

Angels in the Choir

by

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Chapter Four

SEX EDUCATION

The first thing Brian noticed was that Alan Wainwright had hair on his chest. The boy was taking off his shirt and the dark curly hairs were right there, clustered between and slightly below Alan's big round nipples.

"You want me to fuck this punk?" Alan asked.

"He's not a punk...don't even go there," Pat said. "Look, this is perfect from a visual standpoint. Brian is the innocent, you are the tough guy. The size difference is what I'm after. You don't have to hurt him."

"Ok, and what do you say, kid?" Alan smiled.

Like his being older made him the man Brian so desired. Ok, the hairy chest helped. But Alan seemed determined to come on strong. It was almost laughable, Brian could tell the boy was nervous. Maybe the situation was too 'gay' for him.

"This is all about giving Pat something to draw, isn't it?" Brian asked. "I don't see why you need to be such an asshole about it."

"It's all about the money, kid. I don't do this for the fun of it."

Pat and Brian exchanged glances. Alan was only in it for bucks, yeah, there's another lie. The kid had been a street hustler for years, but all those boys tried to convince people they were straight. It was just a job. Excuses were part of the deal.

"Money is ok with me too," Brian said. Let Alan think he was a fellow hustler and not some little gay boy. Patrick wouldn't always be around to protect him.

"Let's do it," Alan said. "I got places to go."

They lay down on the bed and Alan quickly threw a leg across Brian's hip.

"Hold that a moment, " Pat said.

Fifteen minutes later, and just as Brian's neck was beginning to cramp from the pose, Pat flipped a page in his sketchbook and allowed them to move.

"Turn your head, kid," Alan said.

It wasn't something he expected but Alan kissed him, pushing his tongue into Brian's mouth. Now there's a gay move, Brian thought, but he went with it while feeling the boy's hardness swell against his bare bottom.

The kiss lasted a while and Pat didn't interfere until his pencil stopped moving on the page. Again he turned to a fresh page and said, "Move, if you please."

Alan crawled up over Brian and pushed him down into the mattress. The pressure against Brian's rear suddenly increased as Alan poked and prodded until he was centered. Brian expected it to stop there but the boy kept pushing.

"You can stop now," Brian said.

"Alan, we agreed this wasn't going to happen," Patrick said, putting his sketchbook down.

Alan backed off. "Damn, you have a sweet little butt, kid."

"Ok, I've had about enough," Brian said. He rolled over and pushed Alan off.

"Virgins are such a pain," Alan said, "You want to lose it sometime come look me up."

Brian watched as Alan pulled his pants on. Pat slipped him a few bills and the kid left. Brian didn't even know how much Pat had paid the boy. But he didn't want to know either. What price could he put on virginity anyway?

Pat picked up his book and Brian watched as he continued to work his pencil across the page. It was as if he were lost in another world without recognizing what had just occurred in this room. Brian rose from the bed and walked quietly into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Sitting on the toilet, he put his hands to his face and began to cry.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

It was about three weeks later that word spread around the neighborhood. Gabe had been caught with some guy at a motel in Riviera Beach, south of the city.

He had been gone for two days but it seems the cops had been watching the motel for something like this for some time. Gabe's mother had gone to them when her son didn't come home. The guy was now over at city jail while Gabe was back at home. Word was that the boy had been raped.

Somehow Brian was sure that Detective Pullman was involved. He hadn't seen the blue car hanging around the neighborhood, but then whoever this guy was probably didn't know about Gabe and the cop either. It was foolish for the boy to have gone to the motel, he might have been killed.

Everyone thought Gabe was the victim of that horrible criminal. Only Brian understood what had motivated the boy. Gabe had taken a chance to win his freedom and failed. Lord, did that mean he wouldn't be in school this fall? Brian knew there had to be a lot more to the story than common gossip allowed. Somehow he had to find out.

Getting close to Gabe would be risky, and going into his house was out of the question. Half the boys in town now held the kid in total contempt. But there was no way he could walk up to Gabe's door in front of the entire town. They would paint him with the same wide brush strokes and his ass would get beat down.

With this situation all over the news, the cops had officially been made aware of the street hustle and it was rumored that there would be other arrests. Gabe had risked the cash flow for the kids on the street and for that he was the object of some pretty intense hatred. But Brian felt a certain loyalty to the friendship, or did he still love the little brat?

Had Pullman tracked them down? Gabe thought he was pretty clever, so why had they been caught? There were only two people who knew the answer to that question and one of them was in jail, Brian had to see Gabe.

But the boy made the wise choice of sitting in his room at home like a monk in a cell. A walk to the corner store right about now would be all it took for Gabe to get the ass kicking of his life, if he survived it.

