

## Chapter Five

### THE BODY BEAUTIFUL

If possible, Brian would have kissed Mr. Hanson in front of the whole boxing team. The man had not lied when he promised to make them stronger.

By Thanksgiving, Brian had begun to notice dramatic changes in his body. Covering his slender frame there was now a solid pack of hard muscle and he felt positively alive when he moved. And better yet, the new growth of hair on his body was fascinating and a bit of a turn on.

His sixteenth birthday had come and gone in a haze of exhaustion. Running everywhere gave him such great lung power that his mother was constantly asking him to tone it down when he spoke. Brian even mastered the art of jumping rope and was working on a routine of tricks to show the Boxing Club...well, maybe.

Mr. Hanson didn't like their self proclaimed nickname, Hanson's Boxers. Oh, he got the joke all right, but he didn't think it lent enough dignity to their cause. Brian was proud to be a member of the club, no matter what they were called. And now there were nine boys.

The Boxing Club still seemed like harsh punishment to so many of the boys but along with Sean, Brian seemed to revel in the pain. Sean had finally asked Jenny out after a few false starts and they went to the movies. Unfortunately it was a bad choice. The film was Friday the Thirteenth and she had nightmares for weeks afterwards.

Sean took Brian to see it the following weekend and they both screamed like little girls in all the right places. It was the best birthday present ever because they kissed on the way home from the mall.

Brian felt he was back in love with Sean, but this time it was a cautious feeling. Although he never admitted it, Brian knew the boy had feelings for him too. There was no need to push him into declaring anything. It was too soon for that. But Sean never asked Jenny out again and Brian felt like he had no need to hide his feelings anymore.

Since he was part of the Boxing Club, Brian's parents allowed Sean to sleepover on weekends where they had the chance to know each other better. And with Sean's birthday coming up in mid-December, Brian thought it was nice to feel older, even if that meant by only a few months.

Physically they were both changing under the hard discipline. No disrespect was intended, but Hanson was a killer coach. The gym was open to them every day after school, but they were required to attend only three days a week and the Saturday practice. It was still a harsh regimen. The only benefit was that they were excused from regular physical education classes during the day.

But even as Brian's body pulled ahead, Sean was slowly catching up. With a dressmaker's tape, the boys measured and examined their muscles, including the all important stiff one. It had been Sean's idea and proved the boy was a committed horn dog.

Brian had explained his relationship with Pat and immediately thought of getting the artist to draw them both, but Sean hesitated.

"What if someone sees it?"

"I hope they will someday," Pat said. "I'd love to publish a book of my drawings."

He'd recovered the trunk from his mother's place but was still leery of putting things back up on the wall. He pulled out his original sketches of Brian and Sean sat wide eyed while they looked at the drawings.

"Things are a little different now, Pat," Brian said.

"I can see that," he said, "you fill that shirt out much nicer."

And then Pat had them sit nude, side by side, hugging one another. As his hand moved across the page Brian knew that it would become one of his favorite drawings. Pat paused often and smiled as he drew. It seemed as if the moment brought them all closer.

"Best I can do tonight," Pat finally said.

Brian looked at the work and kissed Pat's cheek.

"You're the best artist I know," he said.

"I'm the only artist you know, kiddo, but I accept the compliment. Look how your body has filled out, what have you boys been doing?"

Sean told him all about the boxing and Mr. Hanson. Brian then had an idea.

"Pat, could you draw us boxing?"

"You mean like in a boxing ring during a fight?" he responded.

"Yeah. Hanson won't let us actually spar yet but that phase is due to start real soon. All we do now is punch a bag hanging from the ceiling."

"Do you think your coach would let me watch?"

"To publicize the team, yeah, I think he would. If you want to try I'll ask him," Brian said.

"Ok, why not."

But Hanson was reluctant when asked. All vice-principals are naturally suspicious people.

"Brian, who is this artist friend of yours?"

"Pat is a guy that works over at the chemical plant but he does these amazing pencil drawings. He's a veteran like you, Mr. Hanson. Army I believe. Wait until you see his work."

"Yeah, I'd like to see his work," Hanson said.

