled back. Next I called the cops. After he had been taken to the hospital, I ended up at the local police station.

I was feeling nervous and shook up about what had just happened, but the Aussie cop looked up from his typewriter and said, “Don’t worry about it, mate. You didn’t do anything. This geezer just fell over and hurt his head, right? *Right?*” I just nodded, and then he went ahead and typed that up in his report.

Although I hardly knew who she was then, American singer Grace Jones was touring Australia at the time and played at the Capitol Theatre, and that was how the two of us met. Sometimes I would be out in the crowd or dealing with some issue out back, but on the second night Grace was at the theatre, I was assigned to her backstage changing room door. Grace saw me there, and I guess she immediately took a liking to me because I was big, had blond hair, and was extremely fit. I was twenty-four at the time, and although Grace told me she was going out after the show to celebrate her thirtieth birthday at a club, I later learned she was actually thirty-four. Not that it would have mattered one way or another.

At the club, my good friend Mark, who was also a fighter, was hitting on Grace like crazy, and she was dancing with him, but I was still much too shy to try to do anything like that with her. Then my friend and I ended up back at Grace’s big suite at the hotel. There were a lot of people there—the gay guys who were always part of her entourage, a few girlfriends, and her manager, who was also gay, a very nice guy who later became my manager for a few months.

Pretty soon, there were just a few people there; my friend left and then so did Grace’s manager, and finally it was just me and Grace. I realized what was going on, and one thing led to another and I ended up spending the night with her, missing a few classes at the university in the morning. It was a really strange experience because she was a star and I was a nobody. I had no idea why she liked me, and I didn’t think I deserved it. Grace stayed in Sydney for another week, and we hung out and started to fall in love. But then she had to leave, and I had another five months of school to finish so I could get my master’s in chemical engineering.

Back then, Grace was crazy in her own way but didn’t do a lot of drugs. She might have smoked a little weed and drunk some champagne, but on stage she was always incredibly charismatic, totally focused on her work, and very physical. Her ex-boyfriend Jean-Paul Goude, a well-known French artist and graphic designer, had come up with the idea for her crew cut and

the tailored men's suits she always wore on stage, giving her the kind of androgynous look that no one but David Bowie really had back then.

Grace had been born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, where her father was an apostolic minister. When her parents moved to the United States, they left Grace with her grandmother. I believe Grace also endured beatings, so we had that childhood experience in common. When she was thirteen, Grace rejoined her parents in upstate New York. Rebelling against them when she was eighteen, she moved to New York City and began modeling. Grace then ended up in Paris, where she shared an apartment with top models Jerry Hall and Jessica Lange.

Grace became a famous model for Yves St. Laurent and other big designers and was photographed by Helmut Newton and other top photographers. Because she had come out of fashion into rock, Grace always had an incredible sense of style. She was way ahead of her time in that she was feminine and sexy but also had that masculine thing going in the way she dressed and moved. I've always been attracted to physically assertive women, especially those with style.

After completing school in Australia, I went to Japan in November 1982 to study with Mas Oyama in his main Honbu Dojo in Tokyo. That was where I got my second-degree black belt. Because she was doing a Honda commercial, Grace just happened to be there as well. I would run in the morning and then go to the dojo in the afternoon. Meanwhile, Grace would be doing her thing with Kenzo Takada, who was designing her clothes for the commercial. I had been awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study for my PhD in chemical engineering. I had applied to Cal Tech, Stanford, and MIT and was admitted to Stanford.

Because MIT, which had been my dad's favorite American school, had a completely different set of rules and because I was applying from Australia, I couldn't submit my final grades to them until February 1983. So I wrote a letter asking if they could please save a spot for me in the PhD program. They agreed and admitted me after I sent my grades. Because MIT's term was not going to start until September, I now had ten months off, so I decided to go back to New York City with Grace.

We got there right before Christmas. There was a big snowstorm, and I went out for a run under the West Side Highway near the meatpacking district where Grace lived. I was the only one out there. It was snowing like

crazy, and I felt like, *Wow, I'm home!* But I was still keeping up with my curriculum because, in my head, I was going to MIT in September.

In those days, the meatpacking district was a heavy gay-leather scene with a lot of S&M bars under the West Side Highway, and I was always surprised by how nice people there were to me. Later that year, when I'd go out and ride my big new black Yamaha 1200cc motorcycle with no shirt on, guys would invite me in for a drink. I didn't really know what was going on, but after a while I finally figured it out.

The entire neighborhood was still pretty rough back then. One of the first nights I ever went out with Grace in New York, we were sitting in some club, and she said, "Can you get me my cigarettes and my lighter from my purse?" I reached inside it and came back out with a little pistol in my hand. At first, I thought it was a toy, but no, it was a two-shot, .32-caliber Derringer. I said, "Is this real?" She said, "Yeah," and I said, "Why do you have it?" Grace told me she'd had a boyfriend before me, and somebody had broken into their apartment, tied them up at gunpoint, and then stolen their valuables, cash, and jewelry.

Her driver, an Italian guy from the Bronx, had given her this gun. Illegal, of course. So I said, "Fuck this. That's not gonna happen to me." When we went to Colorado to see her sister, I bought two guns there and brought them back with me to the city on the plane in my luggage, which you could still do back then. From then on, I was armed pretty much all the time in the city. Because there were no metal detectors anywhere, I could carry my .38 or .357 Magnum wherever we went. And because I had been in the Coastal Rangers in Sweden, I knew how to handle firearms.

Grace's brother got robbed at gunpoint in the entrance to the building where she and I lived. He was a deejay and a really nice guy, and they took everything he had. It was the middle of winter and freezing cold, and they even took all his clothes as well. All they left him was his underwear.

That building, which has now become super exclusive, was right by the piers, the West Side Highway, and the Hudson River. Grace had a two-bedroom apartment, and I felt bad because I wasn't paying any rent, so I started working as a doorman at a video bar called Private Eyes on West Twenty-First Street to help pay for some groceries, dinners, etc. The place had opened when MTV started, and people would go there to watch music videos on all these TV screens. One night, this really cute girl came in, and

I asked a few people, “Who is that?” Someone said, “Oh, she’s a dancer who just cut a record.” Of course, it was Madonna.

Later on in New York, I became a doorman at Limelight, which had been a church and then became the place to be in the city if you were into drugs and the disco scene. Peter Gatien, the owner, was arrested for selling party drugs but got acquitted. Then he pleaded guilty to tax evasion and was deported back to Canada. He also ran The Tunnel, a nightclub in a warehouse in Chelsea, where the menu in the VIP room listed all the various illegal substances you could buy there.

At the Limelight, I was just the muscle. A charming little guy named Fred was the one who let everyone in, and people would slip him a vial of coke or a hundred bucks just for doing that for them. At the end of the night, we would split everything he’d collected between us. Although I still wasn’t doing drugs, I remember a night at the Indochine restaurant when everyone at the table was openly doing cocaine. I just sat there a bit confused by what was going on.

I began getting into what I guess you could have called the New York jet set back then when Grace had taken me to some hot club uptown and then run off. This little guy with white hair whom I had never seen before came up to me with a small Instamatic camera and took my picture. Then he said, “So, what are you famous for?” And I said, “Nothing, as far as I know.” And he said, “Well, I want to put you in my magazine.” It was Andy Warhol, and that’s how Grace and I ended up together in *Interview* magazine in April 1983.

Albert Watson took the full-page, black-and-white photograph of us. I’m wearing black Speedos, and Grace, who was naked, is draped over my back. Both of us are staring right into the camera with these crazy, sexed-up looks on our faces, and because the magazine was oversized, the image of us was huge. The line over the story read, “Sports: a champion kickboxer guards the queen of the night.”

There was also another full page devoted to four smaller photographs of me without a shirt on in gym shorts doing different kickboxing poses. Unlike the shot of Grace and me together, I was a lot more relaxed in those shots and actually look like who I was back then, a young kid who had no real idea what was going on around him. When the guy who wrote the article asked Grace what she liked most about living “with a jock,” she said, “I like the big muscles, but most of all, his gentle heart.”

I guess Andy Warhol must have liked the interview, because Grace and I started going regularly to The Factory, which was still on Broadway in Union Square. Warhol would be there with his people, and they would all be talking away nonstop to one another while I just walked around looking at things. Andy himself was definitely an interesting guy. He had this buddy, Chris Makos, who was a photographer, and although I didn't know about this back then, he had been an apprentice to Man Ray in Paris and had taught Warhol how to use a camera.

Makos was the one who shot all those famous pictures of Andy in drag and in white face. The two of them had a deal where if a new guy like me showed up, they would bet whether Makos could get him to take off all his clothes. Makos would start it off by saying, "So, can you take your shirt off?" But he never got that far with me because Grace saved me by saying, "Hey, cut that shit out!" What I didn't know then and only found out after Grace had written about it in her book was that, in her words, "Andy would ring up wanting to know how big Dolph's dick was. It was that kind of world. Everyone was curious. He wanted to get more information about my new boyfriend, so he set up a photo session with Helmut Newton."[1]

Although the two of us did wind up being naked in that session, the way it was shot with my arms around Grace as she stood sideways in front of me, all you could really see was her butt. Nonetheless, because I was her new boyfriend, Grace wrote that Warhol wanted to "see how he's hanging" and that she was now in "good hands. He wanted to make sure I was going to enjoy myself. It was his way of showing he cared."[2] At The Factory back then, Antonio Lopez, the well-known illustrator who later died of AIDS, was around a lot. So was Francesco Scavullo, the fashion photographer. Andy's "superstars" like Ultra Violet and Viva and Joe Dallesandro were also there most of the time. This was when Grace and I started going to Studio 54 on Fifty-Fourth Street regularly.

"Studio," as the insiders called it, was unlike anything else. After you had pushed through the cops and the crowds, paid your twenty bucks, and made it through the front door, you could do anything you wanted because nobody cared. All the waiters were these hot guys in silver shorts with whom both men and women wanted to have sex. The space was an old theatre, so there were balcony seats up by the ceiling overlooking the dance floor, and I remember seeing people doing drugs and having sex up there. I

don’t recall whether Grace and I ever did that, but we may have one night in some dark corner.

It was all very blatant. A huge neon man-in-the-moon figurine with a big coke spoon going back and forth to his nose hung from the ceiling. Imagine seeing something like that now. There were fire marshals walking around, but they never did anything about any of it, maybe because the people there could afford to pay for their drugs rather than having to break into someone’s house to steal them. But I had certainly never seen anything like it before. No one had.

When Grace and I began going there in 1983, Steve Rubell had been convicted of tax evasion and sent to jail, but he had come back and was now running the place for the new owner. Studio 54 was always filled with stars. Through Grace, I got to meet David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Bianca Jagger, and Liza Minelli, who was always drunk and seemed kind of crazy to me.

A private room down the stairs by Steve Rubell’s office was where everybody would do drugs. I knew this because after I had lost Grace one night, I was trying to find her and knocked on Rubell’s door. He opened it, looked me up and down, and slammed the door right in my face. A minute later, Rubell opened the door back up, but Grace was now smiling at me from behind him, so we ended up in the private room where everyone was doing blow. I was still not using and was amazed that these people could stay up until six in the morning. Of course, they were all coked out of their heads, and what surprised *them* was how I could also stay up all night with them *without* doing drugs.

Even then I felt comfortable being with people who were on the edge—edgy, I guess you could have called them. I was also comfortable in the gay world and never felt threatened by anyone or felt that they were freaks. I think I understood that the people in that world also had pain inside them and were trying to find a way to express it. Because I saw they were fellow outcasts, I kind of identified with them and slowly started to realize I could never become a chemical engineer. If that happened, I could never be like my dad and suffer through the day-to-day grind to make a living.

Instead, I had to give this other world a shot. In those days, the Manhattan in which Grace lived was really out there and basically nonstop photo shoots; dinner parties; and sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. But there was

also all kinds of creative stuff happening, and Grace would always take me with her to all these hip events.

When Gianni Versace first came to New York, he opened a small boutique uptown on Madison Avenue, and Grace and I were there. Not many people in the city knew who Versace was, but he took a real liking to me and made me this cool outfit I would wear whenever I rode my motorcycle. It was all black leather with the kind of rubber you'd find on a tire running down the sides of both arms, the pant legs, and the sides of the jacket. It was also very tightly fitted. I was wearing the pants when Grace and I were photographed walking into Area, a club located downtown on Hudson Street, on the night it opened in September 1983.

In those pants without a shirt on, black leather gloves, and huge black sunglasses, I'm escorting Grace down a hallway past a large framed pane of glass, behind which a hippopotamus made from stone hangs from supports with yellow rope wound around its neck, legs, and body. By my side, Grace is decked out in a shiny black leather gown that leaves most of her chest and both arms bare. On her head is a bright yellow and black New York City Yellow Cab hat. On her hands are big industrial welder's gloves. Both of us looked like we had oiled up all our bare skin before leaving Grace's apartment. In other words, for us back then it was just another night on the town.

I was wearing the outfit Versace had made me when I went up to Cambridge on my motorcycle with Grace on the back so I could enroll in MIT in September of that year. By then, I had already started studying acting in New York and was also doing some modeling for the Zoli Agency, but I had only a student visa and was trying to get an H-1B visa and then a green card so I could work legally in America. Even though I knew I didn't want to become a chemical engineer, because I had fought so hard for that scholarship, I didn't want to give it up.

I think the people at MIT probably had this image of me as a skinny engineering student with thick glasses from Sweden who was going to spend several years studying for his PhD while also working as a teaching assistant in undergraduate courses to make some money on the side. Instead, I showed up wearing my Versace black leather outfit with Grace Jones, also in leather, on the back of my black Yamaha motorcycle. When the woman from whom I was supposed to rent my apartment took one look at us, the expression on her face was like, "What the fuck?" Then I met

some of the people in the chemical engineering department and went to some orientation sessions. After about a week of that, I turned around and went back to New York and notified MIT by letter that I was not going to attend, and they took back the scholarship. I had made a big decision, and I knew that there was no turning back. My future was completely open. It felt scary and exciting at the same time.

About five years ago, I was standing in line at the security check at LAX when an older guy in a sports jacket came up to me and said, “Excuse me. I’m a professor at MIT, and I was the one who approved your special Fulbright admission from Australia.” After we talked for a while, he said, “Well, even though you never did come to our school, I guess you did okay, huh?” I think he was right.

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Chapter

Too Tall

Just because the director yells action, doesn't mean you have to do something.

MARLON BRANDO

Right before I made the decision to quit MIT and give up my Fulbright scholarship, Grace had been getting ready to play Zula, a warrior woman who was the last member of her tribe in *Conan the Destroyer*, the sequel to *Conan the Barbarian*, which had been a big hit and made Arnold Schwarzenegger an international star. To prepare for the movie, Grace had started studying with Warren Robertson, a well-respected acting teacher in New York who had worked with people like Jessica Lange, Andie McDowell, Diane Keaton, James Earl Jones, and Madeline Kahn.

For some reason, I ended up taking a few classes with Warren, and afterward he pulled me aside and said, "Did you ever think maybe you're a frustrated artist and not going to be happy working as a chemical engineer?" So he helped confirm the way I had been leaning, and I think he looked at me and thought, *Oh, this guy might be able to make it in Hollywood*. I started taking regular classes with him and loved it right away because I could escape into whatever part I was playing at the time.

The first scene I ever did for him was from *On the Waterfront*—the one where Marlon Brando's character, Terry Malloy, a longshoreman on the docks in New York City, breaks down a door and tells the character played

by Eva Marie Saint that he is going to testify about having seen her brother murdered by the mob. Then they begin making out. Although Brando doesn't cry in that scene, he's in a lot of inner pain and exudes the kind of desperation that comes from being in that emotional place.

During my preparation for the scene, Warren worked on getting me upset about what had happened with my dad. I would start to cry, and then I would begin the scene. Being able to do that on cue was really therapeutic for me because I had never allowed myself to cry as a kid when my father was beating me. Warren was perceptive when it came to the kinds of trauma other people had suffered, and he showed me how to use the pain from my childhood in my acting.

Although I wasn't very good in the scene, I did manage to pull off the needed emotion and felt happy about that. When Grace saw me do it, I think she realized for the first time that maybe something was going to happen for me as an actor. She started partying even harder and went off to Mexico City for her role in *Conan the Destroyer*. I don't know if Grace had an affair with Arnold there, but even though I would never have asked her about it, I felt something was going on between them. I didn't care all that much because that was when I cheated on her for the first time with a New York model. I felt horrible about what I'd done, and our relationship started to slowly unravel from there. It was the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning. As I was to experience many times later in my life, relationships and show business were a tough combination.

However, because we were still in love and had a mutual, animal-like physical attraction to each other, I would travel with Grace whenever she would go to perform in France or Spain or Jamaica. When she was hired to do a commercial, we went to Los Angeles together, and that was when she got me into drugs for the first time. I didn't ever drink much, but I did start doing a bit of cocaine. I already had an addictive personality; you could definitely see that in the way I trained—because I was always doing everything I could to escape reality, beginning back when I was twelve years old.

Slowly, my partying started getting a bit harder. The thing was that whenever we would do drugs together, Grace always did more than me. Even though I had no idea if anything was ever going to happen for me as an actor, I knew I had to stay in shape if I wanted to be in the business. So I would do coke all night long and then still go for a run at five or six in the

morning. I'd take a nap during the day and hit the gym in the afternoon. I'm not going to dwell on this, but Grace and I were also into having sex with multiple partners. She had sexual relationships with a lot of well-known women, and I got pulled into some of that as well.

In late July 1984, I went with Grace to London, where she had a role in *A View to a Kill*, the fourteenth James Bond film and the last one in which Roger Moore played 007. Grace's character, May Day, was the bodyguard, lover, and hired assassin of the villain, a crazed Russian industrialist named Max Zorin (played by Christopher Walken) who wanted to destroy Silicon Valley. David Bowie had been set to play the part but withdrew; then Sting also turned it down. If either one of them had been there on the set with Grace in those days, it would have really been crazy.

Albert "Cubby" Broccoli, the original Bond producer, was producing the movie. His daughter Barbara, who was then in her twenties, was there as well, and one of her jobs was to get Grace to work in the morning. After a very late night out, Grace would stick her face into an ice bath prepared for her by Barbara, as I got ready to go for my morning run around Hyde Park. In the film, Grace and Roger Moore had a sex scene together, and he was known for always bringing some kind of fairly harmless sex toy into bed on the set to loosen everybody up and get them to relax. Grace had heard about this, so she went to some hardcore S&M store in London and showed up that day with a huge black dildo with a motor on it, and poor Roger didn't know what to do except crack up laughing.

I liked Roger because he had great style and a positive attitude about life. He could also be funny as hell. I can still remember him smoking a big cigar while we were all having lunch at the wood-paneled restaurant at Pinewood Studios outside London. In his most posh British accent, Roger looked over at me at my table and said, "Dolph is bigger than Denmark." Whether he thought that was where I was from, I never knew, because I couldn't ask him, at least not back then. I think Dolph and Denmark just sounded funny to him.

The thing about Grace as an actor was that she had great emotionality and could have been very good at it but did not really have the discipline required to do so, because what she always cared about most was her music. She was very good in that film and had this love scene with Chris Walken where he kissed her, so whenever I would run into him on the set or in the

gym, he seemed kind of guilty about that. He was a great guy, but little did he know what our sex life at that time was really like.

Although Grace had made it plain she did not want me on the set the day they filmed that scene, I only learned why when her book came out. Because she thought I was "very Scandinavian about sex" and not "the jealous type," that was not the problem. In her words, "I didn't want him there . . . There was another reason, really. Dolph was beginning to try acting . . . and there was a little friction because it seemed he might be hanging on to my coattails." For the sake of her character, she wrote, "It would have been too distracting having Dolph around, as if this was about him as much as me."[1] And she may have been right.

Despite that, I got to make my first appearance ever on film in a scene in *A View to a Kill* shot at the Chantilly Racecourse outside Paris. When one of the stunt guys didn't show up, the director, John Glen, said to me, "Do you want to be in the movie?" and I said, "I don't know if I can do it." He said, "Just take this gun and point it at Chris Walken." So they put me in a suit, and after I had done that, Glen said, "Good, you hit your mark and looked good, so maybe you could be in the movies." When Grace and I went to the premiere a year later, my name, "Hans Lundgren," appeared about two minutes into the end credits, so that role certainly wouldn't have helped me make much of a dent in Hollywood.

Before Grace and I had left New York for London, her agent, who was a very nice guy, began putting me up for little roles. One of them was in a "boxing movie." I found myself standing in line with about a hundred other guys who were waiting to audition in what is known in the business as a "cattle call." When I finally got to the woman who was seeing everyone, she asked me my name and how tall I was. "Six five," I said. Without even looking up she said, "Too tall. *Next*!" And that was the end of it.

As I was leaving, I saw a handwritten sign behind her on the wall that said, "ROCKY IV" and thought, *Wow, a* Rocky *movie!* By then, I had already seen the entire *Rocky* trilogy and loved them all. While warming up for my fights in the Australian Open Karate Tournament two years earlier, I had actually played "Eye of the Tiger," the title track from *Rocky III*, to get myself psyched up to fight.

Months later, I was having dinner with John Herzfeld, a director who was a good friend of Sly Stallone, and Warren Robertson, my acting coach. Herzfeld said, "You know, Sly is looking for someone to play this Russian

fighter in *Rocky IV*." And Warren pointed to me and said, "Well, look at him," and Herzfeld said, "Yeah, he would be great."

"I was already up for it," I told him, "and they turned me down."

"What?" he said. "You're the guy Sly is looking for."

Herzfeld asked me if I had any pictures of myself, so I jumped on my motorcycle and rode down the West Side to get the photographs someone had taken of me bare-chested in boxing gear, wrapping my hands in a gym in Australia. Herzfeld sent them to Stallone, but nothing happened, and then I went to London with Grace for *A View to a Kill*.

At some point while I was there, one of Sly's production assistants in Hollywood managed to track me down, called, and said, "Oh, thank God, I've finally found you! We've been looking for you for months but we didn't have a phone number." Then the production assistant said, "Listen, Sly wants to meet you. When can you be here?" I got on a plane right away, landed in New York, and flew straight to Los Angeles where some guy picked me up at LAX in a station wagon and drove me to Paramount Studios on Western Avenue. As I got out, I remember looking up at the hills behind the studio lot and seeing the famous white Hollywood sign. Because I realized this could be the real deal at last, my heart was racing like crazy.

I went in and waited a bit. When Sly came out of his office, I was starstruck right away. Because he was about to start shooting *Rambo II*, Sly was super tanned with long hair and looking great, really muscular. There were no digital files back then, so he had all his *Rocky IV* stuff in binders all over the office. We took some photographs together. He told me, "Hey, I've got five thousand guys up for this role." Because I was a karate fighter, I had big legs but a wiry upper body, and Sly said he wanted me to put on ten pounds of muscle. Then he gave me a monologue to practice for my screen test in a few months. We said goodbye, and I went back to London and started training with a bodybuilder and found somebody who put me on a really strict diet as well.

I had always lifted weights to become a better fighter but had only done power movements like squats and bench presses. I never cared what I looked like in the ring as long as I didn't get knocked out. But now it was *all* about how I looked. When Grace and I went back to New York, I kept training at a place called Madison Avenue Muscle with Joseph Poma, a bodybuilding friend who really helped me. After a month or so, Robert Chartoff, who had co-produced the first three *Rocky* movies with his partner

Irwin Winkler, came to check me out. He watched me lift weights and hit the heavy bag.

I knew I had to do a screen test to get the part, so I worked on it with my acting coach, Warren Robertson. He had studied Mr. T, who had faced Rocky in the heavyweight championships in *Rocky III* as Clubber Lang, as well as Carl Weathers, who had played Apollo Creed in the first three *Rocky* movies. Both of them had been pretty loud and done a lot of yelling. And so Warren told me, "When you do this monologue, don't move. Just internalize it. Deliver the lines with your chin up, staring right into the camera like you're an officer and a hardworking member of the Russian proletariat. Don't move a muscle."