Brian didn't feel sorry for the man sitting up in the jailhouse. The television news declared him to be the pervert of the century. Yeah, he'd had sex with a minor, but Gabe had certainly arranged the whole thing.

The news said they had been discovered with a stash of drugs and Gabe was tested positive for marijuana. Well, duh. The beast had doped the kid up everyone said. Like Curtis Bay wasn't already awash in cheap homegrown weed. It was probably Gabe's stash anyway.

Father Connor from Saint B's was shown on television news one night, dodging the cameras and reporters outside the rectory. They wouldn't reveal Gabe's name, only calling him the victim of the crime, but everyone knew that a choir boy at Saint B's was the victim. It took a while but things slowly died down, the coverage turning to other news.

After Brian's modeling session with Alan, Pat had done several solo drawings of him. It was fascinating to see his body amidst all the others adorning the walls of Pat's room. The man was a really good artist in Brian's modest opinion, and he certainly did have a great eye for detail.

But Pat also smoked weed and Brian managed to finagle a few joints when the guy wasn't looking. The man was never careful with his things and surely wouldn't miss a little amount. It came about on one of those quiet evenings when Pat stretched out on the couch and Brian sat at the far end rubbing his feet.

Brian felt like he had to touch Pat to survive being in his presence. He loved the big goofy artist and their friendship was certainly unique. Pat repaid him in kind, allowing Brian to sit in his lap while they watched cartoons. It was the cure for a Saturday morning hangover.

"These things are nothing but animated drawings," Pat explained, another beer in his hand. Hair-of-the-dog he called that drink. But he had taken an interest in telling Brian things about his art. "I would love to do animation...all those drawings."

"Like they would allow nudes on television," Brian said.

"No, silly, not nude. I do other drawings too, ya know. Nude is just...well, natural, like God made us." He would kiss Brian's cheek and say, "And he made you so beautiful." And the boy would always blush; it was their private little thing.

It was ok if Brian loved him; Pat liked sharing that much with the boy. But they had dodged the topic of sex for weeks. Maybe it was because they both recognized the growing feelings between them and yet didn't want to feel like sex was ever on the table.

School was due to start up in a few weeks and Brian was wondering just what Gabe had planned. Surely he wouldn't walk back in as if nothing had happened. The poor kid must be going through hell.

From his lofty perch in the choir, Brian saw Gabe come in for the mass with his mother in tow. But there would be no opportunity to catch him alone with her that close. And then, just after mass, Gabe pushed through the door into the Men's room and Brian followed.

"Hey, Gabe," he said, moving into the next urinal.

Brian saw the frown on that sweet face. "You still talking to me?" Gabe asked.

"Sure...aren't we still friends?" Brian asked.

Gabe almost smiled. "Yes...I hope so. Come see me?"

Brian smiled back. "And risk my life for you? Sure."

"Oh. Friday then, after dark, on the roof..."

And that was all he got out before a man walked in and locked himself into the toilet stall. Brian nodded his reply in silent agreement and quickly left.

The roof top beside Gabe's house was the perfect meeting place. No one would see them together up there. Right now Brian feared that his parents would begin questioning the relationship he'd had with the boy, but so far they had said nothing.

Dark was about eight-thirty at that time of year, but since it was still summer vacation, Brian wasn't due home until ten. And when Friday night came he climbed the ladder with two joints tucked away in his back pocket.

Gabe had finally cleaned out the old pigeon coop and hauled an old mattress up there. He once told Brian he planned for them to have sex on it. But that was all before Dominic arrived and the relationship between the boys withered on the vine.

Brian crept across the roof, hoping to find Gabe waiting, but the place was empty. He sat on the mattress and watched the evening stars trying to glitter through the haze of light from the city. The Presbyterian Church at the end of the block prevented a good view of the bay, but the city lights formed a backlight around the spires and made them look like two tits reaching up into the sky. Gabe had said if they were real tits then the bra size would be about a 400 triple D cup.

Gabe arrived about twenty minutes later, barefoot and wearing only a t-shirt over his boxer shorts.

"Brian, glad you could come," he said. The boy was panting as if he'd been chased.

"Have you been running?" Brian asked.

"No, I had to climb out the window tonight, it was pretty scary."

That meant scaling down the side of his house on the drain pipe, a risk Brian wouldn't take on one of these old buildings.

"You didn't have to risk your neck for this," Brian said.

"I had to see you, it doesn't matter."

"I brought you a present," Brian said, producing the joints.

"Awesome, I need some of that," Gabe said.

"Sorry. I mean about the whole mess," Brian said as Gabe lit a match and fired up the joint.

He puffed and then handed over the rolled paper. What the hell, Brian thought. Dizzy might be a good thing tonight.

"I can't go out, I can't see my friends...but I have to go back to school at Saint B's," Gabe said. He toked again and Brian saw tears gleaming in his eyes. "I'm a dead man. But it was all my doing, ya know?"