Pat spent an entire weekend putting together a portfolio of stuff to show Hanson. And despite his protests, Brian made him include a nude just because he thought they were some of the finest drawings.

Pat had also finished a drawing with Sean and Brian in a boxing pose. He'd caught the grim determination on Sean's face and the predatory look on Brian's. And for the first time, Pat had used colored pencils.

"Why did you do that?" Brian asked.

"Experimenting, that's all. Black on white only takes me so far, and in this one I wanted to put in some background to contrast your bodies. Pencil can get pretty messy if I use too much of it, but see the faces beyond the ropes? I fade the details from natural colors to gray and then to nothing. It gives an edge to the boxing ring and makes you guys stand out better. You like the color of the trunks?"

"Yeah, the blue is nice."

"I hope your coach likes it."

With the choices finalized, Brian took the folder to school and laid it on Hanson's desk. One by one he turned the pages, studying each drawing carefully. He paused when he got to the nude of Brian that Pat had drawn last year.

He looked up. "You have changed quite a bit since then, Brian. What possessed you to pose like this for him?"

"Pat said only God had the wisdom to form the human body and that a child is probably his greatest work in all the universe. He said he drew it to mourn the loss of innocence."

"I want to meet this man," Hanson said. He turned the page and came to the boxing pose. He smiled. "Now this one is worth a million dollars. Are you trying to get me to put you in the ring?"

"Yes sir, I suppose," Brian said.

"Well, maybe you boys are ready to fight. I was thinking we should give it a try."

But the school didn't have a space big enough for a real boxing ring. They only had a converted storeroom off the gym for a training room. And it was there that Brian spent considerable time punching a heavy bag. It was all they had for the moment, but Hanson had a plan.

The first sparring sessions took place in a garage across the street from the school. The space had been loaned to them by the real estate company that owned the building, and the For Sale sign was still out front. But after a few days cleanup they had a space big enough to lay out a ring and Hanson had prompted a lumber yard to give them the materials to build a flexible floor and the corner posts to hold up ropes.

All the boys worked on the project under the direction of an elderly man that Hanson introduced simply as Mr. Wayne. None of the boys had any idea who he was except that Hanson said he was the best. But when the canvas floor was finally stretched out it was Mr. Wayne that produced the gloves and protective headgear.

Brian was anxious on the Saturday morning scheduled for their first boxing session. Sean had hoped they would be chosen to pair up. Not that they wanted to hurt one another, boxing was about skill first. It was about wearing your opponent down, Hanson often reminded them. Inflicting pain was a secondary effect.

The two of them had been shadow boxing at home for months, although Hanson had cautioned them about hitting one another. "You poke an eye out, or break a nose and you'll be out of practice for weeks," he'd said. "You do that and some other boxer will get ahead of you in training."

And here they were, after months of exercise, training and more exercise. The drills on footwork, the jump rope practice, the chalkboard talks about combination punching and the ceaseless bag work...either they knew it or they didn't. Brian crossed himself, please, please, put me in the ring, he thought.

But Mark and Dale went first and the match up was a good one. All of them envisioned a human body as they punched the bag, but here Brian got to see two bodies in conflict for the first time. The protective headgear covered the cheeks and chin but did nothing for the eyes and nose.

Mark was the first one to draw blood and that was only a few minutes into the match. A glove might be covered in smooth leather but a nose isn't made to take a hit without damage. Dale had dropped his left arm a little too low while they traded punches and Mark made a right jab to the head. Dale jerked his head back but the follow through caught him right on the nose.

Dale shook his head and the blood poured down his lip. Hanson blew the whistle and the match was stopped. Mark hopped around joyously until Hanson grabbed him. Mr. Wayne stuck a swab in Dale's nose to stop the bleeding.

"Ok, Mark, calm down," Hanson said. "Drawing first blood is only good for your ego. It will make your opponent more aggressive, you didn't win anything. Remember guys, boxing is about going the distance and scoring points. None of you will knock your opponent out in the practice ring. A KO is out of the question at this stage."

Hanson looked over. "You ready, Brian?"

Wayne tugged the headgear in place and Brian found himself in the ring with Mark. Why Hanson had paired them he couldn't know. Maybe he knew Sean and Brian had practiced a lot together, maybe he wanted to put Brian up against an unknown, but just maybe he thought both boys could learn something here.