Which was scary for me because an actor's first instinct when somebody yells, "Action!" is always to move. Warren Robertson had found out about the Method from Marlon Brando, and one of the great things Brando had said was, "Just because the director says 'Action' doesn't mean you have to do anything." Which is why Clint Eastwood never says that when he directs. He just says, "Whenever you're ready, go ahead . . ."

Warren and I worked on the scene over and over again, and then I went to LA to do the screen test. I had been on a strict low-carb diet to get ripped, and even though I was not going to eat anything for breakfast, I wanted to go downstairs in my hotel to have a coffee. I was waiting for the elevator, and when it stopped, the doors opened and this six-foot-five blond Russian guy was standing there looking back at me.

When I got to the restaurant in the lobby, there was another guy that size down there as well. That's when I realized, *Okay, I'm not the only one doing a screen test today. These other guys are here to test for this part as well*. Then we all went to MGM where the film crew had a soundstage set up with a 35-millimeter movie camera on a dolly track for the screen test. Both the camera and the lighting crew were ready to go. We were told to change into real boxing shorts but no boxing gloves. Just bare-chested with hand wraps. The other two guys were both real Russians, and as I was waiting in the locker room for my turn, I could hear them doing their monologues. It was just as Warren had predicted; they both sounded like a Russian version of Mr. T—really loud and confrontational like, "I WEEL KEEL YOU! I WEEL DEE-MOL-ISH YOU!"

I had been practicing in front of a mirror for weeks with Warren watching me. He was a smart man and had told me, "Whatever you say,

don’t ever let it come into your eyes. Don’t let your eyes reveal a thing. Just do what we’ve practiced, and I promise you it will work.” When I got out there to do the screen test, there were about fifty people standing around behind the camera. Of course, Sly was there with his bodyguards, but also all these guys in suits from the studio. I was nervous and could not help but wonder if I had given up my Fulbright scholarship and everything I had worked so hard for ten years to attain for all the wrong reasons.

But as I stepped in front of the camera, I also felt like, *Fuck it. This is it, and I might as well go for it*. Just like going into the ring for a tournament fight. The camera assistant lifted the clapper in front of my face: “*Lundgren. Screen test I. Drago*.” The whole thing probably took ninety seconds, and I did exactly what I had rehearsed with Warren.

After the screen test, I went back to my hotel with no idea if I had gotten the part. Back in New York the next day, the phone rang. Sly was on the line, and he sounded cheerful. “You got the part, kid,” he said. “I look forward to seeing you out here in LA in two months.” Then he said, “You should think about changing your first name.” I was in shock and said, “Uh, yeah. Okay.” What he had said struck a chord with me because in my mind, Hans Lundgren was still that beaten-up little kid from the suburbs of Stockholm who was never going to amount to anything. Sly also thought Hans sounded too Germanic, which wasn’t very good in Hollywood (or for playing the part of a Russian).

It took me a while to digest all this and kick it around, but in the end, I didn’t actually pick my new name all by myself. By then, Warren Robertson had become a big supporter of mine because I think he realized my being the new villain in the *Rocky* franchise at a time when the Cold War was really heating up was going to be a big deal. Warren had played football in the army, and I think he must have liked basketball too, because the new first name he suggested came from Dolph Schayes, who was Jewish from The Bronx and had played at NYU before starting a long career as a player and coach in the NBA.

Although both “Hans” and “Adolph” were Germanic, “Dolph” stood out to me right away as being unusual, and I liked it because it sounded far softer and much more mysterious. But when I told Sly about it, he said, “What about ‘Nick’ Lundgren?” Somehow, that didn’t seem nearly as good to me. So I went with “Dolph” and went back to Sweden to have my name legally changed before I moved out to LA in early 1985.

First I stayed in Venice, which back then was a very dangerous place —"Murder Capital USA," someone called it. My first purchase was a pump-action shotgun, which I kept right next to my bed. I lived on the second floor, and I realized that one of the guys who was always selling drugs in the parking lot down below at night could easily jump up and climb onto my balcony. The producers at MGM had rented me a Mustang convertible, which turned out to be a saving grace.

One night, I got pulled over, and the cop who was in charge went through my Mustang, where he found an empty gun holster and some ammunition. I had purchased a handgun, but there was a two-week mandatory waiting period before I could actually get the weapon. The cop was very worked up, and as he kept pushing me against a wall, he took out his sidearm while saying, "Where is the gun?" over and over. Although I kept trying to explain that I was waiting for my permit, he didn't believe me and was definitely about to arrest me, or maybe something even worse if I did anything to upset him. After the cop had checked my registration, he looked at me in a different way and said, "It says here that this car was rented for you by MGM Studios. *Why*?" I told him about the movie and ten seconds later, I was a free man. Slapping me on the back, the cop said, "Good luck with the film. And say hi to Sly for me, huh?"

Later on, after I had rented a house in Coldwater Canyon, Grace would come home from partying with some cute girlfriend at four in the morning while I was sleeping. They would join me in bed, and then one thing would lead to another. One night, Grace was throwing a big party, and I decided to sleep in the guest house because I had to get up at six in the morning to train with Stallone. I was awoken by loud knocking on the door and a voice coming from the outside: "It's your trainer. I'm here to check your abs!" I opened the door and there was a grinning Arnold, holding a drink and smoking a big cigar. We've been friends for over forty years now and he's been a role model of mine in many ways.

Because I was now getting ready to do *Rocky IV*, I was in serious training with Stallone. We would do a heavy weight workout every morning at nine and then go home for lunch. In the afternoon, we would box for two hours. We did this six days a week for five months. I was already in great shape before this, but as Sly put it, "We're in such good shape now, we'll never, never be able to get outta shape."

He was almost right except he hadn't factored in Ms. Grace Jones. After I had been living with her for a few months, Sly started noticing something was wrong with me and said, "What the fuck is going on, huh? You look tired." I told him and he said, "Well, you can come live at my place, or I'll hire someone else for the part." He moved his sister out of his guesthouse and I moved in.

Back then, Sly lived up on Caprice Drive in Pacific Palisades. He always had his bodyguards around. I had gotten to know them all and was pretty happy there. But then Grace flipped out and said, "You can make a choice. You can stay with him or you can stay here with me. Or I'm gone." And I said, "Grace, I can't sleep here. You come home every night and wake me up at four in the morning." So I kept right on living in Sly's guesthouse.

A few days later, our maid called me and said, "Sir, you have to come down here." I said, "Why?" and she said, "Ma'am is burning all your clothes." Grace had a voodoo doll, and she had put it in the fireplace and set it on fire with lighter fluid. Then she started throwing all my stuff in there. Not just my clothes, but also the leather and rubber motorcycle outfit Versace had made me, which would probably be worth a small fortune today, as well as all these black and white photographs of us taken by George Hurrell, the famous Hollywood celebrity photographer.

For Grace, this was nothing new. About a year before, while she was recording her *Slave to the Rhythm* album in New York City, her producer called to say he needed her to come down to the studio just a couple of blocks away to record some vocals. Because the two of us were having an argument at the time, Grace later wrote in her book that the producer had called "just when I was setting fire to Dolph's trousers." When she finally did make it to the studio three days later, Grace explained the delay to her producer by saying, "I had some things I needed to clear up. A few more items of clothing to cut up and burn."[2] That was just how Grace could sometimes be back then.

Another incident occurred on the day I had to fly with Sly and a lot of other people from *Rocky IV* to Las Vegas on the MGM jet to watch a fight. I went back to the house to get my clothes. But when I got there, Grace had been up all night partying, and by now it was midday. I ran into the house and grabbed some stuff, and she followed me outside. I was trying to get into this Lincoln Town Car with a driver taking me to the Van Nuys Airport,

and I knew I couldn't be late because everyone else was already there waiting—not just Sly but the producers as well. Because even though Sly had been late for many of our training sessions, I got there late once and he said, "That's it. One more time, kid, and you're gone."

The other thing was that whenever we did mock sparring, I still had to get very close to him with my punches for it to look real. If I was too far away, Sly would get upset. If I even touched him, he'd say, "Do that again and I'm going to fire you and get somebody else." At the time, Sly and his first wife were going through a divorce proceeding, and he would come straight from court in a suit, get changed, and then climb into the ring with me, so I sort of understood where all his irritability was coming from. Later on, while I was going through a tough divorce myself, I remembered those days in the gym with Sly and thought, *Yeah, now I get it*.

Anyway, I knew I couldn't be late for the MGM jet to Las Vegas. I was about to load my stuff into the Town Car when I saw this look of absolute horror on the driver's face. When I turned around, a stark-naked Grace was holding a concrete breeze-block over her head and was about to throw it through the windshield.

Although I would never hit a woman, I knew I had to do something to stop her, so I skipped forward and tapped her with a little front kick, and she fell backward into our pool. When she came back up for air, Grace said, "Okay, that's it! I'm going to call my lawyer and have you deported!" After I had gotten on the plane and told Sly what had happened, he said, "We'll deport *her* ass, kid. Don't worry about it."

From that point on, I was pretty much done with Grace, but we would get back together every now and then because of the sexual attraction between us. We were still hooking up while I was making *Rocky IV,* but the magic between us finally started to fade on the night the movie opened.

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7

Chapter

A Star Is Born?

Fame is the thirst of youth.

LORD BYRON

Before the shooting for *Rocky IV* even started, I received $750 a week as a training salary and another $750 for my expenses and the rent for my Venice apartment. For five months before the principal photography on the movie began, Sly and I worked out together at the Santa Monica Bodybuilding Center and at a boxing gym at MGM. Don King, the famous promoter, came one day to watch us there.

My daily routine was to get up at six and eat breakfast at seven, which was always three eggs, two pieces of toast with no butter, and Shredded Wheat cereal with no milk but apple juice instead. After our weightlifting session in the morning, I had just enough time to drive home to get some lunch, which was always tuna salad with very little carbs. After maybe a short nap, I would drive to Culver City to box in the afternoon. I'd get back home at four or sometimes five o'clock and then cook myself dinner, which was always the same—two chicken breasts with a baked potato. Then I would call Grace in New York and go to bed.

Our weightlifting sessions were the classic bodybuilding three-day split—chest and back on day one, shoulders and arms on day two, and legs on day three, with the cycle repeating until day seven, when we would rest. I was never able to lift extremely heavy weights because my legs are too long

to be a good power lifter. Stallone was the same. Because we were both trying to create the fit and lean physique of an athlete and not a bodybuilder, the most I would work with in those days was 250 to 300 pounds squatting and on the bench. Sly was especially concerned that our chests would make us look too much like bodybuilders, so we did sets of ten to fifteen reps for the chest with less weight.

The boxing sessions in the afternoons lasted for about two hours, and we spent most of that time on the choreography of the two fights I was going to have in the movie, one with Apollo Creed and the other with Rocky. Because every punch and move was spelled out and had to be memorized, there was a separate script for each fight. Taken together, they were about forty pages long. For each three-minute round in the movie, a sample page would read: "Jab, jab, jab, jab, right hand, left hook, step to your left, left to the body, step back, block right hand." In the afternoon, we would also spend time sparring, hitting the heavy bag, and doing abdominal work.

Because Sly had started getting death threats after his huge hit *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, he always showed up in his Ferrari with a police escort of motorcycle cops, which in LA was also a way to let people know right away who you were. Even though he was almost always in a bad mood because of the divorce proceedings, I still looked up to him and was impressed by how he could keep up with me in the ring. Although Sly was ten years older, he knew a lot about diet and training and could always keep pace with me for every second of our workouts.

Because this was during the Cold War, we couldn't go to Russia to shoot the fight between Rocky and Ivan Drago. Instead, Sly shot it at a sports arena in Vancouver. He did that because it was a lot cheaper to shoot up there and easier to get extras than in Hollywood. We couldn't do anything digitally back then, so they had to hire five thousand extras to sit in the arena for two weeks. In those days, they were still shooting everything on actual film, and we would get the exposed footage, "the dailies," back a day later and watch them on a screen in Sly's hotel suite.

On Thursday during the week before we started shooting, Sly and I did some camera tests of the two of us boxing and moving in the ring. With principal photography set to start on Monday, we watched the dailies on Friday, and I remember Sly taking one look at the lighting on our bodies during the fight and saying, "This is no good. We have to repaint the

canvas.” Because Sly wanted more bounce from the lights over our heads, he had them repaint the canvas a darker gray, which, even back then, I thought was pretty clever. Sly had also had all the music for the movie written before we started shooting, so we had already been boxing to it for weeks—which was also really smart.

In addition, Sly realized my boxing boots were yellow with red stripes instead of red with yellow stripes. He made one phone call, and the Adidas factory in Germany opened up for him on Saturday and made ten pairs of boots that were on a plane Sunday so they would be ready for our six o’clock shooting call Monday morning. I could not help but be impressed. I thought watching Sly in action as both a producer and director was always pretty cool.

We spent two weeks boxing in Vancouver, and that was when Sly got hurt. I think what caused it was that he was seriously overworked. He was directing the movie and rewriting dialogue and trying to keep up with me in the ring, and we were hitting each other to the body pretty hard. I was bigger than him and was probably hurting him a lot more than he was hurting me, but the first I ever knew about it was after I had gone back to LA and the producer told me, “You’ve got two weeks off.” I said, “Oh, great. Why?” He said, “Sly’s in the hospital.” And I thought, *Oh, shit!*

At the time, I didn’t understand what had happened, but Sly later said because our characters hated each other so much, he wanted us to really come at each other in the first round, so he had filmed multiple takes of Rocky being hit by a lot of heavy shots to the body. After we had completed the last day of shooting up there, Sly began having trouble breathing. He went to a nearby emergency room, where they told him his blood pressure was over two hundred.

Because his blood pressure was so high, he had to be flown at low altitude to St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica, where he spent four days in intensive care. According to Sly, I had hit him so hard that his heart had slammed up against his breastbone and was bruised. Because people who had been thrown up against the steering wheel in car accidents often died from this, Sly later said “a streetcar named Drago” had hit him. All I knew was I had hit him hard when he told me to hit him hard and he had absorbed a lot of punishment. It was only much later that I learned he had actually been in intensive care, because the next time I saw him was when we started shooting again back in Los Angeles, and he seemed fine.

The first time you see me as Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*, I'm in full uniform as a Soviet Army captain. Accompanied by Brigitte Neilsen, who played my wife, Ludmilla, I've just gotten off a plane and am trying to make my way through a crowd of reporters who keep pushing and shoving one another as they go right on asking me questions. We shot the scene in an auxiliary terminal at LAX. Next I'm sitting next to Ludmilla at a table at a press conference we shot at the Century Plaza Hotel in Century City.

Throughout that scene, I sit there looking around without saying a single word as she does all the talking for me. Before we began shooting, I studied how Soviet officers carried themselves by keeping their chins up in a sort of "worker's hero" pose. So in that uniform with my hair standing straight up in a sharp flattop haircut, I definitely looked the part. Grace was actually the one who told me to get my hair cut really short so it looked a bit like hers. In the early 1980s, most men still had longer hair except for the hip, gay crowd with whom Grace always hung out. So the two of us kind of ended up looking a bit like twins, one Black, one white, one a man, and the other, well, androgynous.

In the film, after Apollo Creed challenges me to fight him in an exhibition bout in Las Vegas, we hold a joint press conference during which he treats me like a pathetic chump and then gets angry and starts arguing with one of the officials who has come with me from Russia. Suddenly, everyone jumps to their feet, and I shove Creed backward as hard as I can. When I did that, Carl Weathers looked scared for real. I was a few inches taller than him, and he didn't really know me the way Sly did from all the boxing and rehearsing we had done together. I was also wearing these boots that had been custom made for me on Stallone's orders, with lifts inside them so I would look even bigger on-screen than I actually was.

At this point in the movie, I still have not said a single word in either Russian or English. Although this may seem hard to believe, I actually had only nine lines of dialogue in *Rocky IV*, but the ones people remember are "If he dies, he dies," which I say after having fatally knocked out Apollo Creed in our fight, and "I must break you!" which is what I say to Rocky after we've touched gloves in the ring before our fight begins. One of the great things about cinema is that it's often a lot better if you can do something without any dialogue, because it makes the character seem even more mysterious and powerful.

We shot that final fight in Vancouver. It was supposed to be taking place in Moscow, so some of the five thousand extras who make up the audience are actually wearing Soviet Army uniforms. A lot of others, all of whom Sly had cast because they looked right for the part, are wearing dark suits and drab-looking clothing like real Soviet citizens did back then. Because they couldn't afford to pay that many extras for that many days of shooting in the original *Rocky* picture, Sly told me that if you pause it in some of the slow-motion sequences, you can see that many of those in attendance are actually cardboard cutouts rather than real people.

The other big thing that supposedly went on during filming was that Carl Weathers and I were having problems with each other. What actually happened was that back in LA, Sly had already let me know Carl could be a bit of a diva. When we all flew into Las Vegas before shooting started, I had been rehearsing the fight I was going to have with Carl's character, Apollo Creed, with someone else. Sly and I had been boxing for five months, so he knew I was a nice guy. But Carl didn't know me at all, and when I walked into the room to rehearse with him, all he saw was this big fucking Russian guy who looked scary as hell, and Carl was probably thinking, *Shit, this guy is going to* kill *me*.

The whole thread of our relationship in the movie was that he was always giving me shit and talking down to me, so when we finally fight, Drago takes all that out on him and ends up killing Apollo in the ring, but probably not intentionally. I do think Carl was scared of me and was always trying to get out of the ring as fast as he could whenever we were in it together. But he never once insulted me personally because he probably thought I would then have to kick his ass for real.

Instead, his character was just trying to survive that fight, and maybe so was Carl. No acting required. Sly told me before our fight sequence began that Carl had come to him and said, "Does Apollo Creed really have to die? Can't there be a little twitch in my leg as I lay there?" and Sly said, "No fucking way." Before our fight Sly whispered to me ringside, "Go ahead and hit him, Dolph."

Just before we started shooting *Rocky IV*, I remember going with Grace in May 1985 to the premiere of *A View to a Kill* in San Francisco. Duran Duran, who had a number one hit record with the title song, was also there. Thousands of young girls were camped out by our hotel waiting to get a glimpse of the band members. Roger Moore was there, as was Christopher

Walken, along with a lot of other big stars. When I told Sly about it, he said, “Just wait until our movie opens, kid. That Bond movie won’t be nothin’ compared to it.” I didn’t understand what Sly meant, but he already knew how big *Rocky IV* was going to be.

As it turned out, it became the biggest-grossing film of all the movies in the *Rocky* franchise. I think the reason for that was because Sly had come up with an “us versus them” theme for the movie during what was a loaded time for the Cold War, what with Reagan and Gorbachev in office and the Soviet Union at the height of its power. Because of the way Sly directed the picture, it still has not aged. Unlike a lot of movies made during the 1980s, *Rocky IV* holds up even now. The lighting, the montages, and the freeze-frames all feel quite up-to-date.

On November 21, 1985, Grace and I went to the premiere of *Rocky IV* at the Village Theater in Westwood. On our way in, no one knew who I was, and all the photographers kept trying to shoo me out of the way so they could take pictures of Grace. I hadn’t seen the completed movie, so I sat there for ninety-one minutes frozen in the darkness and realized for the first time just how powerful both the film and my character really were. When the lights came back up, everybody in the audience was looking at me. And when I walked out of the theater, all the photographers now wanted to take pictures of *me*.

My world started spinning, and that was the final nail between Grace and me. We did still have a great connection, and some of it was definitely my fault because my life suddenly became so exciting. What happened to us on the night of the premiere in Westwood was a bit like *A Star Is Born*, but in our case, it took another year for us to break up for real. Grace loved New York, and I had to be in Los Angeles for my newfound career. We both felt bad about this and did what we could to stay together. At the same time, we both felt that it wasn’t working anymore, and I do remember being very upset about it at the time.

According to Grace, our relationship ended because I had been cast as Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*. In her words, “Before I knew it, boom, Dolph had a career.”[1] Making it all sound even more like *A Star Is Born*, Grace also wrote, “It was Hollywood that tore me and Dolph apart: the place, the industry, the bullshit. Offers for film parts would come along for him, but they often wanted me to be attached. This caused problems . . . Out of nowhere, the ego Dolph didn’t have before, he now had . . . People started

to fill his head with stuff because they saw a chance of making money through him, and he believed it."[2]

The truth is that we were both dabbling in drugs back then, except that I was still getting up at five in the morning to train and work on a movie. I was also partying a lot, and Grace and I slowly drifted apart. I was twenty-eight years old, and it was a moment when all the women wanted to sleep with me and all the guys wanted to hang out with me. All in all, it was a crazy time in my life. Even today, however, I can still say that Grace was one of the major loves and great influences in my life.

Tony Colagreco (my friend and club owner): I first met Dolph when I went to the Miss Hawaiian Tropic Beauty Pageant on Waikiki Beach in Honolulu in September 1986. The way that happened was that a mutual friend of ours named Angelo who worked for Adidas had supplied the *Rocky* movies with sneakers and stuff, and Dolph was one of the judges at the contest. All these beautiful contestants in bikinis were roaming around, and there were parties to go to at this club and that.

Before you know it, Dolph invites me and our mutual friend from Adidas to a little get-together in his suite, which of course is on one of the top floors overlooking the ocean in the Sheridan . . . super nice and right next to the Royal Hawaiian. Because I'm thinking this has to be the easiest way to meet some of the girls, I say "Okay" and then ask a couple of them, "Hey, you want to come to meet Dolph Lundgren, who's one of the judges, in his suite and have a little party?"

And sure enough, two of them [agree]. Miss England and Miss Ireland. Beautiful girls with great bodies, and so, oh my God, I'm in heaven. We go upstairs to the suite, and Angelo goes in first because he knows Dolph. Just Dolph, one of his assistants, and Dolph's manager were there, so I almost felt a little out of place. Back then, Dolph was still a little shy and would never have gone around saying, "Hey, girls! Want to come to my party?" Tom Holbrook, his manager, wasn't like that either. In fact, he was a little standoffish and not that kind of a go-getter manager.

But then I come marching in with a girl on each arm, and Dolph does a double take. He has a look on his face like, "I've got to get to know this guy." He and I begin talking and having drinks and laughing, and then Angelo gets on the phone and calls another girl and before you know it, we have like eight girls up there with us and we all have a great evening.

After that, Dolph and I are like connected, and we exchange phone numbers. Because he had pretty much come out of nowhere to become a star, he really didn't know how big he had blown up until he got out there and started making public appearances after *Rocky IV*. And, insofar as the Miss Hawaiian Tropic contest was concerned, Miss Venezuela won. But Miss England did come in second or third.

I can agree with what Grace wrote about me. When *Rocky IV* became a hit, I was approached by people who wanted to represent me and advise me on things, because I really didn't know all that much about show business at the time. I know Grace still has this notion that someone wanted to put her

in a movie with me and pay her a million dollars and I was the one who killed the deal, but I had never heard of those people or that movie. She is right about the fact that we did have something really special, and it was not the first time Hollywood had come between two people who were in love.

After I came back from a promotional tour for *Rocky IV* with my new manager, he told Grace that because she was filming all night and I was shooting during the day, it was better for me to begin living at the Sunset Marquis Hotel where he could look after me. Most of the time, I wasn't even there. I was in Whittier, California, filming *Masters of the Universe* for Cannon Films for fifty-eight consecutive night shoots, which I've been told is still somewhat of a record in Hollywood.

Tony Colagreco: Grace and Dolph had broken up, but she kind of thought they were still together. She would call Dolph and he would be like, "Oh, shit. It's Grace. This is nuts." Because he didn't want to tell her to stop calling and leave him alone, Dolph stayed in the friendly mode but still tried his best to keep her at arm's length. At the time, Dolph was staying at the Sunset Marquis in LA, so we would meet there for our kind of pregame, and then we'd get into the limo together and go out.

One night, I was there with him, and as Dolph was getting ready, the phone rang in his room, and I said, "Hey, I'll get it." I answered the phone and said, "Hi, who is this?" And the answer was, "Mother fuck! I will kill you! Who are you?" And I said, "Oh, hi Grace. Look, Dolph's in the shower right now." And she said, "You get him on the phone! Or I'll bring a gun and shoot you!" And I said, "Okay, honey. Just hold on. All right?"