"You just had to get outta here, didn't you? I don't even know this guy they arrested."

Gabe smiled and blew smoke into the night air. "His name is Max and he said he loved me. I almost believed him, but he's been with a lot of kids before, I can tell."

"Did...did he hurt you?"

"You mean did he fuck me?"

"I'm gay, Gabe, I know what that means," Brian said.

Gabe laughed. "And you already know about me. It was a stupid idea, he was gonna take me to live in Virginia. But he's like fifty and it seems he already has another boyfriend down there...well, he did, but I'm sure that's over."

"I love a guy now, he's twenty-five, but I can't say who he is...not yet anyway."

"Ok, Brian, I understand. I'm a dead man anyway," he repeated. "Nobody will go out with me, not that I can go out anyway. My mom says I'm grounded for life, whatever that means."

"Did you love him?" The question still nagged.

"I don't think so. I mean, I loved what he did for me. He was gentle and tried not to hurt me. But Max is screwed up in the head, being a perv and all. He did things to me and then cried about it afterwards. It was pretty fucked up."

"I'm still a virgin," Brian confessed.

"I thought maybe we could have changed that...together," Gabe said. "I sort of thought you might see what I wanted. But it's too late for that now...and I don't think we'll get another chance. This is all fucked up."

"I didn't understand...sorry," Brian said. "But I love this guy and he won't touch me until I'm eighteen and legal. It sucks. I want...well, that doesn't matter anymore. I just know he won't."

"Stay with him," Gabe said. "When he realizes you mean business and won't just go away then he will look at you differently. When the moment is right you'll have what you want. He just needs to remember what he was feeling back when he was your age."

Gabe was silent for a few moments and Brian felt a great sadness creep into the boy's thoughts. He watched as Gabe looked up at the sky and saw tears rolling down the boy's face.

"I really thought that Max would be my ticket out of this shit hole. I was willing to give it a shot and look what I got for it. My whore of a mother is all of a sudden trying to run my life, like she was ever a real mother to me.

"And Pullman, he's the one busted us at that motel. He's been following me all along, Brian. Like I'm his boyfriend or something. That sick fuck cuffed us and then slammed Max's head into the door. The two uniforms with him did nothing about it, they just watched and laughed. I hate fucking cops."

And then Gabe began to sob. Brian moved closer and put his arms around the boy's shoulders. Gabe leaned into him and sobbed harder, the misery now overtaking them both.

"The bitch, she doesn't know what she's asking...making me go back to that school. I begged her," Gabe sobbed. "I begged her ass and she slapped me. Said she didn't love me any more...that I was just a little faggot and would get what I deserved."

Brian rocked him back and forth. All the strength he had seen in Gabe was gone; replaced by the hurt little boy in his arms. He felt the hurt too, for if nothing else ever happened between them again, this boy was a part of him forever.

Brian understood the despair of being gay. If only Pullman hadn't shown up, they might have had a chance. But the neighborhood would turn against him too if they ever knew. He knew Gabe was facing a real menace; a ton of hate had been building up these past few weeks. When he tried to return to school, Gabe would suffer the consequences. What was his mother thinking? How could he stand up for the boy?

Gabe suddenly leaned over and put his arms around Brian. His mouth sought frantically, finding Brian's lips and kissing him deeply. It wasn't that Brian wanted to have sex right then, but they were friends and he knew what lay on the road ahead.

Getting dizzy first made the whole experience a strange and distant reality. They struggled to remove their clothes as their bodies clung together, aligning themselves on

the mattress. He knew what Gabe wanted and he was willing. But Brian had never been on top before and he wasn't prepared for the wonderful feeling of being inside the boy. It was dirty, there was no condom. But tonight, and under these circumstances...it didn't seem to matter.

It was as if they both knew this might be the only time they would ever have to share something like this. Brian knew what he was doing. He was being a friend. And that friendship meant giving Gabe the one thing he could, and that was love.

But then in only a short while it was over and Brian knew he had to leave. He couldn't hope to change the world around the boy, but he would try to make a stand if he could. He looked across the roof as he climbed down the ladder and saw Gabe staring up into the heavens.

He saw Gabriel the following Sunday at mass but they had no opportunity to talk. There was a physical sadness in the boy now, his body slumped in the pew and he didn't kneel once during the mass. Brian wondered how soon the other kids would react to him at school the following week. But Gabe had an answer for that problem, as he often thought he had an answer for most things.

The day before school was due to start...Gabe opened the door to their attic and tied a rope around one of the wooden beams. His body was hanging in the upstairs hallway when his mother came home later that night.

A CHILD LOST

Brian had just stepped off the school bus when he heard the neighbor's conversation:

"Hung hisself," she said.

