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Lethally Blonde

A bridal entrepreneur goes from renting jewelry to fighting in a ring.

By Linda Formichelli

I meet Laura Marcusse at the café on the top floor of Lord & Taylor on 5th Avenue in Manhattan. Immediately, I'm self-conscious. Marcusse is petite -- tiny, really -- and has perfectly styled, shoulder-length blonde hair. She's sporting meticulous makeup, black dressy shorts, high heels, and a diamond necklace and earrings.

Marcusse, 26, designed the jewelry she's wearing. She's one of the five founding partners of Adorn Brides, a New York-based company that rents diamond jewelry online to brides who don't want to shell out thousands for their own necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. Marcusse and her partners started Adorn Brides in Kansas City in 2006, but it didn't get off the ground until they received funds in October 2008. As she carefully removes three-quarters of the bread from her tuna sandwich, Marcusse tells me that the angel investors, all men in their 20s and 30s, asked her to move from Kansas City to the fashion capital of America.

As we discuss her business life, Marcusse suddenly stops and says, "By the way, sorry about the black eye." I look more closely. Hidden beneath the makeup around Marcusse's left eye is a deep purple bruise.

Marcusse is a mixed martial artist, and the bruise is a result of an elbow to the face. Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a full-contact combat sport that's a mix of various fighting arts; the style Marcusse studies includes muay Thai (a Thai boxing style with punches and kicks), jiu-jitsu, and traditional Greco-Roman wrestling.

Unlike martial arts such as professional karate, "MMA allows chokes, elbows to the face, knees to the face and body, and all of the joint locks," Marcusse explains. "One of the biggest differences is that in professional karate, boxing, and kickboxing, you are using much bigger gloves and in some cases you're also wearing shin guards and helmets. MMA is as close to a street fight as you'll ever get in a sanctioned sport." Five days per week, in classes that last two-and-a-half hours, Marcusse dons gloves and fights men more than twice her size. She's been choked unconscious, and once a 215-pound opponent landed on her with his entire bodyweight and drove his knee into Marcusse's arm, which caused a baseball-sized hematoma that Marcusse had to cover with long sleeves for a meeting with investors.

After dinner, Marcusse and I head to Fighthouse, a martial arts gym in Chelsea. On the wood floor surrounding a raised boxing ring, students practicing kung fu, jiu-jitsu, boxing, and muay Thai punch, kick, and throw each other. The menthol smell of Tiger Balm pervades the air, and the atmosphere is punctuated by the staccato beat of bags being pummeled several times per second.

Even though I have five years' experience in karate and kung fu, I'm nervous. Classes in MMA include killer conditioning exercises. In the past six weeks I've stepped up my cardio and weight training -- but I'm 40, and all around me, I see fit men in their upper teens and twenties. Can I keep up?

Instructors Adam Schortz, a short but muscular man with buzzed hair, and Plinio Cruz, who has a tattoo on his right foot that spells out "Heavyweight" in Portuguese, step onto the blue mats and the students line up and bow. Then we're shadow boxing, doing crunches, hitting the mat for pushups, and doing rapid-fire roundhouse kicks. Marcusse, wearing shorts, a black cropped tank top, a belly button ring, and a full face of makeup, is sweating but powering through the workout. Me, I'm feeling the pain after 30 pushups and 30 crunches. More shadowboxing -- where Schortz, 29, instructs me to stay light on my feet -- and I'm fighting the urge to flop down on the mats for a breather. I need water, but when one student, a bodybuilder in his early 20s, heads off the mat to take a swig,

Cruz, 23, yells, "Nobody drink water without asking me. Discipline!" I'll need more than discipline to make it through this workout; my legs are on fire and I can't breathe fast enough to take in the air I need.

Mixed martial arts has a checkered past. The sport has its roots in mixed-style contests that took place as long ago as the early 1900s. Inspired by Brazilian vale tudo (literally "anything goes") competitions, in 1993 an organization called the Ultimate Fighting Championship was founded by several people, including an advertising executive and Rorion Gracie, the owner of a Brazilian jiu-jitsu school and the man many consider to be the grandfather of MMA, to find the most effective martial art. Competitors from around the world specializing in different fighting styles faced one another in televised no-holds-barred battles that made headlines around the world -- fights so violent that Senator John McCain bashed the sport as "human cockfighting." Professional MMA fights take place within a five-and-a-half foot tall, vinyl-covered chain link fence called a cage; for this reason, MMA is also called cage fighting.

While MMA is still no pastime for the weak-stomached, in the early 2000s the UFC instituted rules to help MMA shed its image as a barbaric sport. For example, in professional MMA there are now weight classes, so 135-pound martial artists no longer go up against 300-pound fighters, and competitors wear open-fingered gloves to protect opponents against cuts and concussions. But MMA still has a bad rep. "There are times I'm hesitant to bring it up because it's a very misunderstood sport," says Marcusse. "It's not something you would associate with a person who's trying to be the face of a feminine, fashion-oriented company. If it does come up out of context, I feel like I have to defend myself so people don't think I'm some crazy woman who either likes to be beat up on or hates men."

Marcusse studied Okinawan kenpo, a style of karate, for four years in her late teens. In 2006, one year after graduating from a small liberal arts college in Liberty, Missouri, with a degree in business and entrepreneurship, she was messing around with the punching bags at the gym when she noticed two men sparring in the corner. She

approached them and asked what they were doing -- and whether they had a class she could join. "I saw lots of really hard contact -- more so than the karate I had done," she says. "I love to challenge myself, but what sealed the deal was the subtle attitude I got from the instructor that he didn't really want to bother with me. Someone telling me that I'm not strong enough, smart enough, male enough, or old enough to do something is the best motivation for me."