When Dolph came out of the shower, I told him who was on the phone, and he said, "Just hang up." By the time Grace got there that night, we were both already long gone and didn't come back again until two in the morning. I only started shitting myself when Dolph told me Grace actually did have a gun, and all I could say then was, "Let's get the hell out of here just as fast as we can, huh?" Which was exactly what we did. I don't think I ever went back to the Sunset Marquis to see Dolph again. Instead, I'd say, "Hey, how about you come to my house?"

Long before I happened to run into her again twenty years later, Grace would sometimes show up unannounced late at night at my house in LA in a limo and say over the intercom that if I didn't let her in, she was going to start screaming and call the cops. Once, after I told her, "Well, Grace, I'm here with another girl," she said, "That's okay. I don't mind." And then she started honking the horn in the limo loudly, and because it was the middle of the night, I let her in but she didn't join us in bed.

Then there was another episode in 1986 when she was shooting *Vamp* in LA. One of the producers called me to say she hadn't shown up on the set

for two days and was in her house with a gun but wouldn't come out. They begged me to get to the set and save their movie. So I went up there one night after work, and she did have a gun. I got it away from her, pocketed the loaded magazine, and we ended up spending the night together and had a little fling. Crazy times.

After that, I don't think I saw her again until the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, and it was wonderful because I was doing this interview outside with Jean-Claude Van Damme at a pool and someone kept yelling, "Dolph! Dolph!" from one of the rooms. I looked up and there was Grace, like ten stories up. I went up and we talked a bit. I don't think I spent the night with her, but I did get to meet her son, Paulo, whom I had been very fond of when he was a child (and taken care of as a two-year-old) and who was now twenty-six years old.

The next time I saw her was also really sweet. Right after I had my cancer misdiagnosed, I spent five months in London shooting *Expendables IV* and *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom.* By then, I had already been trying to track down Grace so the people making a documentary about me could arrange to interview her on camera, but no one seemed able to find her. Through a friend of mine in LA, I finally got a number for her, and we started texting, but she was still hard to contact directly.

I was in London and I went to a doctor's office on Harley Street for an ultrasound. I was late for my appointment, and as I was checking in with the nurse, I saw this woman walk into the waiting room wearing a big, weird biker helmet with goggles on top. I was thinking, *Who the hell would wear something like that to go see a doctor on Harley Street? I only know one person*. And of course it was amazing Grace, and as always, she was late for her appointment.

For us to run into each other in London because we had both shown up twenty minutes late for our appointments made it seem like it was meant to be. We hugged and talked, and it was all very chill. She told me about her family and asked about mine and invited my fiancée, Emma, and me to come see her perform at The Icon Ball, a fashion show at a hotel in Marylebone. Because I was filming, I couldn't be there that night, and instead Emma and I met Grace in her suite at the Jumeriah Carlton Tower Hotel on Sloane Street, where we all got to hang out together for a while. Her son, Paulo, whom I mentioned earlier, was now forty-two and the drummer in her band.

As for her participating in the documentary, I kept trying to get her to agree to the interview, but she always had some excuse for not being able to do so. She also wanted to get paid $20,000 for it. When I finally realized it was not going to happen, I told her, “You know, it doesn’t really matter, Grace.” And she said, “Oh, I’m really, really private about my life.” And while I don’t think that’s necessarily true, it was still nice to see her again and for us to be able to make contact as human beings. Because, as I said to Grace, whether or not she was going to be in the documentary didn’t really matter. I mean, not at this point in our lives. I was just happy to see her again.

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8

Chapter

Hometown Boy

No matter how far we travel, the memories will follow in the baggage car.

AUGUST STRINDBERG

After it was released in November 1985, *Rocky IV* grossed almost $128 million in the United States and Canada and $300 million worldwide, the equivalent of about three times that much today. In the six years after *Rocky IV* was released, I made six movies. The first was *He-Man: Masters of the Universe* with Frank Langella, Meg Foster, and Courtney Cox. I played the title character, and Frank Langella was Skeletor, his evil opponent; both were based on action figures that were then popular, primarily among young boys.

When I went back to Sweden in 1986 to help promote *Rocky IV*, I was already working on *Masters of the Universe* and was very conscious that I was now going to play He-Man, a very American superhero whom young boys adored. In *Rocky IV*, I had played a Russian, so my accent wasn't an issue. In fact, for that picture I had worked on speaking both Russian and English with a distinct Russian accent.

But now I was trying to minimize my natural Swedish accent and sound as much like an American as I could. Doing that while acting in English was not easy. Because they didn't know much about me back home in Sweden and also had no idea how long I had been in America, the producer of the television show I went on to promote *Rocky IV* asked if I wanted to

do the interview in English or Swedish. I thought about it and said, “In English.” Bad move.

Johan Pramell (my friend and publicist): People in Sweden can be incredibly judgmental and are usually very square as well. There is also something in Sweden called *Jantelagen*, which means “Don’t think you are better than anyone else.” And so you most certainly cannot come back after having been away for a while and forget about the Swedish language. That Dolph had also returned as a very grand movie star wearing this tight leather outfit also didn’t help, so the Swedes never forgot what he had done. In whatever article that then appeared about him, the story always included the fact that Dolph Lundgren had gone on television and had completely forgotten about the Swedish language. Twenty years before Dolph, we’d had another movie star come back to Sweden and refuse to speak Swedish in her interviews. Her name was Anita Ekberg, and people never forgave her until she died.

Of course, what I didn’t realize at the time was that in Sweden, what I did was looked at like the cardinal sin. Like, “Oh boy, he’s really gone Hollywood and completely forgotten about his home country.” So I had to deal with that for the next twenty-five years. I know the same thing had happened to Anita Ekberg, but the difference was that she had supposedly only been in Italy for like five weeks. At least I’d been gone for four years.

What I still remember best about making *Masters of the Universe* was that we shot it for fifty-eight nights in a row during the winter, and because my entire costume was about the size of a postage stamp, I was always freezing. I was supposed to look as much like the action figure He-Man as possible, so my hair was really long and very blond, and I had bulked up to play the part and weighed 240 pounds, about twenty more than I had as Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*.

At one point while we were making that picture, I jumped through a fake glass window onto a platform, which in the film was to become this hovering flying disc. How I was ever allowed to do that, I still don’t know, because as I was jumping, I suddenly realized someone had forgotten to put down the stunt boxes for me to land on. This all took place at around three o’clock in the morning, and the stunt guy who should have done this probably was too tired to focus. Still, I managed to survive the jump without falling off the platform. Had I missed, I certainly would’ve been seriously hurt. Today, someone would have been fired and lost their career for that. Back then, the show just went on; the director was like, “Perfect, Dolph made it. *Print!*”

After having played the bad guy from the Soviet Union in *Rocky IV*, it was a big switch for me to try to become an All-American cartoon hero, and I felt a lot of pressure to make that work. But I also have good memories of doing it, because that picture is probably the only one of mine that young kids can still watch even now.

To add another layer of complexity to my life and movie career, my steroid use began while I was getting ready to do *Masters of the Universe*. Back then, a lot of people were using anabolic steroids. I started by taking one tablet of Anavar, which was pretty mild, every day for six or eight weeks before cycling off to allow my body to recover from the possible side effects, which could include liver damage and lowered testosterone. To get even more cut, I began using Winstrol, which could have far more serious side effects than Anavar.

At some point, I also began injecting Deca-Durabolin into my buttocks. It was better to have somebody else do it for me, because I would always end up hitting the very same spot. Because it was illegal to possess without a prescription and I was scared of getting caught, it was difficult to bring it with me whenever I traveled. I did all this stuff on and off for about ten years, from 1986 to 1996. I also did a bit of testosterone therapy. Testosterone is a natural compound and doesn't have as many side effects. I cycled that on and off as well because I would usually not use it whenever I did heavy karate training. It's mostly used for strength training. Again, it was all so I could look bigger and even more cut on-screen as well as giving me an energy boost.

Back in the 1980s and '90s, these drugs weren't as tightly regulated as they are now, but testosterone therapy is legal today with a prescription from a doctor. A lot of people are doing it now because it does help those whose natural levels of the hormone are too low. But it is definitely not a good thing to be taking if you've ever had cancer—so I don't do it anymore.

And while everything I took back then could have had some effect on the development of my cancer, there is no conclusive evidence to prove it did. At one point, my oncologist, Dr. Alexandra Drakaki, did tell me that she had treated bodybuilders with kidney cancer after they had been using testosterone for a longer period of time. For a while I had also been taking HGH, or human growth hormone, which makes your muscles grow, but

potentially tumors as well. So while what I took might have helped cause my cancer, I cannot say this is so for certain.

The next movie I starred in was *Red Scorpion*. We shot it in Namibia in 1987 when that country was still aligned with South Africa during the apartheid era, and I remember my stunt double complaining about a law that limited how many firearms a white person like him could own to only twenty-three. When I arrived at the airport in South Africa, the police dogs had been trained to bark only at people of color. These were tense times, but what I also remember was the astonishing beauty of the African country and the desert.

In this movie, I played a Soviet special forces operative who has been sent to kill an anti-Communist leader in Africa but then decides to join him and his rebel soldiers. I had a scene where my character jumps from a motorcycle onto a truck. My stunt double was supposed to do it, but on the first day of shooting, he broke his neck in a car crash that had no connection with the movie, so I decided to do the stunt myself.

Because the producers were terrified that I might get hurt, they tried to do as few takes as possible. This was before computer-generated imagery (CGI) and other post-production visual effects, so the camera was shooting from a moving camera vehicle in front of me. I was on the military motorcycle, and then I transferred into the sidecar and jumped across from there while the truck was doing around 40 mph on the bumpy desert road. In those days, I was still pretty sure on my feet, so if something had gone wrong, I was ready to counter it. Still, the speed would have been more than enough to kill me if I had fallen under the wheels of the truck—which is why that is something I would most certainly *never* do today. But back then, I was bored on set and wanted to do something exciting.

I spent New Year's Eve 1987 in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, where we were shooting, and I got really sick from something I had eaten. So unfortunately I was sitting on the toilet as all the fireworks were going off outside at midnight. Whenever you are in a place like that, the food is always very tricky, and if you eat the wrong thing, you will definitely know about it right away.

Red Scorpion was a movie in which I had to wear just a pair of khaki shorts and a green military tank top most of the time. So I had gotten jacked up and muscular to play the part. A gym had been set up in the room next to my hotel suite so that I could keep working out. Because they didn't have

the special kind of camouflage makeup on set, I had to use the real green and black paint from the South African military that was meant to stay on soldiers for weeks when they were out in the bush and could not easily be washed off. Every day after we had finished shooting, I would come back to the hotel covered in the stuff, not just on my face but my arms and legs as well, and then spend a lot of time in the bathtub trying to scrub it all off—just so I could go to sleep, wake up the next day, work out in the room next door, and go back to the set to apply the damn paint all over my body again.

Later that year, I was in London to promote *Masters of the Universe*, and I did *Good Morning Britain* on ITV. Both my dad and mom were in London at the time and watched it on TV. I went to their hotel after the show and was wearing a blue blazer with a shirt and a polka-dot tie. My dad seemed really impressed by how well I was dressed but said, "Yeah, but you know that technically, you're supposed to wear a striped school tie with that blazer and not one with polka dots on it."

We then went for a walk, and he started going on and on about how my mother was the one who had mental problems, so he was going to take her to a special professor who could analyze her. Just to keep him calm, I kind of went along with the idea. But my dad said the reason "she" had all these problems was because when "she" was a child, her parents would lock her in a dark closet for hours and all the trauma had come from that. And I remember thinking, *Oh, okay, that's what happened to* him.

Around this time, back in LA, I started seeing Paula Barbieri, a fashion model and actress who became famous because after breaking up with me, she began going out with O. J. Simpson. Paula was a stunningly beautiful brunette who loved to have fun, party, and have sex. At the time, so did I. Before me, when she was nineteen years old, Paula had gone out with Bob Evans, the infamous producer of *The Godfather* movies. The funny thing is that years later I looked her up, wondering if she might be dead, only to find out Paula had gone back to Florida where she was from and was now married to a judge. *Good for her*, I thought. We both survived the '80s.

Tony Colagreco: Me and Sylvester Stallone's stunt double and this other guy who was kind of a weird dude became Dolph's posse, and his manager, Tom Holbrook, was usually there as well. At the time, Dolph was just starting to see Paula Barbieri, but they were not real serious. Paula was such a sweetheart that we could all still go out together without her because she wasn't jealous. I do remember one night when Dolph showed up with this girl who had been a *Penthouse* centerfold and it was like, "Oh, my God!"

One day, six of us got on my boat. I had a thirty-foot-long cabin cruiser that I could start but didn't know how to steer. We had planned this weekend together, and it turned out to be like the Keystone Cops. We were going to Catalina Island, and the waters were pretty rough that day, but we cruised out, and it wasn't too bad getting there. The funny thing was that because Catalina had boats moored all around it, you couldn't just show up. You had to call in first to get a mooring. This was still before cell phones, but I had one of those briefcase phones that had only just come out, kind of like a police cell phone.

Dolph was up at the front of the boat, and I told him that when we pulled up to the mooring, he had to lean out and grab the rope or maybe even jump into the water to get it so we could tie up the boat. Wearing only a bathing suit, Dolph had just come back from making *Red Scorpion*, for which he had to really buff himself up by using steroids and was as massive as any human being you had ever seen. Because I was steering from the back of the boat, I could see the reactions of all the people around us. Like, "Oh my God! It's DRAGO!" People were running up onto the decks of their boats and bumping into one another, and one guy even dropped his beer. Of course, just like always, Dolph was totally oblivious to it all.

After he had found the mooring and we had tied up, we secured the anchor off the back and had some drinks, and we were all dying from laughter because of the look on Dolph's face, which was like a deer in the headlights as all this had been going on around him. The guy from Sweden and MIT had now hit Hollywood, and all the notoriety was flowing. Whenever we went out together at night, people would buy us shots and send bottles over to our table. Because everything was free, it was hard to turn down, and so, yeah, we would get pretty drunk almost every night we went out.

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9

Chapter

Above the Title

Fame doesn't fulfill you. It warms you a bit, but that warmth is temporary.

MARILYN MONROE

A year later in *The Punisher*, I played a Marvel Comics character named Frank Castle, a former undercover detective whose wife and two daughters had been killed by a bomb planted by the Mafia that had been intended for him. He then became a vigilante who lived in the sewer system and assassinated mobsters with throwing knives, machine guns, and martial arts. The original script had been written by Boaz Yakin, the Israeli-American screenwriter and director who later wrote *The Rookie* starring Clint Eastwood and Charlie Sheen.

The Punisher was produced and also rewritten by Robert Mark Kamen, who had written the first three *Karate Kid* movies and then, along with the director Luc Besson, did *Transporter*, starring Jason Statham. Because Kamen was a karate guy himself and very much into martial arts, the two of us became friends, and he was also taken with my sensei and trainer Brian Fitkin. There was a lot of contact fighting in the movie, and my character drove this big Harley Davidson motorcycle.

To match the look of the comic book character, the production hairdresser had dyed my hair black for the part. It wasn't like today when everything washes out, but a lot more like shoe polish, so I kind of looked that way for about six months. But it was a fun movie to do. The production

brought in these two karate fighters from Mas Oyama's dojo in Japan who thought they had come to Australia to fight me for real. They were both very big and tough and were crushed to find out their characters were going to get killed in the movie. One of them snapped a real bo staff that was about six feet long with a jump kick, and the other was in tears when my character ran him through with a spear at the end of our big fight scene. They were both really scared of losing face back in Japan.

I had the lead role in *I Come in Peace* (aka *Dark Angel*), co-written by David Koepp, who went on to become one of the most successful screenwriters of all time with credits like *Jurassic Par*k, *Carlito's Way*, *Mission: Impossible*, *Spider-Man*, and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. I played a Houston cop who goes after a drug gang only to realize he is now also dealing with an alien who is a police officer on his own planet. The alien cop is coming after an alien drug dealer who's come to Earth to harvest human brains for endorphins. The alien cop gets killed, and I have to take over. That's right. At the end of our big final fight, the bad alien is dying while groaning his catchphrase used throughout the picture: "I come in peace." I reply, "And you go in pieces, *asshole*!" and launch into my final flying kick. That was often just how it went back in the '90s. Unlike Koepp's later blockbuster movies, *I Come in Peace* was not a big success at the box office. But it does have a very cool storyline, and a lot of my fans say that it deserves a remake. That might not be such a bad idea.

Cover Up was a small movie that we shot in Israel during the summer of 1990. One of the producers was an ex-Israeli paratrooper who had a lot of connections, so we were able to film in Jerusalem during the Easter festivities, which was amazing. Because we filmed in the streets, a lot of our cameras were hidden, and in one scene, I was staggering around bleeding because my character had been shot. It all looked so real that two Israeli special unit soldiers in green berets carrying M16s stopped me and ordered me to get down on the ground. Because they could tell I was a visitor, they did so in English. If they hadn't taken me for a foreigner, I think I might have actually gotten shot by them for real. All the while I just kept on saying, "No, no, no. This is a *movie*!" Then the movie guys ran up and shouted in Hebrew, "It's a movie, *relax*!"

In the spring of 1991, I shot *Showdown in Little Tokyo* with newcomer Brandon Lee, a buddy-cop movie that we shot in and around Los Angeles

for Warner Bros. When I first met my young co-star Brandon, I didn't know that his dad was martial arts legend Bruce Lee. Brandon was practicing the same fighting style, Jeet Kune Do, as his dad. His mom, Linda, was of Swedish descent, so Brandon and I connected over that and also because he had actually been to Sweden and spoke a few words of Swedish. Sadly, two years later, at age twenty-eight, Brandon died after he was shot in the stomach in a freak accident on the set of his film *The Crow*. Brandon was a sweet guy as well as a good actor, and if not for the accident, I believe he would have become a huge star.

That same year, I did *Universal Soldier*, which became my most successful picture to date after *Rocky IV* and for a wide variety of reasons deserves a chapter of its own (coming up next).

We shot my next picture, *Pentathlon*, during the spring of 1993. I played an East German Olympic gold medal pentathlete who had defected to America to escape his psychotic coach. The modern pentathlon is an extraordinary activity, and I had to perform on-camera the five military skills a soldier fighting behind the lines during the Napoleonic Wars would have needed to deliver an important battlefield message—you fence, you swim, you shoot, you ride a horse, and finally, you run. For the training I slimmed way down and worked out hard with Rob Stull and Michael Costigan, two former members of the US Olympic pentathlete squad. They got me into what was probably the best all-around level of fitness in my life. I'm still good friends with both of them; Rob is now president of the International Modern Pentathlon Association, and I recently had the pleasure of supporting him in his campaign to get elected.

A couple of months later, I was in Thailand making *Men of War*, a very cool project. We had a good script by John Sayles, who had written and directed *The Return of the Secaucus 7* and *Eight Men Out*, and I played an ex-military guy who is asked to go to an island to persuade the natives to give up their mining rights. He then assembles a bunch of his old buddies to go with him, only to realize when they get there that he has been lied to by the people who hired them. The group splits up and then have a showdown with one another. I lead the group that sides with the natives against some of my former comrades in arms who're backed up by a gang of hired mercenaries.

The location in Thailand was extremely beautiful. Every morning we would get into a small fleet of boats to travel to our island location. The

work was tough, and the constant 100-degree heat did not make it any easier. On the final day of shooting, I had worked all day doing pickups (additional shots) for different scenes we had already filmed, and then I had to go slug it out with the main bad guy in a dark cave filled with water for twelve hours. I went back to my hotel, packed my bags, and flew straight back to LA for another shoot. Today, I couldn't do something like that without ending up in the nearest hospital.

About a year later, we filmed *The Shooter* in the Czech Republic under some rough conditions. Back then, there wasn't a lot of food there you could actually eat. The Soviet Army installations where we filmed were primitive because even though troops had begun living there in the 1940s, the Soviets had taken everything with them when they left and shipped it all back to Russia. The film was directed by Ted Kotcheff, who had done *First Blood*, the first of the five Rambo films.

About halfway through filming, I had to do some running in a chase scene and pulled a hamstring. We were shooting during the winter. I hadn't seen my stunt double in about six months, and during that time he had gained a lot of weight. During rehearsals in Prague, he just kept drinking beer, which, along with the soups, were one of the few things you could actually consume over there.

A few weeks into the shoot, Kotcheff, who was a very serious director, got angry at the guy and told me, "Sorry, Dolph. But I can't shoot him from behind anymore because his ass has gotten so damn wide. You're gonna have to do all the stunts yourself." And so despite being in a lot of pain, I had to wrap my leg and do all the action sequences throughout the rest of the movie. My stunt double, a nice guy, was in tears and told me, "Sorry, man, I just can't stop eating." Because he had literally drunk and eaten his way out of the job, that was the last picture we ever did together.

Nonetheless, it was fun to work with Ted Kotcheff. Prague was beautiful, and this was the first movie in which I got to play more of a romantic lead. Miramax, which distributed the film in America for straight-to-video release, unfortunately cut fifteen minutes of character scenes to make it more of an action movie. Retitled *Hidden Assassin*, it was released theatrically in Europe but did not do well at the box office.

In 1995, I played a colorful hit man / street preacher in the futuristic *Johnny Mnemonic*, shooting in Toronto, Canada. The screenplay was by William Gibson, who wrote the novel *Neuromancer* and invented the term

“cyberspace.” Keanu Reeves, who by then had only done a couple of movies and was not yet a huge star, played the title role. I had long blond hair and a Jesus-like beard, wore a tattered robe, and carried a staff.

I looked so different that when one of my agents came on location he asked me for directions to the set without even recognizing me. All the reviews were pretty bad, panning the direction, and the movie made a lot more money overseas than it did in America. But at least it had been released theatrically, and it was a cool acting gig. At this time I had gone back to New York and was studying acting with Warren Robertson again. I also spent time at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, where I did *Watching Fire*, an off-Broadway play in which I portrayed a death row inmate.

I had been asked to help the US Pentathlon Olympic Team boost its public image and help with fundraising by applying to the US Olympic Committee (USOC) to be the official team leader at the 1996 Atlanta Games. I had trained with some of the US pentathletes for my 1993 movie by that name, and now I was to step up to help organize their training, travel, and competition schedule. To be an actual member of the US Olympic Team for real rather than just in a movie was exciting for me.

Although it was challenging to make the USOC accept me as a serious candidate, I got to travel with the team, did a lot of promotional work, and shook a lot of hands at many international meets until I was finally accepted. Being at the actual Olympic games in Atlanta was a fantastic experience. I will never forget Mohammed Ali lighting the torch and the US basketball “Dream Team” entering the Olympic stadium with Michael Jordan at the helm.

During that same year, I finally went back to Nyland, that small town in Sweden, for the first time since graduating from high school twenty years before. I was with my sister, and once again there was a snowstorm greeting me as we arrived. We drove there in a rented car, and I immediately ran into somebody at the local convenience store who knew me. It was still a small town, and everybody suddenly showed up at the indoor hockey arena that was built after I left and that had become the center point of the town. I saw a lot of my old friends and started developing a real relationship with the place again, which felt amazing. One of my best friends, Kent Anderzon, lived only about five hundred yards from where I had first met him in 1976, while I now had moved five thousand miles away to Los Angeles.

For the next fifteen years, I gave out a scholarship to the best senior student in my high school. That became another reason for me to go there every once in a while to visit my buddies, who knew all about my movie career and had even saved old news clippings about me, which I thought was nice. They seemed so happy for me.

By the time I returned, Nyland itself had been completely transformed. It had lost a lot of its vitality because in Sweden, the urban policies had changed and most of the financial resources were now being directed toward the larger cities. The Swedish government is trying to reverse that now, but in Norway, where my wife, Emma, is from, people living in the countryside still receive real financial support and so have a lot more resources to draw upon.

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10

Chapter

Action Star or Family Man?

No man should mock another for falling in love. Love-sickness often strikes harder on a wise man than a fool.