"Poor boy, they ought to hang that man up at the jail. Made him do it I bet," he said.

"Such tragedy in that family. We best go pray for his soul," she said.

"Suicide's a mortal sin. Poor boy is gone straight to hell, I tell ya. We best go pray for his family," he said.

Brian couldn't believe his ears, they were talking about Gabe and he had...he had... No, oh No. He ran down the block towards the front of the church and stood there on the sidewalk, listening to the neighborhood talk.

Brian had just seen him at church a few days before. No, this couldn't have happened. Gabe had been so beautiful in life. He just... Brian couldn't imagine the boy in death.

He ran up the steps of the church and found the doors already open. Dozens of people were kneeling in the pews saying the Rosary prayers. The sound of their voices murmured in the vast enclosed space. "Our Father, who art in Heaven..." Brian knelt and joined in the prayer, feeling the tears streaming down his face, but numb to his very soul.

"Oh, Gabe....how could you..." he sobbed.

For days, until the funeral, Brian mentally bashed himself. How could he have missed the warning signs? Had he but known Gabe was going to...he could have stopped it. It was all so senseless, and yet the guilt persisted. He had held the boy in his arms and then walked away. Why did this happen, Lord?

Brian cried in Pat's arms as the man held him, whispering words of consolation that accomplished nothing. At least he had the solace of someone who cared, what did Gabe have?

He was torn between believing that Gabe was in hell and his feeling that God was merciful. The same argument raged amongst the church members. And the final consensus was that Gabe had been the victim of a dastardly man, his transgressions should be forgiven. Brian's father said the bastard had better confess and take his punishment because there was no way he was going to get a fair trial in this county.

The church was packed for the funeral on Saturday at two o'clock. Several men carried in the coffin and placed it on a table at the front of the church. The polished wooden box looked so small sitting before the altar railing; Gabe had never had the chance to grow up. The funeral mass said by the monsignor ignored the fact that the boy had killed himself. The simple sermon was about forgiveness and the love Jesus had for all children.

"A child is lost," Father Connor began with great sadness. "And only the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, can possibly understand the pain this has caused those of us gathered here today." The old priest then stopped for a moment to wipe a tear from his face.

Brian was trying very hard not to cry in front of all these people. And he was getting through it all quite well until his father put a hand on his shoulder. Gabe never knew his father and Brian realized how fortunate he was at that moment. Finally, as the mass ended and the pallbearers carried the coffin down the aisle, he broke down.

The tears came and he shook uncontrollably as the coffin passed by, followed by the grieving mother. The sight of her suddenly made him angry and he felt like screaming, but then he saw her face. The pain and loss were etched across her features and Brian knew, no matter what Gabe had said, she had loved her son.

He turned and cried in his mother's arms, knowing that he was making a spectacle of himself. But he was not alone. There were tears all over the church that day. Gabe's voice had resounded within these walls and touched each member of the congregation. He had brought joy to the lives of each of them with his voice, and now they felt pain. For nothing hurt the many parents in this parish like the loss of a child.

And then as he walked home with his parents, Brian got a horrible shock. For sitting in the no parking zone beside the church was a blue car. Leaning against the hood was a man dressed in a dark gray suit, as if he too had just come from the funeral. Brian didn't recognize the man but he knew who it was. The license plate on the rear bumper read BCP-802.

Detective Pullman had come to say good-bye to Gabe and Brian would never forget the sad smile on the man's face. He averted his eyes and grasped at his mother's hand, but Brian could still feel the man staring at him. He shuddered in fear, resisting the urge to run ahead.

In his room, only minutes later, Brian found himself gasping for breath. The fear of seeing Pullman washed over him. Why did the man look at him like that? What did he know about Brian's relationship with Gabriel?

The guy was probably in his mid-thirties, at least ten years older than Patrick. His hair was cut short, shorter than most men favored these days. He had a thin face with a small moustache, a face that Brian couldn't forget. Oh God, why me...why now?

Brian almost didn't go to church the following day. Sunday mass at ten o'clock was when the choir sang and he was supposed to be there. But singing would only bring more pain. How could he feel the joy anymore? Between the funeral and the shock of seeing Pullman he didn't want to get out of bed.

But his mother insisted and Pullman was no where in sight on their walk down to the church. Instead of singing, Brian stood in his robe amidst the choir and didn't utter a sound. Father Dominic looked at him with an understanding sadness in his eyes and said nothing.

But when the mass was over, Dominic approached him and placed a hand on Brian's shoulder. They exchanged a look and at that moment Brian knew...Dominic had loved the boy as well. And as the priest smiled at him, Brian saw the tears in the young man's eyes.

"It takes courage to live through the sorrow," Dominic said. "I'm here if you need to talk about it."