When I ask that instructor, Ethan Benda, whether he wanted to admit to Marcusse that he did indeed offer a class, he answers, "Absolutely not." It's not hard to see why: Marcusse weighs in at just 105 pounds, and Benda's class was frequented by men who weighed upwards of 200 pounds. "So I told her I would let her try it out and see how it went," Benda recalls. "She held her own." Marcusse improved quickly, Benda says, using her speed and smarts to take down opponents double her weight. (Heel hooks, where you grab your opponent's foot and twist, were her go-to move against bruisers.) Eventually Benda started pairing her up with punks who came in off the street wanting to prove their strength. "There's nothing better than watching 105 pounds of cute choke out a 200-pound tough guy," he says.

We've now ground through 20 more crunches and 20 more pushups, and we're doing an exercise where Schortz shouts out a number and we have to pump out that many kicks with each leg. I keep hoping he'll call out "two!" or "three!" but the numbers are always in the double digits and my lungs feel like they're imploding. I catch sight of my notebook and recorder on a folding chair in the corner and have a brilliant idea: This is my out! I glance at Cruz and motion towards the chair, he nods, and I limp to the seat, pick up my pad, and pretend to feverishly take notes while I catch my breath. In the meantime, Marcusse is busting out kicks with a determined look on her face.

When the conditioning segment of the class is over (and I'm conveniently done taking notes), I rejoin the students to learn jiu-jitsu moves. Schortz instructs me to lie on my back and wrap my legs around Marcusse's waist. Marcusse leans forward and presses her hands into my upper arms. Schortz shows me how to pull Marcusse off balance by

yanking one of her hands to the side, then he tells me to flip one leg up and over her shoulder, flex my legs, and apply a joint lock to the arm that's now braced against my stomach. Schortz gives me a mnemonic device to determine when it's possible to break someone's arm: "If their thumb is up, it's good to break," he says, giving me a thumbs-up to demonstrate. Then it's Marcusse's turn. She easily applies the joint lock so that pain shoots through my elbow, and I tap my hand against the mat, indicating that I give up. We learn several variations on this move, and then Cruz tells me to take a seat. Sparring is about to begin.

Marcusse pops in a mouth guard and straps on fingerless pink gloves that have "Fight Girl" inscribed across the knuckles. "I like to inject femininity wherever possible," she says to me. She pulls on black shin guards and is then paired up with Alex Chau, 25. As soon as they're set up, Marcusse runs at Chau, locking her arms around him and kneeing him in the chest. "Look for position and start pounding, Laura!" Schortz yells. Laura loosens her grip and delivers a punch to Chau's ribs.

For Marcusse, the gap between renting sparkly things to brides and wrestling with beefy men isn't as wide as you might think: Marcusse says her martial arts hobby is not only the perfect sport for risk-taking entrepreneurs -- it also helps her navigate the male-dominated world of raising venture capital. "I'm a member of an angel investor group in Kansas City, and I'll never forget the first day I walked in there," Marcusse recalls. "They were all men over the age of 35, and I walked in with this cute little white suit. If you could have put a cartoon thought bubble over their heads, it would have read, 'Sorry, sweetheart, the Mary Kay convention's down the hall.'" Instead of wilting, Marcusse shot pointed questions at the other members of the group. "Without the MMA I might have thought of a lot of things to say and good questions to ask, but would have second-guessed myself," she says. "MMA has allowed me to be more in touch with my aggressive side and comfortable dealing with men."

Practicing MMA has also taught Marcusse that while she can't take down a bigger person with brute strength, she can use her intelligence and speed to outmaneuver the

competition. Just as she uses heel hooks against opponents instead of fighting on their terms, Marcusse uses Adorn's small size as an advantage. "Our size allows us to make exceptions, which is something that means so much to clients -- especially brides," she says. "For example, we sometimes ship a day early or allow the bride to return something a day late because of travel or other reasons."

Both being an entrepreneur and practicing MMA give Marcusse a sense of freedom. Being an entrepreneur because she's able to make decisions without answering to a nine-to-five boss -- and practicing MMA because she's able to walk the streets of New York knowing she can defend herself. "Most women would freak out and lose their mental clarity in a scary situation, but I believe I could handle myself in that sense, and that is a very powerful tool," she says. "In a strange way, it's sort of like carrying a secret around, an inward confidence."

After the round with Alex Chau ends, Marcusse is paired up with instructor Plinio Cruz. They both step lightly, bending over at the waist and reaching out to touch one another's hands with tentative taps. Just as I'm wondering what they're doing, Marcusse launches herself at Cruz, wrapping one of her legs around his, and they tumble to the mats. She works to release her right leg so she can attempt to get full mount, but as soon as her center of gravity shifts the roles are reversed and Cruz is on top. As Cruz grabs Marcusse's wrist to maneuver her into a shoulder lock, Marcusse is able to bridge her body, creating enough space to deliver a few quick punches to Cruz's face with her free hand. Marcusse then manages to apply a chokehold to Cruz. Cruz deftly rolls forward while simultaneously breaking her grip. In a flurry of a strikes, the pair separate and jump to their feet to begin the battle again.