HÁVAMÁL[1]

After *Rocky IV*, the next big thing for me was *Universal Soldier* in 1992. Although I didn't know Jean-Claude Van Damme before we co-starred in the movie together, I felt that he was very smart, a lot more savvy about his career than I was about mine back then, and also a good martial artist. Right from the beginning, working with Van Damme on *Universal Soldier* was a movie in and of itself—because he was definitely a bit different to work with.

In the film's first scene, which was supposed to be in Vietnam but we shot in Arizona, we both get killed in action, only to then have the government reanimate our corpses decades later. I play an army sergeant who has gone crazy and murdered several Vietnamese people he suspects of treason and is now holding a young couple hostage. Van Damme, who is part of an army team trying to secure the village, attempts to save them, and we end up shooting and killing each other.

During our first rehearsal, Brian Fitkin was there along with Vic Armstrong, a famous British stunt coordinator and director. You're supposed to take it easy in rehearsals, but there was this moment when Van Damme was supposed to kick the gun out of my hand. He whacked my

forearm hard, and the gun went flying. Brian said to Vic, “If he does that again, Dolph will just knock him out.” When Van Damme heard that, I could see him getting a little nervous. The next time, his kick was soft.

Craig Baumgarten (my friend and manager): My first real contact with Dolph was when Allen Shapiro and I were producing the first *Universal Soldier* movie, which we began shooting in August 1991 in Prescott, Kingman, and Sedona, Arizona, and then at the very end at Hoover Dam about thirty-five miles outside Las Vegas. We were the first production to ever shoot there, and for a very long time also the last. Not that we pissed them off in any way, but because we shot for ten days right on and in the dam, they realized just how disruptive making a movie can be.

The relationship between Dolph and Jean-Claude Van Damme while we were shooting was just what you would have expected it to be. Two alpha males, each of whom felt he was the bigger star at the time. Jean-Claude was the hero of the movie, and Dolph played the villain. I think he saw it as a role that could resonate with people, and he was really great at it. One of my favorite scenes in the movie is when he goes into a supermarket looking for food and has this kind of PTSD-freakout moment. Dolph was fantastic and blew us all away with how powerful he was at conveying all that anger and frustration. It was just a great, great scene when he did it and still is today.

I had already rehearsed the supermarket breakdown scene in *Universal Soldier* quite a lot with Warren Robertson. He was a very clever coach. He knew there was a monologue in the script, and so we blocked it together and then worked out the body language that would go along with it. First, we had to design the form of the piece, and only then did he have me pour all the emotion into it. Form and content working together to build the scene. Cinema is a visual medium—so how you raise an eyebrow or how you do something with your hand can be very important.

Great actors like Marlon Brando always had the right instinct about how to physicalize the emotion written for the part in a beautiful way. Although this was a very harsh, PTSD-driven monologue, it also had some funny body language in it to which people seemed to respond. The scene was mostly done as a wide shot, and we only did a couple of takes. I think people on the set were surprised by how well it all went, but by then a lot of work had already gone into the scene in order to make it come across as effortless and completely in the moment.

Craig Baumgarten: In real life, Dolph’s character had been a psychopath. In the opening scene of the movie during the war in Vietnam, he’s wearing this necklace of ears he had sliced

off every Vietcong soldier he had killed. After he and Jean-Claude Van Damme's character kill each other, they are put into body bags, and the next thing you know, they have been resurrected in a scientific experiment designed to reanimate soldiers into perfect fighting machines who would unquestioningly follow all orders.

The first scene the director, Roland Emmerich, shot was the ending where Van Damme finally makes it back home to his parents, only to learn they are double agents. But when we showed the movie to an audience at a preview, the ending just didn't work. After Roland had rewritten it, we built a farmhouse and barn, all of which we'd actually had while on location in Arizona, as a set inside a studio in Long Beach. Dolph and Van Damme then have this massive fight using all kinds of tools that are in the barn. They come back out into the pouring rain in front of a little woodpile. Van Damme's character shoves Dolph's character onto the prongs of a wood chipper, and he gets ground up into tiny little pieces of bloody red flesh that come spinning and flying out the other end.

Because Dolph's character had been killed, we didn't have enough imagination to be able to bring him back in the sequel, *Universal Soldier: The Return*. And then when we shot *Universal Soldier: Regeneration* in Bulgaria in 2009, we basically just said, "Fuck it," decided to ignore the previous sequel, and brought Dolph's character back because we realized it wasn't just Jean-Claude that people wanted to see.

The other thing was when we made the original movie, no one ever saw Dolph except when he was on the set. He didn't come to dinner. He didn't hang out or chase women or anything. He was like a monk, so serious and dedicated to the work. By then, he had already worked with his acting coach, Warren Robertson, for weeks before coming to the location, but then he just kept right on working on his scenes with Warren at night.

In *Universal Soldier*, I actually scaled down the face of Hoover Dam, which is 726 feet high. I did it in what's called rappelling Australian style, face down while holding on to a rope in one hand with a friction lock I could use to stop myself if I had to. Back then, every stunt like this one had to be done by a real person. CGI didn't really exist. First Jean-Claude's stunt double and mine did it together on opposite sides of the wall. Halfway down, my stunt double got stuck in some rebar or something, and when Van Damme's stunt double went to help him, the rope got wrapped around one of his fingers, and it snapped part of the finger right off. So then I just did it on my own by scaling down from the midpoint of the dam. Although I don't remember how many takes we did, it was definitely not too many. I think maybe two. When you see the movie, that is me running down on the right side of the dam while Van Damme is being doubled on the left.

There was another crew there that day shooting a behind-the-scenes documentary about the making of the film, and when the shot is finished, I drop the rope and walk away like I'd just been out for a stroll in the park. But those were the good old days when I was still young and tough enough to think I could do anything.

While *Universal Soldier* didn't open in America until July 1992, Van Damme and I appeared at the Cannes Film Festival that May. Because the movie was still being edited, it couldn't be shown at the festival, but we went there to publicize it all the same. Before we went out to meet the press together on the famous red carpet, Van Damme said, "Let's do a fake fight." We were both standing there in formal wear, black tuxedos with black bowties, and I was towering over him.

It began with us talking, and then it became a disagreement, and he put both of his hands on my chest. I shoved him backward with one hand, and the bodyguards rushed in to stop us. When someone asked Van Damme why he had staged this, he said, "Because I'm a businessman." The publicity our fake fight generated for the movie was so huge that the worldwide gross for *Universal Soldier* wound up being $120 million.

By the time we began shooting the picture in August 1991, I had already met Anette Qviberg in New York. She was twenty-five at the time and a fashion stylist who also promoted parties in clubs. We dated on and off for about two years, and then right before I went off to do *Universal Soldier*, we had a falling out and broke up.

Anette Qviberg (my ex-wife): The first time I met Dolph was in the autumn of 1989 in a friend's apartment in Sweden. I was living in New York at the time but staying with her during my visit, and he was going out on a date with her. My boyfriend was also there, and I opened the door because my friend was still in the shower, and so it was just a brief encounter. Dolph came in and then they left. Of course, I already knew who he was, but I didn't particularly like him. One of the reasons I had left Sweden was because I didn't really like Swedish men; Italians had always been more my type. And then there was the big bodybuilding factor as well.

In New York, I worked a lot of part-time jobs in clubs, as the manager of a restaurant, and in a tanning salon called Portofino. Dolph knew I was working there, and he started coming in regularly to tan whenever he was in town. We became acquainted, but I knew my friend still really liked him, and my boyfriend at the time, who was Italian, was very jealous of him. In the beginning, Dolph was also a little pushy with me, so that was a bit embarrassing as well. He actually was never with my friend sexually, but she always kept trying to make that happen. Right from the beginning, Tony Colagreco told me Dolph was the guy I was going to marry, and I said, "No. Never. Never."

At the time, Dolph lived in LA and I was in New York. Along with his Italian friends, he owned a nightclub in LA called the Black and Blue Club. Even though he was not there much, it was very popular, and he said I could start working there. I didn't want to do that because New York was my home, so we kept seeing each other by going back and forth.

Meeting Anette gave me much-needed stability at a time when the fast lifestyle of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll was threatening both my health and my sanity. Although I had not yet recognized it, my childhood trauma had made me susceptible to any escape from reality—and my getting famous pretty much overnight had not helped. Anette was from my hometown, Stockholm, and even though she liked to go out late and party, she still always had a certain kind of inner stability that helped me feel safe. We enjoyed the same music and food, and she had even practiced martial arts back in Sweden. After our first fling, I went back to LA, and she then met someone else, so it was a sort of on-and-off romance.

Tony Colagreco: This was before somebody introduced us to cocaine, but Dolph was never really big on that. Still, every time we went out in LA, we always had a limo. We never had to drive ourselves, which was nice, and we went out together every Friday or Saturday night. One of the places we liked back then was Vertigo, the first club in LA to have a New York–style doorman decide who could get in and who couldn’t, and one of them had also worked at Studio 54. For the first few years Dolph and I were hanging out together, clubs in LA came and went pretty quickly. That was one of the reasons we decided to open our own place.

In 1987, I had met Sly Stallone through his brother Frank. A year later, along with Mickey Rourke, I had a club called Rubber at La Cienega and Olympic. We were probably a little drunk or high on something when we came up with the name, but we had a special VIP room set up in back. Bruce Springsteen and Men at Work played there, and we also used to pass out condoms with our address and phone number on them.

Frank Stallone would come to the club, and I’d let him get up to play with the house band. Then Sly started showing up as well and told me, “This is a nice place. I really like this club. We should do something like this together, yeah?” It was one of those drunken conversations, but then he invited me to his house for Thanksgiving dinner and said he was serious about us opening a club together and wanted me to find a spot. I mentioned this to Dolph, and then it became the three of us. How awesome would that be, Rocky and Drago together again on the Sunset Strip?

So I found the spot and secured the deal, and the club owners were basically me and Dolph and Sly. And now I’m the go-between, and Sly calls me up from out of the blue while I’m hitting balls on the fairway in Palm Springs at seven o’clock one night and says, “Hey Tony, I got an idea for the name. Let’s call it the Tomato Club.” So I go back to Dolph with this, and neither one of us liked it. That was when Dolph came up with Black and Blue. Years before, the Rolling Stones had put out an album with that title.

I had to go back to Sly and sell it to him, and I’m like, “Oh, this is going to be the worst freaking phone call ever,” but we worked it out somehow, and he said okay. Black and Blue was on Sunset Boulevard right near Fairfax across from the Guitar Center, which had been there forever. I’m not sure Dolph was there on opening night, but Sly was, and any time that Dolph was in town, I would make the both of them show up there. We also had a really good Italian restaurant that used to be called Gio’s. I had kept the whole kitchen staff, and Sly would come in with Jennifer Flavin, who is still his wife, and bring a couple of friends. It was such a fun restaurant that you couldn’t even get a seat without making a reservation a month in advance, and it was always packed on weekends.

Because of the Guitar Center across the street, we had the whole rock 'n' roll crowd, including the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Axl Rose, and Springsteen. All the guys who had come to Rubber, we got to come to this club as well. The transition was so seamless that we were able to keep that same vibe going. We lasted about four years, which in LA is pretty good, and everybody made money, Dolph included. Well, we got our money back, which is not actually making money, but first you have to break even.

We were also eating and drinking a lot of it away because the bill for every dinner we ever had there was more than a thousand dollars, and this was nearly forty years ago. On the weekends, we would entertain. Because this was our extended living room, we would always have a party. It was no way to run a business, but it worked for us because we weren't really ever into it just for the money.

Anette was on her way to see me in Las Vegas during the filming of *Universal Soldier* when I got a phone call at the hotel. It was Anette, who had only just arrived at the airport and was crying. After I asked her what had happened, she explained she'd been in a motorcycle accident the night before in Manhattan and now had a terrible headache. I knew something about concussions from karate, so I told my driver to pick Anette up and take her straight to the hospital for an MRI.

Anette Qviberg: The night before I left New York to go see Dolph in Las Vegas, someone was taking me home on his motorcycle from a restaurant that was a real hot spot at the time. I was on the back of the bike, and we were going through Times Square when a taxi ran a red light. I saw the taxi and then when I woke up, each one of my legs was on one side of a tree and I was so embarrassed because I kept thinking, *Oh my God, everybody can see my underwear!* so I just kept trying to push my dress back down. Someone asked me if I was okay and I said, "Oh yeah, I'm perfectly fine," and then I walked to find a cab and went back home.

The next morning, I flew out to see Dolph in Las Vegas where he was filming with Jean-Claude Van Damme. After I got off the plane, I fainted. My eyes were yellow because I had jaundice, and the driver Dolph sent to pick me up took me straight to the hospital, where they told me that because I had a small fracture in my skull, I had to go to the hotel and try to be as immobile as possible. I was only supposed to be there for the weekend, but I ended up staying for two weeks, and that was the first time Dolph and I had ever spent that much time together.

One reason I was not partying all the time in Las Vegas like Van Damme while we were making *Universal Soldier* was because Anette was there with me. I still didn't know Jean-Claude all that well, and even though he partied a lot, he always stayed on his own. I was mostly focused on my performance, so I didn't hang out with him during filming. What I do remember is that after the film opened, we had to do what was then called a

“satellite tour” where you sat in front of a camera and got interviewed live on television on one station after another in like thirty states.

The tour started on the East Coast and worked backward to the West Coast, so we were there at like four a.m. our time, and I was really hung over. I hadn’t slept much, and Jean-Claude told me he had slept *zero*. Somehow we managed to get through it all without embarrassing ourselves too much. We’ve stayed friends and had a lot of good times over the years.

In the fall of 1992, my mother had a stroke and passed away. I received a phone call at my hotel in Seattle where I was working with Warren Robertson on a character. My sister Annika was crying on the line, so I knew immediately something bad had happened. I remember hanging up and collapsing to the floor, sobbing. My mom was only sixty years old when she died, but she had been working two jobs and never getting any rest. For years my father would beat her and sometimes kick her out of the house. She would have to try to sleep somewhere else that night, like in our garden shed, even in the middle of the harsh Nordic winter.

In her later years, he wasn’t as brutal with her as he had been before, but he was still using her. She was always borrowing money to pay for things in their house and to help out my brothers and sisters. When I first started to make some money, my mom had twenty outstanding loans, all at very high interest. It took me a while to get her to admit it, but once I found out, I paid them all off for her. It really made me feel good to finally be able to help her because as a young boy, I had not been able to protect her from my dad.

I never knew all that much about my mother’s medical history because I had been living in America for quite a while and so was not really privy to it. By the end, I think she had worn her body out by serving my dad every time he called her. She was at work one day and got a headache and collapsed. They took her to the hospital, but she never regained consciousness, and by the time my siblings got there, she had already died. In some ways, I guess it was kind of a good way to go and merciful as well, which was something she most definitely deserved.

Because my mom and dad had kept it a secret, none of my sisters or my brother or I ever knew until much later that they had gotten divorced in 1971. That was when my dad took custody of my mom’s estate as well as all her assets. She had inherited quite a bit of wealth from her dad and later from her mom, because they had owned two radio factories together. Most of it was in cash, so my dad was able to access all her money and use it for

his own purposes. Even though she had moved out of the house and was living in her own apartment, my mom still "worked" for my dad, and he could call her at any time and she would show up for him—even in a snowstorm in the middle of the night. I think that was another reason she got so totally burned out physically. My dad did not go to my mom's funeral, but then he had not shown up for his own mother's funeral either.

Losing my mom when I was only thirty-four years old was a real blow for me. Almost as though it had been planned, Anette was very pretty and nurturing, and I guess that on a deep level, I wanted her to replace my mom because she did resemble her in some ways. Four months after my mother passed away, Anette and I got engaged. We were married in a church in Stockholm on February 27, 1994, a large formal wedding. The reception was held in the Grand Hotel in the center of the city, and on our honeymoon, we went to Marrakesh and then Marbella, Spain, where we stayed for three weeks. All this had a healing effect on me because I was ready to settle down, or at least that was what I thought at the time.

Anette Qviberg: Dolph's mother had recently died, and I knew I reminded him of her in some ways, and then he proposed to me. We were in Tahiti together, and he got down on one knee to ask me. I wasn't really prepared for it because I wasn't looking to get married at the time and it seemed so quick, but by then we had already become very, very close in the best sense of the word.

We did have a grand wedding. It was very formal, with close family and friends, about a hundred and fifty people, and another hundred invited to a big party afterward in the Opera House. I had been working in fashion, and whenever Dolph and I would go to Paris, we would see Thierry Mugler, who had become a friend of ours, so I asked him to design my dress, and it made me super happy when he said yes. I still have the dress. He had these leather pants he always wore and that only he could ever wear, and I said, "I love those." Then he made a pair for me as his wedding gift, and I still have them as well.

Anette hadn't been born into money, but her aunt was married to Aje Philipson, a very wealthy guy who was a good friend of the king of Sweden. So whenever there was a big event like a royal wedding, Anette and her cousins would be invited. She had grown up in those circles, and after I had met her, I came to be accepted in them. If you were wealthy, you could work your way into that circuit, but it was all still really about aristocracy and people who had been landowners for hundreds of years—a lot like it had been in England a long, long time ago.

Anette Qviberg: My connection to the Royal Court in Sweden came through my uncle and my father, both of whom had gone to the same schools as members of the royal family and so had the same friends as them, making it quite normal for them to be in that social circle. Because Dolph had come from a good family who were very well educated, he was also comfortable being there and was able to use his social skills because people were interested in him. He does have an amazing mind, and our relationship has always been like yin and yang in that he taught me a lot of things I needed to know and I taught him other things. I was always more social than him because he didn't care so much about that, but we both always had a shared interest in art and music.

This was also around the time when my career started slipping because of some bad choices I made—based on the less-than-useful advice I was getting from my agents. They were mostly interested in their commissions, not my career as an actor. Anette didn't like LA, so I was spending more time in Europe and wasn't really focused on my work anymore. Consequently, the foreign revenues from my movies slowly ended up much bigger than what they had earned in America. *Rocky IV* had been huge everywhere, but now I didn't have Sly around to guide me. Because I never stopped working during this period, I was still earning quite a bit of money, and Anette and I bought a beautiful co-op in New York and a 3,000-square-foot, four-bedroom apartment in Östermalm, the best neighborhood in Stockholm. Anette had grown up in Spain and had always wanted to return there, so we also bought a large villa in Marbella. By the late 1990s, I had pretty much completely lost my close connection with Hollywood.

Nonetheless, I kept right on making one movie after another. Anette was into having expensive cars and houses and a social life, and I started working for the money rather than doing anything I felt really passionate about. Back then, I don't think I valued my own talent enough to spend time studying the scripts I was being offered. Instead of working on my craft and waiting for something I believed in and wanted to do, I just accepted at face value what other people told me about these projects. Then I did them regardless of how I felt about them on a deep level. Most actors go through this from time to time, but for me it lasted almost twenty years, from *Universal Soldier* to the first of *The Expendables* movies in 2010.

My father was seventy-seven years old when he had a stroke in London and died in 2000. He was the one who had first urged me to come to America because he was such a big history buff and had always loved American music. He'd also had dreams of moving to America when he was

young. Near the end of his life, my dad believed he was being followed by the “secret police” in Sweden because he had written articles criticizing the socialist government. I don’t know if there even *is* a secret police in Sweden, but by then he was suffering from paranoia, so it didn’t really matter.

First, he tried to get political asylum in the United Kingdom. I don’t think anybody had ever before tried to get political asylum *from* Sweden as it was usually the other way around. Then he went to America and was in Washington, DC, for a while trying to get asylum there as well. Somehow, my dad became very friendly with a diplomat in the Swedish Embassy who knew someone in the US State Department, and they actually gave him some kind of US visa. But as soon as he got it, my dad left and went back to Sweden, and that was when his mental state really began declining.

For some reason, I had to go back once to the house where I had grown up and where he still lived by himself. I saw that he had put aluminum foil over all the windows to keep out the “radioactive” waves. Having torn his Achilles tendon, he couldn’t walk all that well after the surgery. Unable to get up to the second floor of the house in any other way, he had taken an iron bar and stuck it through the wall on either side at the top of the stairs so he could loop a big rope around it. He slept in the cellar but would drag himself up to the second floor using the rope whenever he needed something that was up there. Hard times.

He also wouldn’t let any workers in the house because they might have been spies or members of the “secret police.” So eventually the roof broke down, and there was a big hole through which you could actually see the sky. Instead of having it fixed, he just left it like that and put some plastic sheeting down on the floor for the rain and snow. Quite a sight, with a snowstorm raging outside. This was the house I had grown up in, and it was tragic to see what had been done to it by this extremely troubled mind.

My dad also had these incidents where he would be out walking and a jogger would be coming toward him the opposite way. He would suddenly think the jogger was after him and would either punch the guy or push him into a ditch, so the cops would show up at the house every now and then. He would respond by having my mom write letters to the authorities defending his behavior.

After having had some other kind of surgery done in Sweden, my dad went back to the United Kingdom because he didn’t trust the doctors in the

Swedish medical system anymore. At some point, his doctors in London finally recognized that he was having serious mental health problems and put him into a ward where there were no handles on the inside of the doors. Neither he nor any of his fellow patients were violent, but just like him, they all needed supervision. That was where he spent the last year of his life before passing away. I arranged for his body to be transported back to Sweden so he could be buried alongside my mom. My brother and sisters were against this, but I thought they should be together because I believed that they really did love each other.

I always go to their gravesite when I'm back in Sweden. Standing there, I can sense I did the right thing. Because now they are at peace. Together.

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11

Chapter

European Again

Fame can take interesting men and thrust mediocrity upon them.

DAVID BOWIE

Anette and I were now spending most of our time in Europe, mainly in Sweden and Spain. On April 29, 1996, my daughter Ida (pronounced *Ee-da* in Swedish) was born in Stockholm. When Anette first told me she was pregnant, I was both shocked and surprised because although some couples plan this, we had been going out a lot and partying and also doing drugs here and there. We were in Paris the first time she ever had morning sickness, and because we had just come there from Marbella, I thought it was because of all the partying. But when I realized it was because she was pregnant, I got really emotional and excited.

It was a good time for it to happen because I really did need more stability in my life. I was also more than a little worried about what being a parent was going to be like. Anette and I felt fairly certain we would be able to give our kids a stable upbringing, as well as a lot of love and affection, which were things we never had much of while growing up ourselves. And certainly no violence. I was set on that. For young parents, having their first child can be a shock because you now suddenly have a brand-new, real living human being in your house, whom if you are not careful, you might somehow drop and quite possibly injure. We both went through all those feelings.

Before giving birth to Ida, Anette was in labor for hours and hours. They had to do an episiotomy to make it happen. I was very emotional when I first saw Ida. That I now had a daughter seemed unbelievable to me. I remember going to the hospital bathroom afterward and feeling the tears welling up. Good tears. Great tears. Then I called Anette's parents and my siblings as well. I was also very, very happy it was a girl because I didn't want to be at all like my dad to a son. I would have been okay if it had been a boy, but I've always felt more comfortable with daughters.

I was also there when Greta was born on November 30, 2001, and then I went home to tell Ida, who was five years old at the time, that she now had a sister. Because Greta had been born in the middle of the night, I took Ida to see her for the first time the next morning, and she just couldn't wait to hold her little sister. Then, just as I had done when Ida was born, I went right back to making one action movie after another that most people have still never seen, unless you're a big fan. In chronological order, they include *Silent Trigger*, *The Peacekeeper*, *Blackjack*, *The Minion*, *Sweepers*, *Bridge of Dragons*, *Storm Catcher*, *The Last Patrol*, *Agent Red*, and *Hidden Agenda*.

Nonetheless, I did my best to make the most out of these projects because my salaries paid for the expensive cars, vacations, and homes that had now become part of our family's life in Europe.

During the first two months of 2004, in *The Defender*, I played a highly skilled bodyguard who has to set aside all his values to protect the world's greatest terrorist—so he will not become a martyr to his cause. Yes, it sounds a bit complicated. Legendary Sidney J. Furie directed the picture, and we shot it in Romania. Of all people, Jerry Springer, the former mayor of Cincinnati and well-known host of what was then the most outrageous afternoon talk show anyone had ever seen on television, played the president of the United States—how funny is that? When I first met him on location, I had no idea he had been cast in the part or even who had hired him to play the role. Still not sure how that happened.