Brian mumbled a thank you, and then plodded down the stairs from the choir loft with the other boys. It occurred to him that maybe Dominic was the one who needed to talk about his feelings. Brian knew Gabe had reached into the priest's heart and created something between them. It couldn't have been sexual; Dominic wasn't like that, he was sure.

But something else had occurred, something that made the young man more human and compassionate. He could see all that in the priest's eyes, he needed to talk to someone, and he thought Brian would understand. Well maybe he would, maybe they would talk, but right then Brian wasn't ready to be the priest's confessor.

Pat had taken the drawings of Gabe down off his wall in hopes that Brian would not cry every time he saw them. It took a while, but Brian finally realized why he was crying. It wasn't just for the loss of his best friend. No, in many ways it was because Gabe was the other part of himself, the side that had only begun to blossom. Now he had no one with whom he could share those feelings.

Pat cast himself in the role of a consoling older brother and Brian unloaded all his concerns on the poor guy. The topic of Pullman seemed to disturb Pat the most, especially when he heard the man had been standing outside the church.

"I don't know him," Pat said, "but I do know a few friendly cops."

"Gay cops?" Brian asked. He'd never heard the like.

"Sure, there are gay cops, but not too many would admit it. Your little friend got all tangled up with the guy didn't he? You keep an eye out for him and don't forget to tell me if you see him following you. It may have nothing to do with you, but we can't take that chance, can we?"

It gave Brian some comfort to know Pat would look out for him. But now his eyes searched the streets every time he walked to the store for his mother. There was no way he was going to allow Pullman to sneak up on him. And if the guy did show his face Brian was gonna scream rape loud as he could.

The crime was still the topic of discussion around the neighborhood. At least it would be until something took its place. And the talk was spurred on by the appearance of several strange men who seemed to do nothing more than sit in their cars and watch the world go by. It didn't take more than a few days of that for the buzz about undercover cops to spread around.

Pat almost freaked when two of the street boys were busted for solicitation and a handful of men were arrested. One of the boys was Alan. The kid had always seemed like an obvious target because of his free running lifestyle. It made Pat take down the drawings and lock them away in a storage trunk over at his mother's house.

"He might give me up for a plea deal," Pat said when questioned about his reasons for taking them down.

"No way," Brian said. "None of the Bay boys talks to the cops."

"Your friend talked to one, didn't he? Alan is a prostitute, Brian. You understand what that means? He sells himself and he'll sell me if he can. His lawyer might tell him to make a deal. I sure don't want to meet this Pullman guy under those circumstances."

Ah, lawyers. Brian could understand Pat's concern. Folks in the Bay believed in lawyers. Pay your money and the guy could get you off from most any charge. It was a belief that most everyone shared. Lawyers bought justice and people mortgaged their houses to pay for high priced legal advice.

The cops were different, they were all assholes. But these strangers quickly disappeared off the street soon after the arrests and they didn't discover any new ones taking their place. Slowly, as the summer waned and fall began, the hustle resumed. And as always, there were new faces in the mob of boys that ran through the neighborhood.

The biggest change Brian made in his life after the loss of Gabe was to tell his parents that he didn't want to go to Saint B's anymore. Death would have stalked him in those halls. Not that he was under any threats, but in his mind, Gabe would still be there. Call it irrational, his father did, but Brian just couldn't be there and learn anything.

There was an hour of quiet conversation with his mother. The relationship with Gabe finally stepped to the front and uncomfortable questions were asked. Brian didn't admit much but her main concern was if "that pervert" had made any advances towards him. Brian told her that he thought Gabe had been the only victim because that was what she wanted to hear. She agreed that he could return to the public school, but she wanted him to remain in the choir.

Brian almost looked forward to starting at Francis Scott Key High School. It would be his first year there and he hoped it would bring him some anonymity amid the new crowd. He didn't want attention focused in his direction, but it was going to be an uphill battle.

Five minutes into that very first day, Brian ran into Sean Williams and the little bastard started right in.

"Hey, it's fag boy," Brian heard him say in the hall. Other kids turn to look at him and Brian rose to the occasion.

"I heard you like a little ass yourself sometimes, Sean" he replied with a grin.

Sean swung at his nose and Brian ducked. The punch hit the wall of lockers and everyone heard the boy curse.

"Enough of that. You two come to the office with me right now."

The voice of authority was strange, but the size of the adult behind it was astounding. Towering over them both was Mr. Hanson, a man of huge proportions and all of them solid muscle. Brian was to learn that the new vice-principal was a no nonsense man and quickly becoming the most feared administrator in the school. Damn, this was a bad way to start the year.

He sat on one end of the long punishment bench in the office while Sean occupied the other. Brian glanced at Sean wondering why this kid was so hateful. It was hard to ignore him since he was so attractive. He and Gabe were the only two blondes in Brian's life. It was like a curse since he seemed to have this affinity for their long beautiful hair.

It didn't take more than fifteen minutes before several other boys joined them. Hanson was on a roll this morning and it was only the first day of school. One by one they were called in the office and made to stand before the man's desk.

"I'll be brief," Hanson said. "This is your first day and I don't even know your name." Hanson stared at him and Brian felt ashamed. "But if you are wise I won't have a need to repeat this warning." He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a thick wooden paddle. Engraved on one of the flat sides were letters that spelled out 'Board of Education.'

Hanson smiled. "I have permission to use this if I need to. What is your name?"

"Brian Mahoney...sir," came the reply.

"Good, Mr. Mahoney. I don't know why that boy tried to hit you, but that kind of fighting is not part of our process here. But I will say that you ducked that swing pretty good. You want to fight about something come to the gym after the final bell and I'll supply the boxing gloves. There will be no fighting in my hallways or the Board will be talking to your ass." With that statement he brought the paddle down on the corner of his desk with a terrible bang which made Brian jump. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir," Brian said.

"First offense forgiven, that's my policy," he said, reaching for a pad of paper.

As he wrote out an excuse slip for Brian's next class, the boy managed a look around the room. The framed pictures on the wall caught his attention, much the way Pat's drawings had. Hanson in a Navy uniform. Hanson wearing boxing gloves. Hanson in boxing trunks, his hands in the air over his head. Brian could almost hear the referee announcing him the winner.

"Brian, you like to box?" Hanson's voice snapped him back to the present.

"Never tried it...sir," Brian replied. He nodded at the wall, "But obviously you have."

"I won some fights when I was Navy," Hanson said with a smile. "You want to learn how to box?"

"Me...you think I could?"

"You do any sports now? Any activities?"

"I'm in the church choir, that's about it."

"That's good, moral guidance is important. But so is physical exercise, they balance one another. Come see me after school tomorrow. Three o'clock in the gym. Now take this note to your next teacher and don't let me see you sitting on that bench again."

"Yes, sir."

Claude Hanson was the first black man Brian had ever spoken a whole sentence to. On his way out he passed Sean, who asked, "What was that loud noise in there?"

Brian paused at the door and rubbed his ass, "You'll find out soon enough," he replied. And he laughed all the way down the hall at the look of shock on Sean's face.

That night at the dinner table his mother showed concern when Brian asked if it would be ok for him to take boxing lessons from Mr. Hanson. His father paused in mid-bite and looked up strangely.

Not surprising. Here was a son that had never seemed interested in sports and whose only activity had been singing in the church choir. If he thought Brian's life was less than manly to this point he would have been right.

But Hanson had put a thought in Brian's head this morning. His body was growing. If anything, a little exercise and the skill to defend himself might come in handy. Besides, it would make him look a whole lot better when he finally found a man to love.

Pat still saw him as a little kid and Brian was determined to transform that image. Hell, he would be sixteen in a few weeks and still looked like nothing more than a skinny runt.

"You want to box?" his father asked. "Where did that come from?"

"A kid in school tried to hit me today. The vice-principal saw it and offered to teach me self-defense. He's got awards and everything. And he's a Negro."

Now that last bit had nothing to do with anything except that the priests had been preaching diversity in the parish for the past several years. Brian's parents had discussed this on several occasions when they didn't know he was listening. But with black families moving into the Bay area a few blocks over, Brian felt it was time to put his two cents in and see if it would help get what he wanted.

"A black man, that's good," his father said. "Some of the best boxers in the past few decades have been black. Mohammed Ali is the current champion."

"Lots of kids at school are scared of him but he's a really nice man," Brian said.

"Did you get in trouble?" his mother asked.

"No, Mom. Mr. Hanson just asked me my name and then invited me to take the boxing lessons. He said moral and physical exercise balance one another or something like that."

"He sounds like a wise man. I think we should let you try the lessons, but don't you come home crying if you get hit in the nose," his father said.

"I already know how to duck," Brian replied.

So he became one of Hanson's boxers. And while he was prepared to get in a ring the following afternoon and get his face punched, nothing like that happened. Instead the six boys who showed up after school were treated to a run around the gym.

As luck would have it, Sean was there too. Brian counted forty laps before he collapsed against the wall gasping for air. Sean didn't even make thirty.

"You boys are out of shape," Hanson declared as he paced back and forth before them. "Standing on the corner Friday nights, smoking your momma's cigarettes and stealing your daddy's beer. What a bunch of wimps." Hanson was right but Brian had run further than the others. "Go get a mouthful of water, but you better spit it out. Don't swallow or it will make you sick," he cautioned.

Brian followed orders but watched as several of the boys, including Sean, gulped down a lot of water.