About two weeks before we started shooting, Sidney got sick, and the producers asked me to take over for him. Although I had always wanted to direct, I was still very impressed and flattered that they asked me to do so. I had been working on the script with Sidney, and he was the one who suggested me to the producers. He had directed Marlon Brando and many

other big stars, and I learned a lot from him, especially how to make the actors feel safe and relaxed on set.

What I learned for certain about Bucharest, where we shot, was that there were a lot of hookers there. When I would be out in the hotel corridor doing push-ups at six in the morning with my training partner, the elevator doors would open, and we would see a gorgeous woman in a fur coat and high heels, who was most definitely just coming home from "work" at the end of her night. "You boys want company?" she would ask. Moving on to sit-ups, we politely declined her offer.

Together with a lot of other actors in the indie world, I seem to have always wound up in all these crazy places to make movies because that was where some producer had financing—or was getting a tax break from the government. I don't think it happens these days as often as it used to because the tax code has gotten much more streamlined.

Beyond any doubt, the pioneers in securing independent financing and then hiring a big-name action lead so they could start selling off distribution rights—in order to raise yet more money—were two Israelis, Menachem Golan and his cousin Yoram Globus, who ran Cannon Films. They were the producers of my picture *Masters of the Universe*. In their footsteps followed Avi Lerner, another Israeli who had served as a paratrooper in the Six Day War, who founded Millenium Films and produced hundreds of movies, including *The Expendables*, *Expendables 2*, and *Expendables 3*. I made half a dozen other films with him, mostly in the 1990s and early 2000s.

I guess the most exotic place I ever found myself on location was when we shot *Diamond Dogs* in the fall of 2006 in Inner Mongolia, which is part of China. We had a Canadian director who ended up getting sick because we were at such a high altitude in the mountains. I had to take over for him as director for most of the picture but was not credited for having done so. We were shooting in and around Hohhot, a city of about three and a half million people that is the capital of Inner Mongolia, but we were up in the mountains most of the time, far from any kind of civilization.

In China, anything having to do with firearms is highly regulated. People can't have their own guns, which is the opposite of what it's like here in America. We had a Chinese Red Army guy as our armorer who handled all the guns on set that were loaded with blanks. On day one he handed me a loaded pistol with the barrel pointing right at my chest, and I said to my interpreter, "Tell him, 'Please don't point the barrel at me when

you hand me the gun’!” But the guy never really got it, just kept pointing loaded weapons at me, and I couldn’t help but wonder how many gun accidents the Red Chinese Army must have had with real ammo. I also remembered what had happened to Brandon Lee in the same kind of situation.

Whenever a vehicle would break down on set, which happened every day, I would call the transportation guy over and tell him to fix it. He would then call over ten to fifteen Chinese men to take a look at the engine. I said: “Why so many people? It makes it impossible to really see what’s wrong with the damn truck.” They explained to me that in China, if one person was found responsible for something, he would be severely punished. By sending over a big group, it was harder for the authorities to put the blame on one individual, hence everyone could walk away alive. Survival.

Just another crazy low-budget action-movie adventure.

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12

Chapter

Summer Host: Hometown Boy Makes Good

What the warrior renounces is anything in his experience that is a barrier between himself and others. In other words, renunciation is making yourself more available, more gentle and open to others.

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA, *SHAMBHALA: THE SACRED PATH OF THE WARRIOR*

In the early 2000s, Bob Van Ronkel, an American producer and promoter, got in touch with me. He had moved to Russia in the 1990s and opened shop there and then began bringing in celebrities for various events. He had already taken Jon Voight and Mickey Rourke there, and I went over in 2001 to help him promote a film-production company about to open in Moscow. Before we went, he had told me that I was really big in Russia because I had played in *Rocky IV*, but I didn't understand what he meant until I was walking down a street in Moscow and people saw me and began chanting "DRA-*GO*! DRA-*GO*!"

I went there along with John Malkovich, who was already well known as a great stage actor in New York and had been nominated for two Academy Awards. However, nobody in Moscow seemed to know him and didn't care at all that he was there with me—because what the Russians really like is the Strong Man. I mean, look at Putin. They like tough guys, and because of my characterization of the Soviet boxer Ivan Drago, they felt like I was one of them—their sort of adopted Hollywood movie star.

I was there for about a week and went back later that same year to attend a film festival in Sochi. I liked being in Russia because it was such a fascinating mix of French and European culture with a bit of the Orient thrown in—combined with their long, amazing history, including the Russian Revolution in 1919. With fantastic architecture and all that history, Moscow is a really powerful city. Even though everyone was very nice to us, we still had around ten bodyguards because this was not that long after the civil unrest during the Boris Yeltsin presidency, and it was still a bit dangerous there. Putin came in afterward and started to clean up the crime. By the time I went back again a few years later, Moscow was actually a lot safer.

What also happened during this period in my life was yet another classic Hollywood story. I would be gone for two or three months at a time on location while Anette was at home with the kids. When Ida was little, they would come on set and stay for a few weeks at a time, but when Greta was born and Ida had to start school, we decided they needed some stability. That left me alone far away from my family for long periods at a time, and I ended up having affairs with other women. Although a few lasted longer, most of them were one-night stands that came out of loneliness when I was off making movies or traveling to do publicity for them. While Anette knew about this, she sort of accepted it as long as I kept making money.

Somewhere along the way, she began dating her tennis instructor in Marbella, and that also began to unravel our relationship, but we were still very close at times. Anette would say, “Let’s go off on vacation in the south of France in a big yacht.” We would do that, which would cost me around $100,000. Then I’d leave for three months to go make a movie and meet a bunch of ladies and have fun with my buddies again. Anette would go back to Marbella where she had everything she needed, and our marriage went on like that for the next eight years.

Johan Pramell: My relationship with Dolph started back in the Dark Ages. Not really, but it sometimes does seem that way to me now. I think the first time we met was thirty-five or thirty-six years ago at a late-night party in Stockholm thrown by the beautiful girlfriend of the tennis champion Bjorn Borg. Dolph was about thirty years old and I was twenty-two. By then, he had made *Rocky IV* and so was already a huge movie star, and I think he was together with Paula Barbieri.

I was working as a model in newspaper ads and things like that, not just in Sweden but all over Europe, doing editorial stuff but also fashion shows and commercials. Dolph and I were acquaintances for quite a few years, but I didn’t really get to know him until he met Anette,

because she and I had been close friends ever since I was about eighteen years old. We were both in the same crowd in Stockholm, so I knew both her and Dolph long before they ever got married.

At that point, Dolph was not yet all that open about his life, so I knew nothing about what he had been through as a child. In fact, Dolph had always defended his father and seemed to look up to him very much, so no one knew anything about him until Dolph finally decided to begin telling the truth.

In Sweden, there was a hugely popular radio show called *Summer Host*, on which major celebrities would get two hours on the air to talk about their lives and sort of do their own verbal autobiography. It was my suggestion that Dolph do the show, and we started writing his life story together. That was the first time he ever told me what had actually happened to him as a child. At that point, Anette didn't know and his daughters didn't know. Nobody knew.

Before I did the interview on *Summer Host* in Sweden, I spoke with a Swedish female producer who was in charge of curating the show. Because it was going to be recorded live with a number of musical breaks as well, everything I said had to be very exact. After I had written a draft of my life story with Johan Pramell, the producer said, "You know, that part about your father is really interesting, and I think you should expand on it for the show." And I said, "Do you think people would care about any of that?" She said, "Yes, if you can really open up about it." She was very clever and immediately realized that for me, this was the key to everything. Why I had become a fighter. Why I had gone to America to be an actor. How I had sometimes used that troubled past to help me get into character for a part.

The first thing they had me do was pick out the music that would go along with my story. I began the show by describing one of my earliest memories: sitting on my dad's shoulders when I was a little kid watching the changing of the guards at the Royal Palace in Stockholm. And then I had them play a famous Swedish military march. It was all about how he had been my idol and how much I had looked up to him as a little kid, and then how it had all changed for both of us.

Johan Pramell: Dolph did the show on July 19, 2008, and before he began telling me all this stuff, I'd had absolutely no clue that any of this had ever happened. I did realize he'd had a strange upbringing and knew his father had become completely out of control at the end of his life, but I didn't know any of the facts. Dolph had written two endings for his story, and even as I was sitting with him in the studio that day, I still had no idea which one he was going to use. I don't think either of us did, but he then came to a crossroads in his story.

I was going to be able to tell which way Dolph would now go by the sentence he picked next. For a moment, Dolph just sat. Then he looked at me and began reading the true story

rather than the polite version. For the first time ever, he told the truth about how his father had hit him and all the physical and psychological abuse he'd suffered throughout his childhood.

On every level, it was an incredibly astonishing moment. Dolph didn't break down, but his voice didn't carry the way it usually did. Despite how emotional it was for him to take that direction, he had mentally prepared himself for it. Because he really didn't know how to tell me or his family or anyone else the story, this was the perfect way for him to do it.

I had been given the choice of putting my story about my dad on tape or doing it live on the air. I had chosen to do it live. My daughter Ida was there in the studio that day with me. Because kids are so emotionally intelligent and Ida, who was then twelve years old, saw me getting so emotional, she got really upset as well. I think she had always known there was something up with her dad, but this was the first time she realized why that was. For me in Sweden from that moment on, everything changed. It became very common for people to go on that show and speak about personal matters rather than trivial things like how they were spending their summer. I believe that exposing my painful past that day had a lot to do with the way the show has developed since.

Johan Pramell: Dolph's timing was perfect because this finally changed the way the Swedish people had looked at him ever since he came back home after having made *Rocky IV* and unfortunately insisted on speaking English during an interview on a Swedish television show. So now, they finally forgave Dolph. I think he had always wanted to be acknowledged in Sweden, but it was only after he did *Summer Host* that people suddenly had a brand-new attitude about him and really started to love him again.

A week later, the PR person at the Swedish National Radio station sent me a large bundle of fan mail that had arrived after I hosted that show. (Of course, this was still before email.) I especially remember one letter from a middle-aged woman who said that when she considered who to listen to from the list of the "summer hosts," the first name she had crossed out was mine. By chance, she was driving in her car with the radio on as I began telling my story about me and my dad. Within ten minutes, she had pulled off the road, turned up the volume, and was crying. She'd had a similar experience with her dad and like so many Swedes, tended to hold these things inside instead of ever expressing them. Reading that letter made me feel that this had been worthwhile. Perhaps sharing my difficult experiences could help others share theirs.

Three weeks later in Sofia, Bulgaria, we began shooting *Command Performance*, a film I starred in and also directed based on a script I had written and developed that was kind of like *Die Hard* at a concert. In the film, the two daughters of the president of Russia are great fans of a female American singer. The president has her come to Moscow to do a command performance—only to have Russian separatists take over the arena and hold both his daughters and the singer hostage before the Russian authorities decide to intervene. I played Joe, the drummer in the opening act rock band, who has a fling with the American singer and then ends up saving the day.

To play Anna Petrov, the older daughter, I cast my daughter Ida, who, as I mentioned, was then twelve. Although she had never acted professionally before, I had a sense she could pull it off. We had tried some stuff at home, and she had done some acting in her school and had always been very free in front of a camera. But I was still surprised because once we got on set, Ida could start crying within a few seconds after I said "Action!" and then keep doing it until the scene was over. She could even do it when we were shooting at night, which is really difficult. One of the other actresses in the picture actually became quite intimidated by this emotionally expressive child who had never even been on-screen before.

Anette Qviberg: The only thing I ever really wanted for my daughters was that they would be as normal as possible and not be involved in show business until they chose to do so themselves. For me, the most important thing was to not expose them too much to that life. And so Ida had to decide for herself what she wanted, because I was not going to push her. She used to come to me and say, "Everybody thinks I'm going to be a model or an actress." And I would tell her, "It's not what everybody thinks. You have to want it and do it and work for it." But she was never scared. She always went right up to people. She could be a little clown. She also liked to flirt with the camera whenever someone took her picture.

Ida Lundgren (my oldest daughter): *Command Performance* was filmed in Bulgaria and Moscow, and I played the daughter of the president of Russia, and one of my best friends played my sister. For me, it was a very cool experience. This was when I first realized I had a talent for acting because a lot of people on the set were telling my dad, "Oh my God, your daughter can act!"

Ida was really great and kind of stole the show. She was on location with Anette and then when she left, a nanny looked after Ida and her friend

who played her sister in the movie. Ida was on set for about a month. I was surprised not only by how good she was but also by how much more at ease she seemed in front of the camera than I had ever been.

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Chapter

Home Invasion

There are no mistakes, only lessons.

DR. CHÉRIE CARTER-SCOTT

I was on location filming in May 2009 when three guys wearing masks broke into my house in Marbella. My daughter Ida; my wife, Anette; and my younger daughter, Greta, who was then eight years old, were there along with four staff. One of the robbers told Anette to open the safe, and she did, but we had two safes, and the guy said, "No. Open the other one." We had already had someone break into our villa at night and steal some jewelry, so I had installed a high-tech alarm system. Our house was also in a walled-in community with a security staff, so I felt that should take care of it. Well, it didn't.

This second, more serious robbery was definitely an inside job. The robbers knew everything, came in the early evening before the alarm had been turned on, and most likely knew that I wasn't there. They stole $250,000 in jewelry. Afterward, I sent some tough guys from Bulgaria down there to find them, but by then they probably had already sold everything off. There must have been some kind of synchronicity in that because about a year later, Anette and I were divorced.

Ida Lundgren: The first time we got robbed in Marbella, my parents were still married but in a state of siege. My dad wasn't there because when I was child, he was always away. When

my sister was born, things got even worse between him and my mother. His career had gone down a little bit, and he was also self-sabotaging.

Because I was off on a school trip, I wasn't in the house for the first robbery, but my mom was there with my sister and the staff, and they said the robbers had gassed everybody so they wouldn't wake up while they were there. My mom loved jewelry and antiques, and she was also very into fashion. But when they robbed her, the thieves already seemed to know what they had come for. She wasn't awake when it happened but then thought how weird it was that they knew where everything was.

The second time it happened was two and a half years later, and I was in the house. This was the big one, and it was very bad. My mom and my sister had come back from tennis on a Thursday at around six-thirty. Because it was wintertime, it had already started getting dark. The front gate to our house would open to let us in and then close again after a few seconds, but on that day, it was wide open.

Back then, I already had a lot of anxiety. I also had OCD as a kid, especially after my parents' divorce, what with my dad being weird and my mom always trying to cover it up. I also had a bad boyfriend at the time, so I was not in the best shape at all that day. Because of the OCD, I really thought something bad was going to happen, which it did, and that only made my OCD worse.

It was eight o'clock, and we were all watching *American Idol* when three guys came down the stairs wearing masks and Nike and Adidas outfits. At first, I didn't think they were robbers. I just thought my ex-boyfriend was playing a joke on me, and so I said, "Oh, Harry, what the fuck are you doing?" But they kept coming closer and closer to us until we could feel their energy and realized we didn't know these people at all. And then they kept coming even closer. One of them asked my mom in Spanish how many people were in the house. That was when my whole body just sank into the sofa and I couldn't scream or get out, so I went into a state of pure shock.

I once had a brain scan, and they found this post-traumatic stress and trauma thing. Afterward, someone asked me, "Oh, what happened to you when you were around fifteen?" Which was when this had occurred. Long story short, these guys also knew where everything was. Because they hadn't gotten everything they had wanted the first time, they had come back again, and this time, they took it all.

None of them had a gun because, as the police later told us, when they're that professional, they don't bring weapons because if they got caught, they would serve a lot less time in jail than if they had been armed. But they were using my dad's weapons to scare us. He had a lot of big knives from his movies in the house, and they would grab them and do weird shit with them to frighten us.

Greta Lundgren (my younger daughter): Apparently, I was asleep in my mom and dad's bedroom when the robbers came in through that room. They entered that way because it was easier for them, and then they walked downstairs to where my mom and my sister were. Later on, we thought they had used something to make sure I wouldn't wake up. It was weird because as a kid, you usually do wake up easily if you hear any kind of noise in the room, but I was fast asleep the whole time. I wasn't there the first time it happened, but my mom, my uncle, and my sister were, and the robbers put some kind of army gas through the vents so when everyone woke up the next morning, they saw everything that had been moved and knew someone had been there.

I was so young then that I didn't really understand what was going on. It was a lot more traumatic for Ida because she was in her teen years and remembers a lot more about it than I

do. For me, it was more about the house itself. After a while, it didn't feel so homey. Because when you're a kid, you really feel it when something is not good. But because I was still so young, I didn't really understand what was going on.

Ida Lundgren: All this went on for three hours. My sister had been sleeping when they came in, and so when two of them went upstairs with my mother, I was stuck there alone on the sofa along with the other robber. I was wearing just a little top and underwear, and I said, "I really don't want to be sitting here like I'm in love with you." The way I handled the situation was interesting because I was very strong-minded and didn't cry. My mom was also being very strong and direct with them, but she had two kids there, and so it was different for her.

Of course, they all knew my dad wasn't there, right? And so they kept saying, "Oh, your dad's not here, ha ha ha!" It was good he wasn't there because someone would have gotten hurt and then the trauma would have been even worse. Someone could have gotten killed. Because he would not have been passive. He would not have just sat there. He would have gone after one of them, and God only knows what would have happened. Because three against one was not ideal and this was not a movie either. It was real life. There would have been no knowing what they might have hit him with or done to him.

After it happened, my mom was not angry at him for not having been there. But then she only ever got mad at a few things. Although she had all this nice stuff, most of it wasn't insured, and so when they did get some insurance money, my dad went out and bought her a very expensive ring. And my mom got really annoyed and said, "I don't want a fucking ring!" For her, it was just not the right way to deal with the situation. At the time, their relationship had also become quite intense. My dad then got into a real panic and hired five guys to come live with us. And so after this, we had five bodyguards.

Anette Qviberg: After the second robbery, Dolph was trying to show me how to be careful in the car and actually gave me a knife to keep in the glove compartment, just in case. And then of course I got caught with it. The police stopped me one day, and when I opened the glove compartment, the knife fell out. The policeman said, "You can't have that with you when you're driving." I also had pepper spray Dolph had given me so I could defend myself, if need be. I know he blamed himself for not having been there when the robberies happened, but he was working and so he couldn't have been. I think it was a good thing he wasn't because of how he might have reacted. One of robbers said, "We know who your husband is. We're his biggest fans." And then he said, "But I don't think he is your biggest fan."

Ida Lundgren: It made it a little intense sometimes because we all had to live this way now. At some point, we did begin feeling safe again, but then my dad started doing this thing with my mom where he would show her what to do to protect herself whenever she got out of her car. After having gone through a traumatic experience, you really don't want that kind of attention from people. You just want a little bit of love and concern. But I think my dad did not have a lot of time to give us that back then, and although he tried to help us, it didn't really work out that way. That was when it got really awkward between them, and that was rough.

For both me and my mom the robbery was a very, very, very tough experience. It wasn't like, "Oh, someone just came in my house, took my handbag, and then left." It was very psychological because they knew us and kept talking to us like we were friends. They were giving us weird fruits to eat, and one of them gave my mom back one of her watches and said, "You should keep this. You deserve it." I mean, it was crazy. I was fourteen going on fifteen, and all of a sudden, I had been confronted with something that was just a real nightmare, you know?

After this, things between my mom and my dad definitely widened, but at the same time, they had already been kind of bad. It was like my mom would say, "Okay, guys, we have to speak to Daddy today." And one of us would say, "But I don't want to . . ." I think Greta felt it most because he hadn't been there for her when she was younger. He was always working, and so she never got the connection with him like I did as a kid. I think Greta still has a bit of anger toward him because of how he was away all the time during her childhood and does not have as close a relationship with him as I do. But then she's a bit of a different character than me. I think the two of them are very similar, so that's also why they sometimes clash.

After the robbery, I felt really bad and scared for my daughters. Who knew, maybe these guys would come back and kidnap them next? I didn't trust the local cops either, so I hired my own security team, and they were with the kids every morning; they took them to school and picked them up after school. I also had an armed guard patrolling our property at night. I built a guardhouse by the gates and installed cameras everywhere, which could be monitored from the guardhouse.

My daughters were embarrassed when the security guys would walk them all the way into their school, because they looked like exactly what they were—very tough people. I think once they were pulled over by the local cops and were almost arrested because they were carrying pepper spray and steel batons. Fortunately, one of my best friends knew the local police chief, so they were left alone. This went on for a couple of years, pretty much until our divorce in 2011. Even after that, as long as I kept my Spanish property, I always had armed security there at night when I was in town—all the way up until I sold it in 2022.

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Chapter

Yo, Dolph! Back on the Big Screen

Don't replace me. I'm good. I'm still good.

GUNNAR JENSEN, *THE EXPENDABLES*

Anette Qviberg: Dolph and I were together for twenty-one or twenty-two years and married for eighteen, and it did become lonely for me at the end because he was gone a lot. When people don't work together on a relationship, they do grow apart. When we were younger, I could go places with him, and even after I had Ida, we were still always traveling together until she had to be at school. And then I got pregnant with Greta and I couldn't fly around all the time, and that was when we were no longer together as much as we had been before.

By the time Anette and I were getting divorced, my salary for a picture had dropped about 90 percent from its high point, which had been $2 million. I was getting $200,000 a movie. My expenses in Spain were high, and the divorce was also costing me a fortune, so I needed money. Then Sly called me in 2009 to be in *The Expendables*. Right on time. Doing that film was significant for me because I had not seen Sly for a long while except here and there socially. About four years before we began making *The Expendables*, I had run into him at Restaurant Ago, this hip celebrity trattoria in West Hollywood. We had a few shots of tequila and talked about the old days, and suddenly we were buddies again.

The next time we met, I was directing and starring in *The Russian Specialist*, a film I had co-written. I had to do some aerial shots and had

worked all day long, and when I came back to my room at the Four Seasons that night, some huge "thing" was sitting there in the darkness. When I turned on the lights and unwrapped the oversized package, I realized that Sly had sent me a *Rocky IV* poster from Guinea in West Africa that someone had painted by hand on burlap sacks. A beautiful piece of art. It was really impressive as well as thoughtful of him, and I still have it in my apartment.

The Expendables came from out of nowhere. My agent had sent me a script that opened with a raven sitting on a human skull, which was typical Stallone. Very dark humor. As I read it, I started laughing out loud because I had sort of forgotten that Sly is a very talented writer. After all, he had been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay with *Rocky*. He knows how to make a script funny and deep at the same time, which is difficult. On page four, it said, "Gunnar Jensen, a drunk Swede, with a big knife." I thought, *Okay, I guess that's me!*

When I did *Rocky IV*, I was under Sly's wing. It was not only a great part, but we also had the best executive producers, and I was working with actors like Burt Young, Carl Weathers, and Talia Shire. But after I had done a couple of other movies, I realized there was this whole other side of the business where people cared a lot more about the bottom line than the creative part. Most of those scripts weren't very good at all. Now, because *The Expendables* was another big-budget movie and I was in it with Sly, Jason Statham, and Jet Li, I knew it could be another game changer for me, so I did take that role very seriously.

It was great to see Sly again. When I showed up on set in New Orleans, he was directing one of the actors using a big megaphone like in the old Hollywood days. "All right, go out on the balcony! Look to your left, look to your right! Then walk back inside!" We hugged, and it felt good to be back working together, twenty-five years after *Rocky IV*.

In our first scene together, we have an argument about a job that my character wants, even though he has been on drugs. I say, "I'm good. I'm still good." He answers me by saying, "You're still using. I can't hire you." So I get upset and give him back the medallion worn by our team of elite mercenaries that hangs around my neck by slapping it into his chest. Automatically, I just suddenly felt like pushing him hard. It wasn't in the script, and he stumbled backward and I heard the entire crew gasp. Like, "Oh, *shit*. Here we go!" As the director, Sly said, "Cut!" and then he walked up to me and whispered, "Good. Next time push me *harder*." The scene

came out great, and the film became a big success worldwide. At long last, I was back on the big screen.

Craig Baumgarten: Right before *The Expendables* was released in 2010, I got a call from Jake Bloom, who was Dolph's lawyer for thirty years and also represented people like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, among many others. Jake kind of owed me a favor because Jimmy Caan had fired me. Jake had said, "Yeah, Jimmy just doesn't want anyone to manage him. He doesn't want to pay anybody anymore. He's too cheap. I'll find you somebody else." Jimmy was my friend, so he'd had Jake fire me instead of doing it himself.

The next thing I know, like, six months later, Jake calls me up and says, "Would you like to manage Dolph Lundgren?" Jake had already told him, "Craig's a really good manager. You should talk to him. Okay?" And I said, "Fuck yeah! He's smart as shit." Dolph and I then sat down together for dinner, and he said, "Yeah, let's do it," and I signed him, and that was it.

Jake Bloom was my lawyer, and he represented Arnold, Sly, and Van Damme as well. He really had everybody in the world of action movies, and he and I were also friendly socially. At some point, Jack Gilardi, who had once been married to Annette Funicello and was a longtime partner at ICM, became my agent. After moving from LA to London and then to Marbella over a period of ten years, as I mentioned previously, I had been forced to take a 90 percent cut in my salary for a movie. Not being in Hollywood and close to the action can be very damaging to an actor's career—unless you live in New York City or London, provided that you work in English-language pictures.

So when I came back to live in LA again, I was doing all I could to get back into the business. At some point I met with Craig again, and we got along on a personal and professional level. Even then, I had already known him for twenty years, and now it's become thirty-five. To his credit, Craig leaves most of the creative decisions to me. Sometimes he'll chime in when he feels strongly about something, or I'll ask him, "What do you think of this? Can you watch this cut and tell me?" I always value his opinion because he usually has something interesting to say. Now as I've started directing and producing again, I stay more in charge of everything I do.

Craig Baumgarten: Dolph had been living in Marbella and was getting divorced from Anette and so was coming back to LA to resurrect his career. I knew *The Expendables* was a great opportunity for him because I figured it would be successful, and it was. And so that was how

we began working together. We were lucky to get him in some big movies, and we improved the quality of the smaller movies he was doing and also improved his scenes dramatically.

Over the course of the next twelve years, we did three more *Expendables* movies that grossed more than $800 million domestically and worldwide—but just as importantly, it was great for me to be working with Sly again. Something special seems to happen when we are on-screen together, maybe because his Italian look and my Nordic look seem to get people excited. But it's not like we've never had a cross word with each other.

Sly really hated the script of *The Expendables 4*. "Hey," he told me, "it's a fuckin' disaster, y'know?" I didn't like it that much either, but it was a money gig and a movie I knew we could shape as we went along to make it into something new. So we both decided to do it, but Sly had come up with all these experimental ideas and begun working on his own script for it.

We began shooting in London in September 2021, and then Sly showed up and started rewriting the script, and nobody wanted to argue with him. I was one of the few people who was willing to say, "Hey, Sly, I don't know if this stuff really works." He had come up with some interesting material for my character, but after having rewritten two scenes, he got frustrated with the whole production, finished his part, and went back to the States.

Then I had to work with the writer and the director so the scenes Sly had rewritten for the end of the movie would track all the way through the picture to make sense on-screen. They were all good ideas. It's very hard to write scenes that are both believable and entertaining, but Sly is good at creating that kind of hyperreality. The only problem was once he left, I had to figure it out by myself. In the end, however, just like always, he and I seemed to come out of it okay.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said about *The Expendables 4*, also known as *Expend4bles***.** Despite an incredible cast featuring Jason Statham, Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, Megan Fox, and Andy Garcia, the picture received negative reviews. It cost $100 million to make, and the film grossed only about half that much worldwide. The fact that Sly hadn't been involved really showed, so there probably won't be another *Expendables* movie for quite a while.

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Chapter

A Spiritual Path

Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.

BUDDHA

What sent me to therapy in the first place was that even before my divorce, I had started drinking too much and going out at night in Marbella to party with my buddies and a lot of different women. Many were hookers who never asked me to pay because they wanted to say they had been with a movie star. I would not come home for two days at a time, and my family life was completely falling apart because both of my daughters would be crying and wondering where their dad had gone.

I was spending too much money, and my wife was spending even more than me, like $50,000 a month on her credit card. Plus the half a dozen cars, the staff, the yacht vacations in the south of France, around-the-clock security. I knew if I didn't move back to LA right away, both my career and my financial security would be over. I told Anette we had to go back there as a family. But she didn't want to, and that was when our marriage really imploded, and we finally decided to get divorced. At the time, Ida was fourteen years old and Greta was nine. And that was around the time when Sly stepped in and called me to be in *The Expendables*.

A year later, I was at a martial arts fundraising gala in Stockholm presenting an award to my old instructor Brian Fitkin when I met fellow Swede Jenny Sandersson, who was also a karate fighter. Although she was

twenty-four years younger than me, we began having an affair that night and ended up being together for the next eight years. She helped soften the blow of my divorce, and because I did not want to ruin our relationship by doing to her what I had done during my marriage, I made a vow to myself that I would never cheat on her.

Jenny Sandersson (my ex-girlfriend): I don't know why, but a girlfriend of mine and I had heard about this gala in Stockholm where they were honoring Brian Fitkin, and we just decided to head up there. Although, of course, we were not sitting at the same table as Dolph and Brian, a friend of mine with whom I had competed at the same club in Gothenburg was there, so I walked over to say hello to her. That was when Dolph and I saw each other for the first time, and between us that night, it was like an instant thing. And then he left the next day.

But we had exchanged phone numbers, and he began texting me a lot and then actually came to Gothenburg, my hometown. That was a really big deal because I'd never had a guy do that for me before, and he stayed for a couple of days and actually trained at my dojo. Because our relationship was so new, we were still hiding it, and so I had to come up with a story about why he would come to our little club. I told people he just wanted to get to know our dojo. It was all so crazy that I couldn't eat for two days.

Then he invited me to visit him in LA, and I did that a couple of times. Because I had never really traveled before, that was a big deal for me as well. Very shortly after—I don't even think it had been a year—he asked me if I wanted to live with him in LA, and I said, "Yeah. Okay." At the time, I was a hairdresser, and so I told him, "Hey, if you have a hairdressing job for me there, I could come over and work." Shortly after that, I quit my job, gave up my apartment, packed my bags, and went.

This is all now a bit of a blur, but I was still so young and naïve at the time that I never realized he and Anette were still married. Back then, I didn't really think like I do now because if I had, I would never have done that without having first made sure. But it was all so big and exciting for me that I never asked him about it or checked on it myself. That is the actual truth. When I first came there, I was just riding this wave but when I eventually found out, I thought, *Oh, shit. This guy has a wife and kids, so what do I do now?* And I remember him telling me the real problem had been that Anette didn't want to move to LA, and then he quite quickly introduced me to his kids.

Ida Lundgren: My sister and I found out about Jenny kind of randomly. It was while I was going to boarding school in Sweden, and I saw something in the newspapers that said Dolph Lundgren was in Mexico with my mother, but it wasn't her at all in the photos. It was Jenny instead. That was a really weird way for me to find out about it, so I said to my dad, "What the hell is this?" And he said, "I know. I'm so sorry. I was going to tell you, and I don't know how it came out like this." And then my sister and I went to LA, and Jenny was there with him in his house.

Although my sister asked him if she was just a friend, I understood a lot more about what was going on between them because even though my parents' marriage was more or less over, they still had not yet divorced. After we got to the house, Greta asked Jenny, "How long have you and Daddy been friends?" And Jenny said, "Oh, we've been friends for not so long, maybe a month or two." And Greta, who was then about eight years old, said, "Oh, that's even

less than Mommy's boyfriend." And that was how my dad found out for the first time that my mom had also been with someone else.

Although I never did cheat on Jenny and felt good about that until our relationship began falling apart in 2020, there were definitely some bumps along the way. About two years after we got together, I met another girl who began flirting with me, and I gave her my cell phone number. We started texting, and when Jenny found the messages, she went crazy.

This was when I said to myself, *I can't do this anymore. Somehow, I have to change my life*. By then, Jenny had already talked to me about going to therapy, and my response was, "Forget it. Therapy is for sissies." When she suggested I try meditating, I said, "Do I look like an Indian guru to you? No, I don't think so." But she was right—I needed all the help I could get to deal with my childhood trauma.

After nearly thirty years in the business and forty films, I was a movie star, but I was miserable most of the time. I had a failed marriage and two daughters I loved who didn't even know me, and my mental state had hit rock bottom. I didn't know this then, but it was the part of me I had "frozen" as a kid that was ruining my life. Like I mentioned earlier, my "escape behavior." Because of the trauma I had suffered while growing up, I kept trying to escape by drinking and having sexual affairs and doing drugs. But I never could, because the problem was inside me, and so I did a lot of bad things, not just to myself but to others as well.

Jenny Sandersson: How it all started was that Dolph and I were together in a swimming pool where he checked out another woman. Then I found a text from another one. We had a big fight about that, and I said, "All this is coming to a point where you need to fix it, because this is obviously something deep within you. You should see if you can go and get some help."

Maybe what made me want to start helping him is that I'm very much an empath. I'm a very caretaking person. In every relationship I'm in, I want to fix people. I want to help. This was obviously a big project, but because I was young, I didn't know what else to do. What I did realize was, *Okay, if this guy doesn't get help, he is going to hurt me really badly soon. Because he's a womanizer, he is going to cheat on me.* I saw that and felt that, and this was horrible for me because I had never experienced anything like this before. All of it just kind of came to me slowly. Like, *Oh, wow, he could actually go and be with another woman and then lie about it to me.*

Because all of this was so new to me, I can't remember when, but I finally gave him kind of an ultimatum: "You have to go seek help somehow, or this is not gonna last because you need all this constant attention and validation from women, and there is something within you that's not very manly and not at all like being a gentleman. You are a gentleman and you are

good. But this is something within you that you can hopefully get rid of." Most women probably would have left him then, but I saw it as a disease and said, "Okay, let's try to fix this."

Honestly, I don't think he had ever done anything with another woman while we were together. But I saw the tendencies and the looks, and I knew it was just a matter of time. In terms of his first step in the process, we'd had that fight and the response I got from him was, "Hey, I can't walk around talking about my feelings. That's stupid. That's not for me."

But because his acting coach was going to a therapist at the time and spoke very highly of him, we got a link to the guy, and Dolph seemed to get into it right away. I also started talking to him about meditation and gave him a disc we both listened to a lot when we first began sitting. He listened to it from that day on just like he had taken to the therapy. Then I stopped meditating, and he became more advanced. I'm trying to remember if he did it every single morning, but for him, that was the foundation for everything else that was about to come.

When I first started meditating every morning, I would listen to tapes by Jack Kornfield, who had trained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand, Burma, and India and established Spirit Rock, a well-known meditation center in San Francisco I would later visit. I was fifty-five years old when I started going to therapy every week and doing Vipassana meditation every morning, and it took about two or three years before it all really began to make a difference for me, though right away I felt calmer and not as likely to "act out" as before.

Every morning, I would sit in a meditative pose, concentrate on my breathing, and observe my feelings. Like, if I was feeling anxiety, I would keep naming it, "anxiety, anxiety, anxiety . . . ," and that would make it fade into the background and eventually disappear. Then I'd go back to follow my breath and wait for the next feeling or body sensation to appear. I'd name it, like "restless, restless, restless . . . ," until it faded away. Next my feet might be throbbing, so I'd name that, "throbbing, throbbing, throbbing . . . ," while breathing into that body part, and so on. Eventually I'd reach a more stable state, where my body is relaxed and my mind feels pure and clear. One comparison is: If you'd like to clear a glass of muddy water, the best way is to just let the glass sit. After a certain amount of time, the mud sinks to the bottom and the water is clear. I usually reach that focused state after about fifteen to twenty minutes, in tune with the sounds around me, and instead of a series of images in my mind, I just see a luminous, yellowish gray "inner eye"—or "third eye."

I kept doing my meditation practice, month after month, year after year, and in the end, it totally changed my life. Slowly, the frozen part inside me

started to melt and become smaller and smaller, and gradually I was able to see the life I had always wanted to live coming up to greet me.

I actually went to Spirit Rock but only once with Jenny for just a couple of days on a retreat. We did various meditations every day; some of them went on for an hour, and some even longer. Jack Kornfeld himself wasn't there, but his instructors led the sessions, and it was nice. What I realized while I was there was that I had done pretty well on my own just by reading his books and listening to the tapes. When you reach a certain place where you feel comfortable with the practice, then it's just a matter of continuing to do it in a disciplined manner—like with everything else you're trying to learn. I just applied the athletic side of me to this new practice, and it wasn't that difficult for me to stay on track, even over a long time.

The person who connected me to my first therapist in 2011 was my acting coach at the time, Aaron McPherson. He put me in touch with someone who began seeing me for the next six or seven years. My therapist and I had similar backgrounds because he'd also had issues with his father. He had had some anger issues when he was younger, so he understood escape behavior as well as what growing up with a parent like that could do to you. He also helped me realize that all the mentors in my life, Grace and Sly among others, were also damaged spirits, all of whom at some point had been through tough experiences like I had.

The therapy sessions themselves could sometimes be very tough for me. Because I was working with post-traumatic stress, my therapist would try to go back in time to revisit the most painful experiences of my childhood. In my therapist's office, I would cry and scream and roll up into a little ball on the floor, or he would have me start beating the couch with a baseball bat. Anything to attack the frozen part of me that for so long had negatively impacted my life.

Every time I came back out of that state, my therapist would help me create a different and more positive outcome by stressing all the encouraging things I had done with my life. How I had used my negative experiences to create something good. To put my suffering and trauma in a larger, more potentially inspiring perspective, I also began doing EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, a form of sound and light treatment where I would follow the movement of my therapist's hand while recalling a painful childhood experience. EMDR has helped a lot of soldiers who were suffering post-traumatic stress from combat.

I now know that if I had not gone to therapy and begun meditating, I may have completely self-destructed. By having become an actor, I had hijacked all these real emotions to use on-screen instead of ever really dealing with them. Escape behavior was also the reason I had always insisted on doing my own fight scenes as well as all kinds of crazy physical stunts without using a double.

Aside from the dangerous stunts I had performed on my own in *He Man: Masters of the Universe* and *Red Scorpion*, I had done a high fall from about fifty feet in *The Punisher*, partially missed the stunt bag, and come down really hard on my side. I still have back issues. Five years later in *Men of War*, I got hit in the face with an M16 assault rifle and had to have ten stitches in the middle of a night shoot, then go straight back to the film set. Not to mention having to warm up in sub-zero temperatures for a movie fight scene in Montreal in which I then threw high kicks at multiple opponents, not exactly the best thing for my muscles and hip joints.

In 2017, I had double hip replacements. The reason I had kept doing these stunts was because of the adrenaline rush I got from them. It was the same way I would feel whenever I got hit hard during a full-contact karate fight—also part of my escape behavior.

While I was on set and playing a character, especially doing action, I was momentarily able to escape my trauma. But once the movie was over, I never felt any better. So I would go out at night and drink and party to make myself feel better.

Ida Lundgren: I was always really close to Jenny because she was only a little bit older than me. When I think about it now, she always tried to put me and my sister first by telling my dad, "Wow, you need to do something special for your daughters," or "You should help them through this." She would also take Greta and me out to do stuff all the time and would really hang out with me. She even hung out with my mom a few times, and when my dad turned sixty, Jenny called my mom and asked what she should do for my dad because my mom knew him better than her. Jenny was very open in that way but also always knew her place and where he was in his life when she first came into it.

Toward the end, their relationship did become very toxic. When I saw that, I was like, *Oh, damn, that's bad.* I do think LA changed her a little bit, and I also think my dad was still not fully healed from the divorce. Still, I really believe that she came into his life for a reason. And you know, I also hoped she learned something from my dad as well, because their breakup wasn't very nice. Jenny had been going to the gym where Emma worked and knew about her before my dad and Emma had a thing, which was also a bit of a problem. She went up to Emma and said, "I know that you're looking at my boyfriend," or whatever. Jenny had no filter. She was warning Emma off but it obviously didn't work.

By that point, Jenny and my dad were having so many fights that it was impossible for him to stay in the relationship. He tried to make it work, but it didn't. It just didn't work. But she did get my dad to start meditating and to go to therapy, which I really respect her for. And the truth is that at the end of the day, she really was a very big part of his life.

I was still in a relationship with Jenny when she confronted Emma in the gym about us occasionally talking to each other there, but it was actually very subtle and not really that big of a deal. It was just that Jenny would notice talking, and she was always pretty jealous. And while our breakup was a bit ugly—they usually are—the way I look at it, a person comes into your life to fulfill a function. You give something to them, and they give something to you. Then you either grow stronger together or you grow apart, and that's when the breakup happens.

When I first met Jenny, I was in a very needy mode. I was going through a divorce and also having health problems. All those stunts I had done and martial arts fights had begun to show up in my body, but I refused to listen. Instead, I kept pushing, training, traveling, filming, drinking, and taking steroids. I also missed my family life and needed somebody to be there with me, so I brought her to Los Angeles. She wanted to come over, but it wasn't like she would have ever done so on her own. I think that once I began doing a lot of therapy and meditation, my personality started changing to become less needy and more self-sufficient, and we kind of grew apart.

I also think a big part of it was that the business can be very hard on people who are not accustomed to it. Jenny didn't get used to LA all that much because it was difficult for her to find a place for herself and feel comfortable there. I don't think what was going on between us at that point was the real reason we broke up because by then, I had already stopped drinking and taking drugs and messing around with other women. Basically, it was just that she really did miss Sweden and had never really felt comfortable in LA. Not that I blame her—Hollywood isn't for everyone. Twenty years earlier, I myself had felt the need to escape the pressure of the business by moving back to Europe after having met Anette.

But Jenny did help me transform myself. It was a lot like what had happened between me and Anette when my mom passed away. Anette became my way of getting over the death of my mom. She also was the person with whom I started my own family. Jenny was there not just during

my divorce but also at the point when I finally realized I had to change the way I had been living and start examining the trauma of my past. She helped me heal by having me address my emotional and mental health. Jenny was also there when I received my first kidney cancer diagnosis in 2015 and had to drive that Ferrari for a torturous week with my daughter Ida by my side in that Gumball Race. She was there during my first surgery and recovery as well.

Emma and I met right before COVID, and at the time both of my daughters were going to school in Europe. At some point, I told them about the two of us, and then the cancer situation began. I ended up speaking to a therapist, and both Ida and especially Greta spoke to a therapist on their own, and then we did some father-daughter therapy together for a while. I think what it all comes down to is understanding yourself and your own problems and where they come from. And then, forgiveness. Because once you understand why something happened, you can forgive that person and then you can forgive yourself.

Jenny Sandersson: Because it all ended so badly between us, in my head I've always been like, *Oh, they all probably hate me*. And while I know the ending shouldn't overshadow all the other stuff, it does. You know, it still kind of does. But I'm now very much into that everything happens for a reason in terms of how people meet and what happens between them. I think we're all really here to heal one another, so when I speak to others about this, I overlook all the bad stuff and focus instead on all the good things Dolph and I had during the years we were together. I focus on how much he taught me, how he strengthened my self-confidence, and how he was always lifting me up by telling me I was a star.

I was still deeply involved in the early stages of therapy when I wrote a script with a couple of friends about human trafficking called *Skin Trade*. I had read an article about young girls who had died of heat stroke and suffocation in the desert near the border in Arizona after having been left in a van as they were being smuggled in from Mexico to become sex slaves in America. We wanted to shoot the film there but found financing in Thailand, so we rewrote the script and set it there. I produced it along with my partner Craig Baumgarten. It turned out that Thailand also has a huge problem with human trafficking. I played a detective who goes to Thailand to kill the mobster who murdered his family, only to discover the guy is now running a huge worldwide sex trafficking ring.

While being exposed to the hardships experienced by trafficked girls I was trying to help, I was also starting to understand my own behavior. Simply, you have to help yourself before you can help others, and up to that point in my life I had never been able to do any serious charity work, because I'd always had so many emotional problems of my own—most of which I had created myself through my escape behavior.

When I came back to LA after the film, I contacted an organization called CAST, the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, and asked if I could help. My involvement with them as well as organizations like Mentor USA, which works to prevent youth substance abuse, and Child Help, which focuses on stopping child abuse, continues to this day. It's a great feeling to finally be able to give something back after all these years in the business.

For me, another way to deal with my trauma was to go public with it, and that was why I accepted the offer to give a TEDx Fulbright Talk in Santa Monica in September 2015. It was a chance for me to finally open up about some aspects of my personal life. Here is the end of my talk that day:

> You know, a lot of this human trafficking isn't just happening in places like India and Africa. As a matter of fact, one of the most interesting cases was a girl who was brought over from a Third World country by a very wealthy family. She was kept in a house, they took her passport, kept her under guard all the time, threatened her with violence, and threatened her family. You know where the house was? In Brentwood, about a mile from here. And she didn't know what to do. They brought this American nanny in to take care of the younger child, and the two of them talked, and the American nanny said she'd help her, but nothing happened.
>
> A week passed, a month passed. Finally, they were both coming back from the park one day, and here were fifteen FBI agents outside of the house. They took her inside and said, "Do you want to stay or do you want to leave?" She said, "I want to leave." CAST got her into a shelter, reeducated her, and brought her back. She found a job and finally ended up getting a green card. As a matter of fact, she met this man from her home country that she fell in love with and they got married. And to be part of something like that is just amazing. As a matter of fact, she is now also pregnant with her new baby and toward the end of my talk, I wanted to say hi to her. Alice, please stand up.
>
> Anyway, I guess for me the experience that I just told you about was like you first have to come to terms with yourself. You have to love yourself so you can appreciate those things in others. If you heal yourself, you can heal others. And I think if you take time to look inside and find that little boy, that little girl, inside yourself and then you have to treat them well. So, are you ready to look and see a little boy or a little girl next to you who may need some help? Because if you can do that, it's just the greatest feeling in the world. Thanks. Thank you.[1]

That talk was something I could never have done ten years before because I'd had far too many hang-ups and too much crazy energy. But now

I could.

Along with the therapy and meditation practice, my Ted Talk was another stop on my way to who I had always wanted to be: a mature and responsible man and artist who took care of himself and the people around him.

It’s also around this time that I started to get offered slightly different roles as an actor. More dramatic roles where I wasn’t hired only to run around with an assault rifle or to beat people up—almost like the universe had heard my call for help and for a new life.

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Chapter

Comeback Kid

It's not how you start that's important, but how you finish.

JIM GEORGE

As part of all the publicity I was doing for *Creed II*, which was released in November 2019, I spoke to a writer from *New York* magazine. In what then became a pretty long profile, he said I was "ready to be one of those former stars who stages a comeback as a dramatic performer in middle age." Because I had been stuck doing all those straight-to-video movies for so many years, this felt kind of true to me.

About two years earlier, I had learned that James Wan, who had directed the most successful of *The Fast and the Furious* movies, was a fan of mine and wanted me to be in his new picture, *Aquaman*. But the studio wouldn't sign off on me because King Nereus, the character he wanted me to play, had very little action in the picture. Insofar as they were concerned, that was all I could do on-screen. Because Nereus was more of a political figure and had a lot of descriptive and expository dialogue, they wanted me to audition for it. The last time I had auditioned for a movie was for *Rocky IV* in 1984, so even though I wasn't all that happy about this, I said, "Fuck it, I'm going to go for this!" and I went to the audition.

At that point, they didn't want anyone to see the actual script for *Aquaman*. Because I would be playing King Nereus, the director had found a scene from *Excalibur*, the 1981 film directed by John Boorman based on

the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. It's the one where Arthur breaks Excalibur, the sword with magical powers that is the symbol of his divine kingship, after having battled with the knight Lancelot.

In the scene, Arthur says, "What horror is this?" After picking up the broken blade, he says, "My pride broke it, my rage broke it . . . Humiliation and defeat lie in ambush even for a king." Looking at Lancelot, Arthur says, "This excellent knight who fought with fairness and grace was meant to win. With Excalibur, I tried to change that verdict. I have lost for all time the ancient sword of my fathers whose power was meant to unite all men, to serve the vanity of a single man." Throwing the sword into the water, Arthur starts to cry and says, "I am nothing."