"Ok, calisthenics," Hanson yelled, "form a line. Ready? Jumping Jacks."

Hanson did the exercises with them and Brian watched his muscular body move with grace and ease. The man was enjoying this and so was he. Within thirty minutes they had progressed through a dozen different exercises and several boys had run to the bathroom to throw up.

Brian was covered in sweat and so was Hanson. With a completely dry mouth, Brian wanted a drink badly but he knew Hanson wasn't finished with them yet. They walked around the gym this time, winding down. And as they walked Hanson talked to them.

"There is promise here, I can feel it. A boxer needs stamina, not just a good right hook. A boxing match is an endurance race, guys. A forced march through muddy swamps is about the only other experience that I can compare it to, and only if you have to fight a battle once you get through to the other side.

"But there is pain in fighting and a man has to know how much he can endure if he is ever going to win. And that is what you need to see in your future...winning. No one should ever approach a monumental task without an objective in mind. I will teach you how to achieve that goal.

"Boxing is not a real team sport but an individual moment of triumph. Each of you has different strengths and weaknesses. I am here to develop that strength and defeat the weakness. You come here three days a week and by spring I will let you fight in a real boxing ring against real opponents.

"But until then you will run and stretch, jump and crawl, until your guts scream and your brain tells you that you cannot go any further. Then I will teach you to punch a heavy bag like you mean it. Now gather over here on the bleachers."

They all sat gratefully, bodies trembling from exhaustion.

"You did well today," Hanson said," but then I knew you would. This is not the time to tell yourselves that you cannot do this and that you are dying from the effort. I chose each of you for a different reason, but I didn't choose you because you are quitters. Now here, I have a jump rope for each of you to take home." There were groans from all the boys.

"Ok, I know you think only girls jump rope, but that is plain wrong. Try it and you'll see it takes skill and footwork. A boxer is only good if he's standing on his feet. You will trip and fall down a lot, I promise you. And run, I want you to run everywhere, except in the hallways of this school.

"Your momma sends you to the store, run. Run to church, run to the playground. I want to see wings on your feet by Christmas and I will let you box in the spring. But only if each of you reaches the physical goals I will set, and not an inch less.

"Now a few words about the exercise you have done today. You are going to be sore as your muscles tear down and rebuild. That is what exercise does to your body, it hurts. You will eat more, but not junk. You will sleep more, because I expect to see you tired.

"But you will soon feel like you are on top of the world as your body rewards all this hard work. I expect to see you all here on Saturdays too, at nine in the morning. This weekend will be only the first day of your new life. And since boxing takes lots of practice, you will also come here after school three days a week until I think you are ready. Now go take a shower and no messing around." More groans.

Hanson laughed at their reaction. "I know you boys are embarrassed about being naked but you will shower after every practice. I am not sending you home to your mommas smelling like a bunch of pigs. And I don't care if your marbles are smaller than his; because by the time I am done each of you will have a big set of balls, ok?" They all laughed at that and walked off to the locker room.

It was the first time Brian had bathed in a gang shower and he was unsure how he would react to seeing all those naked bodies together. But he was so tired that nothing could have aroused him, even the great view he got of Sean's ass. He could tell Sean was

still concerned about the past because he stood under the spray with his crotch facing towards the wall. It was the silliest thing Brian had ever seen him do.

He dried off and walked home because the bus had already left. There was no strength left inside him for running. Dinner was a distant memory and he was in bed by eight o'clock. But he remembered seeing his father's face at the bedroom door before he conked out. There was a satisfied smile on his face as he placed Brian's new jump rope up on top of the dresser.

Brian ran to the school bus the following morning but ended up limping when his protesting muscles were reminded of the day before. Sore was hardly a word for the way his body felt. He had a hard time lifting his arms and using a pencil was awkward.

To his surprise Sean came and sat beside him during lunch period. Both of them had a full plate and they shoveled it down in record time.

"I need to run after school today," Sean said. "You make it look easy...want to join me?"

"Your body is a bit heavier than mine, that's all," Brian said. "Yeah, I suppose, but not too far, ok?"

"Yeah. I tried that jump rope last night. Nearly busted my ass. It ain't that easy."

"I'm as uncoordinated as a one legged frog," Brian admitted.

Somehow Sean had changed his attitude. Was it that they were involved in a manly sport together and he thought Brian was changed? Or was he trying to revive the friendship? And if Brian had any doubts what Sean said next nailed it.

"I was thinking about asking Jenny Beatty out to the movies," Sean said. "Think she'd go with me?"

"I think she would be glad to go anywhere with you," Brian said.

Sean was a handsome boy. Brian would never have kissed him if he thought otherwise. As for Jenny, she was shy and would flip if Sean asked her out. But then the boy said the most curious thing. "You want to go see a movie with me sometime? I'll pay."