I got the scene about a month before the audition and rehearsed it by myself about thirty times before running it for a friend. At the audition, I ended up doing two different takes of it. Because I never thought I was going to get the part anyway, I felt like I had nothing to lose, and in one of them, I went for it big-time. When Arthur throws the broken sword into the water, I started crying and said, "I am nothing." Not that far from how I had been feeling about myself for many, many years.

I guess it had come across on camera too, because the next day I got a call from my agent telling me I had gotten the part. For me, this was the real turning point. It came after all the therapy I had done and the TEDx Talk, and suddenly I felt like I was finally out of the woods in both my life and my career. The Excalibur scene itself is so intense that while we were shooting *Aquaman*, I used it to warm up before I walked in to do my scenes.

In March 2017, not long before I went off to begin shooting *Aquaman* in Australia, Dan Reynolds, the lead singer of the rock band Imagine Dragons, who had been boxing for a while and was also kind of a fan of mine, decided to do a video for their new song called "Believer." In it, there was a version of Dan when he was ten years old, him as he was now, and an older version played by me. If you listen to the lyrics, the song is all about him fighting himself, and so when he asked me if I wanted to be in it, I said yes. I was and still am a big fan of the band.

We shot the video in Park City, Utah, and even though Dan was an inch shorter than me and weighed about twenty pounds less, he managed to land a few really good punches while we were boxing. I landed a few myself. As he later said, "Dolph caught me with a straight right to the jaw that almost knocked me out." Still, once we both really got into it, he did very well, and

I took a few solid punches from him that I told him, “might even have shaken Rocky Balboa.”

At the time I don’t think I realized how popular Imagine Dragons really was. The video has been viewed more than three billion times on YouTube. The song itself became one of the band’s best-selling singles. For me, it was a chance to downshift to a completely new generation of fans. I also wound up going to a couple of the band’s shows, so the whole thing turned out to be a great experience.

Although *Creed II* did not start filming until about a year later in Philadelphia, Sly had the script long before then. When I got a text from him asking me if I wanted to play an aging Ivan Drago, my first thought was, *Oh, shit. Drago*. I was really scared of destroying the legacy of that character, and I also didn’t like some of what the writers had Drago saying and doing in the script, I thought, *Fuck, I don’t know if I even want to do this again*.

But when I met Steven Caple Jr., the new director, around Christmas in 2017, I realized right off the bat that he was a talented artist because of how he saw my character. Steven mentioned that he grew up in a housing project himself, so he could identify with my character’s struggle. In *Creed II*, Ivan Drago and his son, Viktor, literally have nothing and are dirt-poor. Caple had rewritten the original draft of the script, and when I read it, some of the scenes actually brought tears to my eyes. It was that good.

At the beginning of the film, Drago is a hard-ass who has lost everything and become bitter because after Rocky defeated him for the heavyweight title, the Soviets took everything away from him and made him move to Ukraine. His entire life had turned to shit, so all he wanted now was to get his revenge by making his son the heavyweight champion of the world, no matter what. To play him, I tried to find all the parallels in my own life when people had underestimated me or misunderstood what I was trying to become and then use that to help me create the character. I also saw it as a chance to portray my own dad in an on-screen father-son relationship. He had passed away in 2000, so this felt like an opportunity to bring real closure to my relationship with him.

For those who have not seen *Creed II*, Apollo’s son, Adonis, played by Michael B. Jordan, agrees to meet Viktor Drago for the heavyweight title. Viktor beats him but gets disqualified for hitting Adonis when he was down, so Creed retains the title. Apollo’s old friend Rocky Balboa then comes in

to train Adonis for the rematch, which takes place in Russia. Viktor is being trained by his father, Ivan Drago, who killed Adonis's father in *Rocky IV*. Very high Greek drama indeed.

Because I wanted to make everything I did on-screen seem as authentic as possible, I had to learn about forty lines in Russian. So I had these cheat cards with the words written out phonetically so I could pronounce them correctly. To make sure we hit the right rhythm and had the proper phrasing in Russian, after every take I would go over to our language coach who would be standing behind the monitor to hopefully get a smile or an affirmative nod. More times than I can count, she would look to Steven Caple Jr. and say, "No, it wasn't right," and we'd have to do the scene all over again, even if my dramatic performance itself had been spot-on.

When I first read the script, there was an especially fantastic scene where Rocky Balboa walks into his restaurant in Philadelphia and finds a big, hulking guy sitting in the back who turns out to be his old nemesis Ivan Drago. He goes up to him and says, "What are you doing here?" And then the two of them have this really intense sit-down conversation that reminded me of scenes between Robert DeNiro and Al Pacino in *Heat*.

Drago explains that after he lost the heavyweight championship fight to Rocky, he lost his wife, he lost his career, he was kicked out of Russia, and the reason he is now a nobody is because of what Rocky did to him. Warning him not to get in his way, Drago tells Rocky he is now going to take back what should have been his all along through his son, Viktor—who is going to defeat Adonis Creed for the title.

That was how the scene had originally been written, but then Sly made some changes I did not agree with. He also changed a few of my lines, which is typical Sly, even though I would have never dared to rewrite any of his lines. After all, he had been my boss on *Rocky IV*. But now, for the first time ever, we sat and talked to each other about the scene like actors—with another director in charge. After a while, Sly began to realize I was not going to back off and a lot of what I was saying sounded right. We sat there arguing for about an hour, and the director was smart enough to stay in the background as we did. Finally, Sly just said, "Hey, can we just shoot this fuckin' scene?" And then we pretty much ended up doing it the original way—the way I had suggested.

I really do love Sly and always will. Whatever we've been through over the years, I still love him and he knows that—which is why we have such a

special relationship. I look at him as an intelligent and extremely talented artist. But in that particular scene, I was able to use some of my frustration with him at that moment in how I played the character. And it worked because when Sly came in and saw me sitting there, he reacted in a real way because after our long argument, I was still upset and probably a little scary as well. Because Sly had no idea what I was going to do, the truth of what was going on between us made the scene work quite well on-screen.

In *Creed II*, we also had an actual fight scene—one that eventually got cut out of the movie. We shot it at the end of a very long day. I was standing in a hospital lobby, waiting for Sly to come to the set so we could do it. Suddenly, I saw people backing up against the walls to make way for Sly, who was tired and in a really bad mood. He'd been shooting a long, dramatic scene all day, and this was around seven or eight at night. I knew the last thing he wanted to do now was to be in a fistfight with me, but he was trying to be nice about it and gave me a big smile and said, "Let's just work out how we're going to do this, huh?"

The scene begins as I show up at the hospital where Adonis is being treated after the first match. Trying to create a confrontation and get a rematch, I argue with Rocky, and then I am supposed to push him. We had done a quick rehearsal of it before, but now Sly said, "Hey, go ahead and *really* push me." I was kind of worked up from having waited so long for him, so I pushed Sly really hard, and he went stumbling backward all the way across the set into these glass doors. Inside, I was like, *Oh, shit!*, and the director and crew were looking at me like: *WTF?* But when Sly came back to me, he said, "Yeah, that was great. Do it again the same way for the take." This scene of course reminded me of our first scene together in *The Expendables*.

Then we shot the choreographed, quick fistfight—and it felt great to be swinging at each other again, thirty-five years after *Rocky IV*. The stunt team and the crew loved every second of it, and I think they were impressed by how close our blows came to each other's faces. After all, we'd had plenty of rehearsals back in the day, so the timing and precision were still there. Unfortunately, that fight was cut from the final picture. That was a loss for the audience, in my opinion.

The most dramatic and satisfying moment I had in *Creed II* comes at the end of the final fight between Adonis and Viktor when my son starts losing and is pushed into a corner and completely defenseless. I can see that he

will not go down but is being beaten so badly he might die. As his father, I have to make a decision: Do I push him to try to win or urge him to admit defeat to save his life?

This all goes back to *Rocky IV* because when a reporter asked me about my fight with Apollo, I said, "If he dies, he dies." So in this film, I wanted to make the audience believe Ivan Drago was the last guy in the world who would ever admit defeat and give up.

Reading the script for the first time, I had not thought that "throwing in the towel" to stop the fight so his son would survive was even an option for Drago. So it was a huge transition for my character to step into the ring and throw in the towel. After I do that in the movie, I hug my son and say in Russian, "It's okay. It's *okay!*" On the day we shot the scene in Philadelphia, I could see the female extras in the audience crying, and that was when I knew *Creed II* was going to be a big success. For me, it was such a great experience to be able to do this purely dramatic role. It was also a chance to sort of play my own father and to give that father-son relationship a happy ending.

Tony Colagreco: I moved to Hawaii in 2005 and lived there until 2016, so Dolph and I kept in touch by phone. After I had moved back to New Jersey with the family, I saw him again for the first time just as he was finishing *Creed II*. He was going to be in Philadelphia, so I went down there with him and his daughter Ida, who wanted to see the steps and the Rocky statue. We took a cab, and it was exactly like Dolph standing at the front of the boat looking for the mooring at Catalina thirty years earlier.

We all got out of the car, and it was like the Pied Piper had arrived. People could not have been more shocked. Like, "Who's going to show up next? Mr. T?" Before we knew it, there were a hundred of them following us around while asking for autographs and taking pictures, and of course Dolph was being really sweet to them all. At some point, I knew I needed to be the bodyguard, so I said to him, "Hey, Dolph, we've really got to be going," because he would never have been the bad guy where his fans were concerned.

About a year earlier, *Aquaman* had begun shooting in Australia. All of it felt really weird to me because there I was on the set of Warner Bros.' biggest movie with a great director and fantastic production design doing scenes with an Academy Award–winning actor, Nicole Kidman. Before we spoke for the first time, I was really starstruck by her, but then she came up to me and said, "Oh, you're such a legend." Which of course was the way I looked at her too.

When I got those parts in *Creed II* and *Aquaman*, neither of which had me beating the crap out of anyone on-screen, I thought, *Okay, this is what I wanted to do thirty years ago*. I wanted to be able to show my own humanity on-screen as well as what it really means to be a mature man. This is what I think my "comeback" was really about. It was about starting another chapter in my life and my career because I had pretty much given up hope. I was like a fighter slugging it out in the last round of a big bout without caring if I was going to win or lose—because all I wanted was to be standing at the end. Funny how that sounds like a *Rocky* movie.

In America, I think people really do look up to survivors. Someone once asked Jane Fonda what she had learned about herself over the course of her career, and she said, "Better late than never." And I believe that's very true for me as well.

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Chapter

Looking Back—and a New Fight

If you're going through hell, keep going.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

I began working on a documentary film about my life in 2020. Around the time that Emma and I got engaged in Stockholm, I got the news that my cancer had come back. After I went back to Los Angeles and had my kidney surgery, I was approached by a Canadian producer about doing another documentary. I tried to get a coproduction going between the British director of the first one and the Canadians, but it all got very complicated. I actually wound up getting sued and eventually had to spend a few hundred thousand dollars on a settlement and legal fees so that I was free to focus on the second documentary.

When I started doing immunotherapy in 2021 and began getting even sicker, I didn't tell the producers of the new documentary about it because I still had no idea what was going to happen. Later, when things really began to not look good—while I was shooting *Aquaman II* in London at the end of that year—I finally alerted them about what was going on. By then, I had realized, *I better let them know this now because I might not be around for this premiere—so they can ask me questions now based on that very real possibility*. A tough decision.

Craig Baumgarten: Early on in terms of the cancer thing, Emma and I and Larry Witzer were the only people who knew Dolph was sick. I actually never knew how sick he really was until Larry finally told me before Dolph ever did. At the same time, Dolph had been cast in both *Expend4bles*, the fourth film in that franchise, and the second *Aquaman*. They were both shooting in London, and I arranged it so he could go back and forth from one to the other and do both movies at the same time.

Although we didn't tell them anything about Dolph's condition then, he had to have a physical exam before shooting began, so we gave his doctors permission to inform them about his condition and to explain that there would be no bad side effects from the medication Dolph was then taking that might keep him from doing action scenes or anything else in either movie.

After Dolph had taken both jobs, his attitude really improved. He was being treated. He had the medication and thought it was going to work and he would be okay. But then as Dolph began shooting, he started getting really sick from the side effects of what he was taking. To this day, I still don't know how Dolph did it because he was literally in the middle of making both movies while feeling really badly, and he somehow kept this up in London for about four months.

During that winter, I went to Sweden with a full crew for about a week, who then went up north to interview people in Nyland and go to my old high school and all that. After COVID had shut down filming a year earlier, Emma began using her phone to record what I was going through in the hospital with the surgery and my cancer treatments. The first cut I ever saw of this version had a lot of family photographs of me as a child, as well as my brother and sisters and my mom and dad. It also had me visiting the house we had all lived in as well as the campus of the Royal Institute of Technology where I studied chemical engineering. Along with new interviews with many of the most significant people in my life, there were also a lot of clips from the movies I had made. As always with a documentary of this kind, the problem was how to make it all feel seamless. In addition, my cancer journey had sort of taken over the story, and soon I realized that we needed to restructure the documentary.

We started out by working with a Canadian editor for about six months, but nothing I was happy with really came from that. That was when I decided to look for another editor. I found two editors who worked together, hired them, and paid them $75,000, but they didn't do a great job either. I spent a lot of time editing it myself and got so wrapped up in the process that at one point, I realized I had made around three hundred notes on just the first thirty minutes of the documentary—which even for me is way over the top.

Then in the fall of that year, I finally called a young editor, Darren C. Bui, whom I'd worked with before when I directed my last feature, *Wanted Man*. First, we reshot the interviews Emma and I had already done, and then he took over and put together the present cut, which is seventy-two minutes long. This cut finally tells the cancer story and how Emma and I experienced it, all within the larger context of my life and career. I'm happy to say that most people who have seen it seem to have been really moved.

Most importantly, we're happy and feel that it's now worth all the work we put into it, as well as the $100,000 I had to invest to get it done, plus the lawsuit.

At one time, the documentary was called *If He Dies, He Dies*, the Drago line from *Rocky IV*; then it was *Like a Viking;* but now it's titled *Dolph: Unbreakable,* referring to some of the battles I've fought and won both on-screen and off. It also plays off the other famous Ivan Drago line, spoken to Rocky Balboa forty years ago: "I must break you."

Apart from finding a distributor and deciding what to do about the music—because paying for that is not usually done until you already know when and where the film will be seen—the documentary is now finally complete. One reason I kept pursuing this project was so it would be a part of my legacy. Because of all the problems we had in production, with COVID and then trying to get the right cut, I've now reevaluated that just a bit.

Whatever real legacy I may have will come mostly from the movies I have made. So the point of the documentary now is my desire to speak up about subjects that are still a bit taboo in Hollywood—childhood abuse, cancer, and the kind of physical injuries that can so often occur while shooting action movies. While it's not nearly as bad as it used to be, people are still hesitant to talk about these topics—most especially about the "C word"—because they feel it can be destructive to their career. For me it hasn't hurt a bit, and things actually picked up career-wise once I broke the news about my cancer in 2023. I'm also hoping the documentary might serve as an inspiration to people who are going through any kind of extreme hardship in their own lives.

And now, I'd like to mention my wonderful wife. I met Emma Krokdal in March 2019. Born in a small town in Norway, she had come to Los Angeles on her own at the age of nineteen, gone to Santa Monica College for a semester, been certified as a personal trainer, and begun working as a

personal trainer in the Equinox Gym on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood, which was where I first met her. She was recently divorced and single again at the time. Having been divorced and now coming out of a relationship with Jenny Sandersson, my situation was very similar.

Emma Krokdal (my wife): Although a lot of famous actors trained at that Equinox, I really didn't know much about that world. I mean, I did know about Arnold, and I had heard about Sly Stallone, but I had never met either of them. One day, Dolph was there and wanted to do some boxing, so I asked one of my colleagues where he could do that and then walked down the stairs with him. Someone was already in the ring, so I had to tell him, "I don't think there's anywhere else you can go to do this here." He went to work out on his own, and then I trained him a few times, but he was still using heavy weights like guys had done back in the 1980s when that had been the form.

Although Emma was actually two months younger than my daughter Ida, she had been married and gone through a difficult divorce, as well as a lot of other stuff that people her age usually don't have to deal with. She was quite mature. When I asked her to help me find the boxing room, she turned around, and suddenly I was looking at Emma and froze. It was one of those moments where you go, "Uh-oh. This girl is very special. I may be in trouble."

After she started training me, we became friends, but it was a while before anything else happened between us. At some point, when she told me she was from Norway, I knew I was really in trouble. Both my previous long-term relationships had been with Scandinavian women, even though Emma sounded very American with almost no accent. One of the great things about Emma was that she had no idea who I was or what I did for a living. When the two of us finally began dating, we were up at Sly's house having a drink one night, and there was someone sitting at the bar. I asked Emma if she knew who it was, and she said no. I said, "That's Al Pacino," and she said, "Al *who*?" Now she knows who Al is.

Despite the difference in our ages, which I was always aware of, I sometimes felt as though Emma was an angel who had been sent down from heaven to help me. I also felt sorry for her because, despite being so much younger, she still had to help me get through all the horrible side effects of the drugs the doctors were using to treat me as well as accompany me to all my doctors' appointments in Sweden, London, and Los Angeles.

To this day, I don’t know how she managed to get through it all without ever losing it herself. She’s a very strong and special person.

Emma Krokdal: I still remember when I first learned Dolph had cancer because I was there with him throughout it the whole time. The doctors were going to do a biopsy in Sweden, but he decided not to, so we flew back to LA because it would be safer to do it there, or so we thought. At times, Dolph would be so out of it and kind of in a fog that I think I remember some things a lot more clearly than him, because I was always the one asking the questions.

We were seeing a doctor at Cedars-Sinai who was supposed to be the best in his field. Dolph did the first treatment, and everything was fine. He did the second one, and the scan was clean, so he went off to do a movie in London. We were then supposed to go from there to Greece and Bulgaria to shoot some scenes too. During all this, he had to take pills to stop his diarrhea, and because of that, he had to step down the treatment and take a lower dose, but the tumor was still growing. So the doctors said there was another alternative—one more medication he could try and two other drugs to which he could switch. We were hoping they would work.

My impression from the meeting we had with the doctor in London was that Dolph had maybe a year to live. It was very interesting because he was very happy. Like he was high from being fearful. And because Dolph was still acting, he was able to get out a lot of his frustration. We asked that doctor how he knew for certain it was kidney cancer, and he said “we assume that,” but he didn’t want to do any more surgery now to find out.

Then we went back to LA, and this great woman doctor agreed to take Dolph on as a patient. This was on a Friday, and we had an appointment with the original doctor at Cedars the following Monday that we called to cancel. The doctor’s assistant, not even the doctor himself, said, “Do you know how much trouble we had to go through just to get this appointment?” Like the doctor’s schedule was all they really cared about rather than how Dolph was doing as a patient.

Emma and I got engaged in June 2020, and I posted a photo of the two of us holding champagne glasses standing together on a terrace with beautiful Stockholm in the background. In the photo, she showed off the pink diamond engagement ring I had just given her, and the caption read, “Something very special happened here in Sweden,” along with the initials of our first names on either side of a heart. I was planning a big wedding for Emma and myself in Sweden just like my first one, but Emma didn’t feel like having a large wedding, so we made other plans. Ida was seeing a young Greek man, Yiannis Koroneos. My new doctor, Alexandra Drakaki, was Greek, so we now had this close connection to Greece. I had been filming *The Rats: A Witcher Tale* for six weeks in South Africa for Netflix, and I was really tired. Actually, I was sick as well and also had a serious liver infection but did not know it yet, so both Emma and I were happy to do something smaller on Mykonos on July 13, 2023.

There were only about fifteen people there—Emma's close family, my daughters, and a couple of my closest friends and their wives, including Craig Baumgarten, who was my best man, Tony Colagreco, and Larry Witzer, who had connected me to Dr. Drakaki.

As always in Greece during the summer, it was a beautiful day, and both Emma and I were dressed all in white. We were married by the pool at our villa overlooking the sea in a civil ceremony conducted by a Greek official. Although we had accepted the vows he had chosen, I did make a little speech about the Greek islands and the *Odyssey*—how Odysseus had spent years and years trying to get back home to his wife, Penelope, and how I had also traveled the world and fought different monsters and giants and passed by the Sirens of the sea so I could finally be here with Emma on this special day. To celebrate, we all had dinner and a party and then went out on a private yacht together the next day. And then Emma and I went to Sweden so we could get together and celebrate with my brother and sisters.

That was when I suddenly got very sick with a serious liver abscess. I spent a week in a Swedish hospital and then two weeks at UCLA fighting the liver infection I had contracted, after the doctors had removed one of the largest remaining dead tumors by cryoablation. I had to stay on intravenous antibiotics for five months, until early 2024. As I later found out, this infection was actually far more life-threatening than my cancer had ever been. After this ordeal was over, I gave myself a full year to get back in shape. It took me two.

Ida Lundgren: The thing about my mom and dad is that once she had kids, she didn't prioritize my father and make him first. And that became a kind of dynamic, because my dad needs a partner who can be near him 24–7, and if he doesn't have that, it gets a little bad. And that's why although Emma is just about my age, I'm fine with it because the two of them haven't left each other for more than a day since they've been together.

Although *Aquaman* was shot in 2017, it was not released until just before Christmas in December 2018 because all those digitally enhanced underwater sequences took a year to complete. The movie instantly became a huge hit at the box office, grossing $330 million in the United States and $805 million worldwide, with nearly $300 million of that coming from China. Whenever a movie makes that much money, one thing you can always say for certain is that there will be a sequel. And while *Aquaman*

and the Lost Kingdom began filming in England in June 2021 and ended six months later, the movie was not released until just before Christmas not one, but two years later. And this wasn't just because of the additional digital work.

For me, doing the original *Aquaman* was a far better experience than when we shot the sequel. The script for the first *Aquaman* was really good, and I was playing a political figure with a real character arc who began as a sort of bad guy and then became a good one. I also felt connected to my character since there was a father-daughter thread I understood well because of all I had gone through with Ida and Greta. Because I'd had some very good scenes in the first one, I had really high hopes for *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom*.

For the sequel, the script was actually equally strong. This time, my character, King Nereus, was part of the main storyline, the quest to rescue and bring back Aquaman and Mera's son—my grandchild. The evil forces were planning to use this child who was carrying Aquaman's ancient bloodline to unlock the dark forces to take over the world. Their goal was to eventually destroy the surface dwellers, as in us humans.

However, because of the cancer treatment, I wasn't feeling 100 percent at the time, had lost weight, and was worried about my health, so I had to stay focused on my character and use any negative emotions to try to strengthen my performance. The fact that I was still working actually helped me in my medical battle because it made me feel a lot more energized and youthful than I would have felt had I been sitting at home waiting for the results from my next scan.

Like any sequel, with the possible exception of *The Godfather Part 2*, *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom* became diluted because its success was already being taken for granted. On the first one, everyone was on edge and putting everything into it because this was such a big-budget movie and could have been a tremendous failure. The second time around, everyone was sort of assuming success.

For Amber Heard, who played my daughter Mera in both movies, the distractions began long before we began shooting the sequel. She had been involved in a divorce case with Johnny Depp that attracted a lot of media attention, not all of it positive.

I don't know all the details, but possibly for these reasons as well as realizing they now had additional story problems, the studio decided to

shoot a lot of new footage. The aim was to create a different storyline than had been in the original script, which of course is really tricky because you can't reshoot the entire movie. In the process, a lot of what we had done in London was recut or completely eliminated. When I finally saw the final cut, I was disappointed. Not so much because some of my work was cut out, but because I realized this film probably wouldn't do as well as the original. Everyone had worked very hard over a long shoot, and I felt we deserved a better picture. Not to mention all the time and money that had been wasted. Well, just another day in Hollywood.

The first previews were not very successful, and then, thanks to social media, it only took a few days and it was like, "Game over!" There was no premiere in either LA or New York, but there was something like a premiere in China—where viewers may not have cared as much about the new storyline one way or the other. The original production budget had been over $200 million, but the movie must have ended up costing millions more and then the huge marketing costs on top of that.

Worldwide, *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom* still somehow wound up earning around $400 million—which meant it wasn't the success everyone had hoped for. Welcome to the new Hollywood, where a gross of $400 million is considered a failure. What I do know is that whenever I fly somewhere, the original film is still being shown on many airlines—because that's the great one.

Throughout all this, my documentary kept shooting, and my cancer diagnosis kept right on getting worse. One day after filming, I had a man-to-man talk with the British doctor, who told me I had "about three years left." But from the way he said this, I could tell it was probably more like a year.

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Chapter

A Second Opinion and a Second Chance

It always seems impossible until it's done.

NELSON MANDELA

In the fall of 2021, while I was shooting *Aquaman* in London, Larry Witzer, an old friend who had been my business manager for thirty-five years, was playing in a golf tournament with a kidney specialist, Dr. Anjay Rastogi, from UCLA. By then things had gotten so bad for me that Larry just blurted out, "Hey, my friend is really sick. Can you recommend anybody who might be able to help him?" And Dr. Rastogi said, "Yes, there is a woman at UCLA who is a really good oncologist and specializes in kidney cancer." Larry called me and said, "You *have* to try this, Dolph. It's worth a shot."

After coming back home from the set in London exhausted, I got ahold of all my charts and scans and sent them to Dr. Alexandra Drakaki at UCLA Medical Center. As I learned later on, your current doctor is often very reluctant to send your charts anywhere because that probably means you're asking for a second opinion and they may then be out of a job. In my case, the staff at Cedars-Sinai proved to be extremely difficult to work with. Luckily, Professor Tom Powles, the doctor to whom I had been assigned in

London, was helpful in getting this done. Nonetheless, I still had slim hopes that any of this was going to make a difference.

That December, my then-fiancée, Emma, and I went to Norway to spend the holidays with her family. Neither of us spoke about it, but we both had a feeling that this might be our last Christmas together. In January 2022, we came back to LA and went to see Dr. Drakaki at the UCLA Urology Clinic. At this point, I was depressed and had almost given up all hope, but Alexandra was very positive during our first appointment and immediately said, "Something isn't right here. I knew it as soon as I took a look at your case. I think you've been misdiagnosed, and I have to go back and get your tissue samples from 2015 to know for certain." She had me do another biopsy and then asked her pathologist to evaluate the results, and we also requested the slides from my initial biopsy for comparison.

What she found was that my "kidney cancer" cells had a mutation that is fairly common in lung cancer. That's why the medications I had been given for the past two years weren't working. The next time Emma and I saw her, she told us, "Yes, I was right. It's an ALK gene, and there are several medications for it. By the way, if we had not found this out, you would have had four or five months left at most." So not a year, but a few months. Crazy. After she told us all that, Emma and I were driving home from UCLA, and neither one of us could speak because this all just seemed like a movie to us. We were both in shock.

I was so lucky to have found a doctor who was not only good at what she did, but whose father back in Greece had been a great fan of action movies so she had even seen some of mine. Her husband, Dimitrios, another doctor, was also an action movie fan. He had actually trained in a dojo in the small town in Greece where I had spent a summer as a junior karate instructor in the early 1980s, and he had a photo of Ivan Drago in his home gym. That was really crazy in terms of how small the world can be. Even though Dr. Drakaki wasn't accepting new patients at the time, because of all those circumstances she was willing to take me on. And that saved my life.

Still, I began this new treatment without believing 100 percent that it could work. Fortunately, I was wrong. Within a month of my taking the brand-new meds, the tumors began shrinking. The one in my liver, which had been about the size of a lemon, had shrunk to about two inches within six months. All the others were now 90 percent smaller than they had been

before I began seeing Dr. Drakaki. She also brought in other doctors because one of the cancer drugs I had been taking before meeting her had screwed with my heart and thyroid gland, so I needed to start taking meds for that as well.

Pretty much all of 2022 was a waiting game, but Emma and I both got our hopes back up because the scans kept getting better and better. In early 2023, I started removing all remaining tumor scar tissue in my lungs and liver by cryoablation, where a doctor basically inserts a long needle into the area and then injects liquid nitrogen to destroy the scar tissue and any remaining cancer calls. The liver ablation led to the abscess that almost killed me later in 2023. Ever since early that same year I've been NED —"No Evidence of Disease." It's been that way for more than three years now. Or, as the laymen say, I have been "cancer free." The medication I still take daily is designed to suppress any recurrence, and it doesn't have any nasty side effects.

In late 2022, I also had reconstructive surgery on my left ankle, which I had injured in the Swedish military back in 1979. That piece of titanium in my ankle, along with my bilateral hip replacements from 2017, sometimes make me feel like my *Universal Soldier* character, GR-13, a creature brought back to life in a high-tech lab.

After having gone through all these trials, I can honestly say that I appreciate life a lot more than I ever did before. Knowing how lucky I am to still be alive, all I can do is appreciate every day I get to spend with the ones I love. That I was able to find all these wonderful people to help me when I needed it so badly makes me feel incredibly grateful. As an actor, I always tried to put positive energy into all the roles I played, while as a person also being as nice as I could to fans and everybody else. Although I can't say for certain, maybe some of that positive energy came back to me just when I needed it the most. I am a firm believer that the universe gives us back what we put out. Ever since the diagnosis of the recurrence of my cancer in 2020, I have also kept doing positive affirmations based on Louise Hay's book *You Can Heal Your Life*.

The point she makes is that most people have a problem loving themselves, which I sure did. My dad had always told me how useless I was and that I was never going to amount to anything. After discovering Louise's book, I started looking at myself in the mirror every morning and saying, "Dolph, I really, really love you," which can feel stupid and difficult

at first, as most of our inner self-talk is usually negative. I also started following other routines Louise suggests, like writing down your affirmations and manifestations every morning, positive things you want to happen in your life—always in the present tense: “I am strong and healthy.” Your body needs to register any manifestation as a truth, not as a wish. “I want to be strong and healthy” means you’re looking at some future time, but we only live in the moment and that is the only thing your body understands. Along with the medical treatments, I believe all this positive energy helped me heal. Louise also had cancer as a young girl and then recovered fully to write a book that is one of the best-selling self-help books ever published, with some fifty million copies sold to date.[1]

I now also work with a cancer-survivorship therapist, who recently asked me, “What would have happened if you didn’t get that cancer diagnosis ten years ago? What course would your life have taken?” It took me a while to answer, but I told her I thought I might have destroyed myself by training too much, working too much, doing too many stunts, traveling too much, doing steroids, and taking other supplements to keep pushing on. There would have been no limits, so I could have pushed myself into some kind of catastrophic physical failure like a heart attack or a stroke. So in a funny way, the cancer became my savior of sorts. Made me reborn.

Of course, it wasn’t all positive. Like many cancer patients, I also had many suicidal thoughts, both during my treatment and, strangely enough, even more so after the worst was over.

Ida Lundgren: Although Emma has talked about how positive he was throughout all this, I have a feeling my dad has been depressed throughout his life, and I think challenges are what have kept him alive. That he didn’t die of cancer also sent him into a kind of depression, like, “Why am I alive?” He’s also spoken a little bit to me about sometimes having suicidal thoughts. As a kid, I always felt he didn’t really want to be alive, which was not a good thing. But I think even my mom told me he had been like that for many years. So it was just part of his way of living, for whatever reason, and in terms of the cancer, he was so grateful to still be alive but also had this feeling of wondering why he had been allowed to do so.

Johan Pramell: Dolph did plan to end his life. It might have all just been in his mind, but he wanted to go out in glory like a Viking because he didn’t want people to have to watch him suffer or fade away. Dolph was going to ask his brother to help him. I’m not sure whether he ever actually did anything or just planned to do so. But it’s not as dark as you might think. You have to know Dolph to understand this. It’s the Viking thing that you should go out in glory.

That's the solution. You also have to understand his interest in wars and how the soldiers in World War I went out to do battle knowing they were about to die, but in glory. He was always interested in all that and transferred it into his own life.

When I was deep into the cancer treatments and thinking about the possibility of killing myself, my brother, Johan, was going to help me, because I didn't know what kind of condition I might be in once I made that decision. I could be in really bad shape by then and not capable of completing the suicide on my own. There are countries in Europe, like Switzerland, that permit legal suicide for people who are terminally ill, but I still might have needed someone there to help me. Johan and I talked about it, but once I met Dr. Drakaki and began feeling a little better, it never went any further than that.

Tony Colagreco: When the cancer thing came around, I didn't physically see Dolph, but I could hear what he was going through on the phone. There were a couple of calls where I had to cheer him up and say, "Come on, man, this is not, this is not how it ends," but I would get off the phone crying because he'd say, "Tony, we had a great life. If it ends here, I can't complain. Because I know what other people have gone through with this."

I would then try my best to flip the switch until I realized I couldn't talk him out of it, and so I'd be like, "Oh, you know what? You're right. You're right! We should be proud of our lives and what we've accomplished. And that we both have two wonderful daughters." I still kind of tear up even now just thinking about it because even though he never once actually talked to me about ending it, I could hear it in his voice that this was what he was thinking about. I am so glad that Emma came into his life. There has to be a God to have brought him so much energy and positivity.

So yes, I continued having those kinds of thoughts even after my cancer had gone into remission. I learned that it's part of the shock to the system after having experienced a protracted near-death experience. Like when some soldiers came back from combat in the Iraq War and there was a big party for them because they had made it home, even though a lot of their buddies had been killed. Everybody was cheering for these soldiers—and then two weeks later, one of them puts a gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. And nobody could figure out why. "He made it, he was one of the lucky ones." I've learned that the human body has its own way of dealing with that kind of serious trauma. What goes in through the body has to come back out that way as well. In 2024, I went through a serious

depression that lasted for about six or seven months, but I was lucky enough to find this new therapist who specialized in cancer survivorship.

Survivorship therapy is based on the fact that because you have gone through a series of extensive cancer treatments, your body has literally experienced the equivalent of having been shot at by the enemy during war while also trying to defend yourself in any way you could. After three years of "No Evidence of Disease," I am now in the median phase of this therapy.

The initial phase began once I began getting clear scans and started to feel safer on a regular basis. Surprisingly, that was when the depression really hit me hard. I began having heightened reactions to a sore throat or a cough, accompanied by thoughts of catastrophic failure like, "Oh, I knew this survival was too good to be true. Now the cancer will recur, making me a double loser. I don't want to go through it all again, so I might as well die."

My survivorship therapist, Kauser Ahmed, and I would get together for an hour a week over a video call. After I told her what I had been going through, she would try to help me deal with the kind of negative feedback loop that makes everything seem that much worse. With her help, I could break that cycle by doing breathing exercises and by remembering, *Yes, I had a sore throat three months ago, and that's all it was—and I came out of it okay. And my last few scans were good*. By working myself down from what I now know was my body going through a psychosomatic reaction, I could get back into a positive feedback loop. I still speak to her today, only not quite as often. Maybe once a month.

Throughout my life, I have always been interested in how men react under stress when they are in combat and how that experience can change them for the rest of their lives. When I was young, my dad would lie in bed reading about World War II battles, and I would lie there next to him looking at all the pictures of soldiers and tanks. To me, being in battle was the ultimate test of your will, so even as a kid, I was fascinated by all that. Being Swedish, I was also interested in our Viking heritage.

When I got into studying martial arts later on, I learned that the samurai warrior code comes from the fact that they had to be ready to die every day. Their ritualistic way of life prepared them to stay mentally and spiritually ready for death so it wasn't such a big leap for them. This is the reason for the code in some of today's military units, like the US Marine Corps. This type of harsh discipline and realistic training keeps you from freezing up in

battle. Being ready to die can actually save you from injury or death. Like, “Yes, you may kill me, but I’ve already dealt with that, so bring it on!”

Before I was diagnosed with cancer, my Swedish lawyer and old friend Bjorn Rosengren gave me a copy of *Hávamál*, a collection of poems roughly translated from the Old Norse language, written about twelve hundred years ago. The title means “Words of Havi—The High One.” The poems themselves are attributed to Odin, the Norse god of the dead and warfare, so a lot of it is very heavy—but it also has a lot of practical wisdom in it. While I was working on the documentary about my life, I suddenly remembered a couple of stanzas and looked them up. I thought they were very insightful and reminded me of my own life’s purpose. This is the most well-known part of it:

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> you shall also die,
> but a noble name will never die,
> for he who gets himself a good one.
>
> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> you shall also die.
> One thing I know that never dies:
> the fame of a dead man’s deeds.[2]

In other words, a true warrior should live a life that leaves a great and positive reputation behind.

Even back when I was a kid, I always had this strange feeling that I wouldn’t live long enough to become an old person. Maybe because of my near-death experiences when I was being beaten by my dad, or a feeling I had that life is very short and precious. As an adult, I had never seriously thought about or planned for retirement. Like a Viking, I figured it was just a matter of time before I went out in a blaze of glory and ended up in Valhalla with all the other Viking heroes, with Odin as my master and the fair Valkyries to soothe my pain.

But the fact that I did get through all the hardships and the trials, including the cancer, has resulted in me finally feeling that where I am today is exactly where I’m supposed to be. On every level, I now feel like a true survivor. And I realize that you can also become an older, wiser warrior

who has a purpose to inspire and educate others in the community. That feels like my newfound purpose.

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Epilogue

It's never too late—never too late to start over, never too late to be happy.

JANE FONDA

Back when I first began modeling and acting in America, I did not initially get a green card but rather an H-1B visa as a "worker of special merit" that allowed me to be legally employed. I kept renewing that, and then I had a green card for five years, but when Anette and I moved back to Europe with our daughters in the late 1990s, I gave that up. Every time I would arrive in America for the next twenty-five years, the immigration officer would look at my Swedish passport, frown, and say, "What, you're not a citizen yet?"

In 2024, I decided it was finally time for me to become an American citizen. When I asked Emma how she felt about it, she decided to become one as well. Like everyone else who goes through the process, we both had to first study for the citizenship test (officially the Naturalization Test). There is a list of one hundred questions, and they ask you ten of them in the interview; you have to get at least six of the ten correct to pass. I love history, and so I thought it was interesting to learn about America back in colonial times. I already knew some of it but not the details about the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which I learned is the world's oldest still-functioning constitution—and the model for the French constitution as well. I also learned that America itself is a constitutional republic rather than a democracy, and that there is a difference between the two that most people aren't aware of.

Early in the morning on February 12, 2024, Emma and I went into the City Center in downtown Los Angeles. Although we performed our ceremony in separate rooms, we both had to raise our right hand and swear

to tell the truth, so help me God. After passing the test, Emma and I took some selfies with the examiners and some photos of us with the American flag. The whole process took a few hours for us to become US citizens.

Ever since I was a kid, America has always been where I wanted to be. All the good things that ever happened to me are because of this country. Everything I have accomplished in my adult life, I did right here, and it felt really emotional for me to finally become a citizen. So now I am an American, three years NED, and feeling more relaxed and excited about my future than ever before.

By the time we took the oath, Emma and I had already been working together on something completely different: creating our own vodka brand. We were on an early date, sitting at the bar together at the Four Seasons Biltmore Hotel in Santa Barbara in 2020. I had been complaining about never being able to find a vodka I really liked, and after a while she said, "You're a chemical engineer, you're from Sweden, you played a Russian in a couple of movies. You should be able to make your own vodka."

We started out like any other amateurs, except as Scandinavians, Emma and I drank a lot of clear spirits in our youth. I knew vodka was a distilled spirit but not much more than that. The goal we had in mind right from the start was that you would be able to sip our vodka over ice like a fine whiskey or tequila—so we began tasting various forms of vodka from everywhere. We actually found one we both really liked—that had been made right here in the United States, in southeastern Idaho. It was a potato vodka made with Rocky Mountain water. It was overproof, so much stronger than the others, but distilled at high altitude, thereby making the liquor itself extremely pure and smooth.

While doing all this, I had to brush up on my chemical engineering by studying fractional distillation and osmotic filtration. That felt like I was now going back full circle to MIT. Emma and I were hands-on with the design of both the bottle and the label. I also came up with the name—Hard Cut Vodka. "Hard cut" is a film-editing term for when you make an abrupt shift, like suddenly cutting from LA to New York, just like a "jump cut" or "smash cut." The name also describes the square bottle being "hard cut" like a diamond—while also referring to some of my hardboiled action characters.

On March 21, 2025, Emma and I held a launch party for Hard Cut Vodka in LA. We were both so totally involved in putting on this event that

we even folded the napkins for the tables. We held the party on the rooftop of Petit Ermitage, a chic West Hollywood hotel that is a beautiful private space. There were about a hundred people there that night, and I spoke about how many years had passed since Emma and I had first come up with this idea. How grateful I felt to all the people who had come on board with us and then become part of the company as well. Both Ida and Greta were there, along with a film crew who were shooting the event for their new Swedish TV reality show. The vodka itself took off so quickly that just two months later, we had run out of product. And so all in all, we've done very well with it so far.

In terms of my other recent activities, I did a freestanding episode of the hit series *The Witcher* called "Rats" on Netflix—about these kids who are little thieves and need a busted, washed-up witcher (me) to pull off a dangerous heist. I'm in a buddy comedy called *Mike & Nick & Nick & Alice* with Vince Vaughan and James Marsden. I have a cameo in the new version of *Masters of the Universe* in which Brit Nick Galitzine, who is a really nice guy and a good actor as well, plays He-Man—the role I played in 1986. I only have one scene, but for me it was a beautiful callback to my whole career.

Emma and I are now also developing a few movies for me to act in and for us to produce. It's really satisfying to work together as husband and wife because it means that we're pretty much collaborating on everything together. In the past six years, Emma and I have been apart for maybe three weeks in total, and two weeks of that was when I was filming in South Africa while she visited her sick grandmother in Norway.

When it comes to my own workout schedule these days, I'm very careful not to overdo it as I did before. Basically, I try to do strength training two or three days a week in shorter, thirty- to forty-five-minute workouts, splitting them into four programs: chest and shoulders, back, arms, and legs. I also try to do one cardio session a week where I get my heart rate up to 80 or 90 percent of max. I usually do this by doing a kickboxing session or riding a stationary bike, but sometimes I'll do a weight circuit—ten stations, one minute each, with three rounds for a total of thirty minutes. Every week, I also do a twenty- or thirty-minute session of Pilates for my abs and core. I find Pilates really helps with posture as we get older. Sometimes Emma and I go down to Gold's Gym in Venice to say hi to Arnold and the rest of the old gang—always a great experience that

brings back memories. I'm still pretty focused and disciplined to the point where Emma sometimes will have to talk me down from overdoing my workouts. Every two months, I take four or five days off completely in order to heal up and get that inner hunger back to really want to train again.

I also like riding my bike outside, which in LA can always be a little dicey. I have a route in Beverly Hills where there are not a lot of cars, and I try to stay on sidewalk paths away from all the heavy traffic and crazy drivers. I have come close to getting hit once or twice because people don't keep their eyes on the road here when they drive. When they come to an intersection, a lot of them automatically make that right turn without ever looking. The last thing I need right now after all I've been through is to become yet another traffic casualty in LA, because that would definitely suck.

Every evening, I follow Louise Hay's advice to end my day with positive energy.

When I lie in bed at night, quietly reciting my positive affirmations, it may sound something like this:

I am safe.
I am at peace.
My life is beautiful and meaningful.
I love and accept myself unconditionally.
I believe in myself and my unlimited potential.
I am calm and centered.
I trust in the process of life.
I trust myself and my intuition.
Everything will be OK.
I release all tension and stress.
My mind is peaceful and clear.
I'm confidently moving toward my dream.

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Dolph as a newborn with his mother, Birgitta Lundgren: author's private collection
Dolph as a toddler: author's private collection
Dolph with his mother: author's private collection
Dolph as a toddler with his father, Karl-Hugo Lundgren: author's private collection
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Dolph and Slavi Slavov training: author's private collection
Dolph and Tom Nyman at a karate summer camp in 1977: author's private collection
Dolph and Grace Jones at the premiere of *Rocky IV*: Michael Ochs via Getty Images
Dolph and Grace Jones: Ron Galella via Getty Images
Dolph with Tony Colagreco: author's private collection

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Dolph training for *Rocky IV*: author's private collection
Dolph and Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky IV*: Pictorial Press via Alamy
Dolph as He-Man in *Masters of the Universe*: courtesy of MGM Media Licensing
Dolph with Brian Fitkin at his dojo in Sweden: author's private collection

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Dolph as a team leader for the US Olympic Team in 1996: USOC

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Dolph with his siblings, Johan, Katarina, and Annika: author's private collection

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Dolph with his daughter Greta: author's private collection

Dolph directing his third film, *Missionary Man*, with director of photography, Bing Rao, in 2007: set photo

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Dolph and John Bates at a TEDx event in 2015: Liz H. Kelly, founder, Goody PR

Dolph meditating: Emma Krokdal

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Dolph with Sylvester Stallone and Jenny Sandersson on the set of a Tecate Beer commercial: author's private collection

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Dolph's ankle after surgery in 2022: Emma Krokdal

Dolph throwing a punch after cancer surgery: Emma Krokdal

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Dolph filming his documentary, *Dolph: Unbreakable*: Adam Scorgie
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Dolph with Dr. Alexandra Drakaki: author’s private collection
Dolph and Emma Krokdal at the DRINC Distillery for Hard Cut Vodka: author’s private collection

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Dolph as a newborn with his mother, Birgitta Lundgren.



Dolph with his mother.



Dolph as a toddler.



Dolph with his family on Christmas in 1960.



Dolph as a toddler with his father, Karl-Hugo Lundgren.



Dolph and Slavi Slavov training.



Dolph and Tom Nyman at a karate summer camp in 1977.



Dolph and Grace Jones.



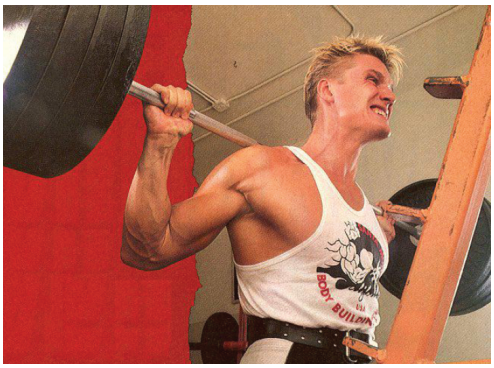
Dolph with Tony Colagreco.



Dolph and Grace Jones at the premier of *Rocky IV*.



Dolph and Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky IV*.



Dolph training for *Rocky IV*.



Dolph lifting weights at Golds Gym..



Dolph as He-Man in *Masters of the Universe*



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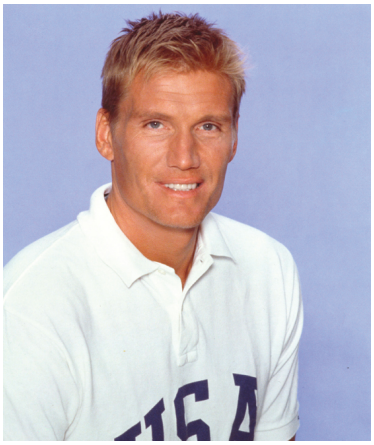
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Dolph filming his documentary, *Dolph: Unbreakable*



Dolph at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm.



Dolph and Emma Krokdal at the DRINC Distillery for Hard Cut Vodka.

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1. The US Treasury Department officially discontinued $500 bills on July 14, 1969, citing a lack of use, though they were last printed in 1945. While they remain legal tender, most have been destroyed or are held by collectors.

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1. Grace Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs* (Gallery Books, 2015), 184.

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2. Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 184

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1. Grace Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs* (Gallery Books, 2015), 276.

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2. Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, 285.

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1. Grace Jones, *I'll Never Write My Memoirs* (Gallery Books, 2015), 290.

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1. Author’s translation.

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1. “Dolph Lundgren: On Healing and Forgiveness,” TEDx Fulbright Santa Monica, October 28, 2015, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNOE0dZpHcY.

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1. Louise Hay, *You Can Heal Your Life* (Hay House, 1984).

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2. Author’s translation.

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