Brian looked over and saw the blush on Sean's cheeks. Did the boy still harbor feelings for him? There was only one way to find out.

"That would be nice. My birthday is coming up. It would make a nice present."

Sean grinned, "Happy Birthday it is."

"That is if we can still walk by that point. Can you imagine, we have to do this four days a week?" Brian groaned, trying to get to his feet. "My legs are killing me."

"I took a hot bath and my Mom rubbed liniment on my legs last night," Sean said as they put their trays on the dish counter.

"Fat chance for that at my house...did it help?"

"A bit, but the liniment stunk up my room something fierce."

The warning bell rang and they both started moving towards the door. Having your life controlled by bells was just another pain in the ass.

Sean stopped at the door before they split. "Brian, I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean to swing at you the other day. I'm sorry about the...the word I called you."

Brian had to say something right then or face the consequences of a lie later on. "I'm gay, Sean, you were right about that. I just won't be anyone's fag, not anytime."

Sean just stood there with his mouth partially open and no quick reply to Brian's statement. The admission may have been a shock, although by now Brian was certain that

Sean wanted to resume the friendship. And if that were true then it would be on his terms this time.

Brian tried to skip rope when he got home that night. They had run only five laps around the school before quitting, but he did manage to run home. And now this silly rope in his hands wasn't cooperating. He caught his ankles a dozen times but finally managed to get in about ten hops before pulling up too hard and catching his shoe. Down he went, his head banging on the edge of the coffee table.

"Brian...you better not be out there destroying the furniture," his mother yelled from the kitchen. "Why don't you take it outside?"

Outside? No way he was gonna skip rope in public, that would never happen.

"Brian? Would you go up to the store and get me a quart of milk, this seems to have gone sour." She walked in from the kitchen with a carton of milk in her hand. "Oh dear.... you're bleeding, did you hit your head?"

"The coffee table attacked me," Brian said. He put a hand to his forehead and felt the wetness come away on his fingers. He didn't like the sight of blood, especially his own.

"Come on into the bathroom," she said. He got a band-aid and a kiss, somehow that was always enough.

Staying true to the regimen, Brian ran to the store. On the way he passed Mark, one of the boxing boys. "Run, fool, run," he yelled. Mark looked startled but then he took off running. Brian got to the store quite breathless and the first thing he saw in back by the cooler was Sean with a broom in his hand.

"You working here now?" Brian asked. He knew Sean's uncle owned the store.

"Sorta, he pays me a little." Sean smiled, "Movie money, ya know."

"Look, sorry I dropped the bomb on you after lunch," Brian said. "I should probably have done it somewhere else so we could talk about it."

"No, it was ok," Sean actually began to blush. "I know about you...remember?"

Brian smiled...the boy was just so damn cute. "I'll bet Jenny will appreciate what we learned together."

Sean looked into his eyes and smiled, "You think?"

"Well unless you need more practice. I guess you'll find out soon enough, did you ask her yet?"

"I will tomorrow, before English class. I already wrote the note."

"Oh Sean, you have to ask her face to face. Give her a chance to see those baby blue eyes and your killer smile. How could she say no?"

"Would you say no if I asked you...asked you to kiss me again?"

Brian didn't see it coming and Sean looked like he was about to bolt. But the question had been asked, he had to answer. Was Jenny a ploy?

"Sean, go out with Jenny first and see if that's what you want. I'm not going to run away from this, we'll work it out."

Sean put his hand on Brian's arm and for a moment it seemed as if they might kiss, but then he seemed to realize where they were.

"You're a real friend, Brian. I'm sorry it took so long for me to understand that."

Brian lay awake for a long time that night thinking about what was happening around him. Gabe had been his closest friend ever and that was lost. Pat was a really

good friend but he wouldn't see Brian as anything but a child. Sean, on the other hand, was probably willing but scared of his innermost feelings. Damn, life was confusing.

Brian was determined to become a great boxer. Not because he wanted a career in the ring but to increase his self assurance. Strong in body and strong in mind, the qualities Pat said a gay man needed to survive in this world. Brian had never succeeded at anything like this before, but it was time...wasn't it?

Becoming one of Hanson's Boxers was going to change his life, he knew that. And if Sean stuck it out with him then his body would grow stronger too. Together they would be a dynamite team out on the streets, and maybe the sugar on top would be having sex. Brian smiled and thought to himself, the sugar on top would be Sean since he was sure the boy would not like being a bottom.

Thinking of Sean's body was arousing him. And for a change he didn't think of Pat as he stroked himself, instead he remembered what he had seen of Sean's slender figure in the shower room. The new and improved Sean, it was enough to make Brian moan aloud as he reached orgasm.