Brian's footwork was better than Mark's and they circled one another warily. Brian's feet never stopped moving and Mark got impatient. Brian ducked as the boy took a wild swing at his head. Mark got a one-two punch in the gut for his mistake before Brian backed off.

That pissed Mark off. Dale had never hit him in the stomach. He tried to corner Brian who kept on dancing around. The other boys on the floor could be heard making comments to one another and Brian grinned, though the mouthpiece made it difficult.

Mark tried a series of straight jabs which bounced off Brian's shoulders and then he tried for a face shot. Brian bobbed around the gloves and saw an opening. A left jab to the side of Mark's head shifted his posture. Brian took a punch on the chin just to set up a right jab to Mark's face. The blow landed solidly and Mark stumbled back against the ropes.

His feet had failed him and Brian wouldn't let him regain his balance. A left-right combo followed but Mark managed to block only the left glove and Brian's right caught him on the chin. Again he fell back on the ropes and this time Brian moved in.

Mark's gloves were out of place to block the left hand shot to his stomach and he foolishly lowered them further. Brian stepped back and took a shot at his face. The glove struck Mark's nose with great force and his head whipped back.

Hanson blew the whistle and Brian started to turn back towards his corner when Mark threw a punch at the side of his head. Brian staggered and saw stars before Hanson was in the ring restraining Mark. Mr. Wayne took Brian by the shoulders and led him back to the corner.

Mark was pushed down on his stool and Hanson stood over him, ripping the headgear off of the boy. "You heard the whistle, Mark, and yet you took a cheap shot at your opponent. I will not tolerate cheating or any behavior like that on my team." Hanson looked around at all the boys. "If you can't handle losing then you had better clear out of here right now. The next guy that throws a punch after the whistle blows is outta here for good. Do you all understand that?"

A chorus of "yes sir" went around the room. That blow to the nose had produced only a few drops of blood and Mr. Wayne said the nose wasn't broken, just moved a bit. Mark was taken out of the ring and Sean stepped up to take his place.

Hanson looked Brian in the eyes, his hands on either side of the headgear. "You ok to go on? Sean is waiting."

"Oh...him? I can beat his ass all day long," Brian grinned.

Hanson smiled, "That's my boy, go for it."

Sean and Brian put on quite a display of technical boxing. It was all about footwork and blocking one another's shots for the three rounds that Hanson allowed them to spar. Neither of them made a significant blow on the other, although they both tried their best.

Sean had always been good and sometimes Brian even thought he was the better boxer. But neither of them played strictly defensive and Sean managed a few good shots to the mid-section that made Brian's stomach ache. Both of them were relieved when Wayne blew the whistle to end the match.

"Now that's what I'm taking about, that was boxing," Hanson said and all the boys clapped in approval.

When the match was on Brian found himself planning blows only to have Sean a step ahead in countering. He learned that a win might happen only if the opponent made an error in judgment. It often took a long time to wear the other guy down. Looking back, it seemed the rounds had gone by real fast and it was because Brian's mind had been so focused it was hard to judge time at all.

In fact he hadn't been aware of anything outside the ring during the match and so he had not seen the small crowd that had gathered to watch them box. Pat had come in at some point and he'd brought a friend. Both of them approached as the boys stepped down from the ring.

Pat smiled, "You did real good up there, a regular Mohammed Ali in the making."

"Naw," Brian blushed, "it wasn't all that."

"This is Sam Vincent with the Sun Times," Pat said, introducing the man standing there beside him. "He's a good friend of mine."

Brian caught the smile Pat gave as he introduced Sam. This guy was someone special to him. Brian shook Sam's hand and introduced Sean. The four of them settled back to watch the other boys spar until everyone had taken a turn in the ring.

Brian calmly introduced Pat to Mr. Hanson. The two shook hands and seemed to recognize some quality in the other that they liked.

"You've done wonders with these kids," Pat said. "Brian isn't the shy little boy anymore."

"He's come a long way," Hanson said. "I saw your art work, where did you learn to draw like that?"

"Guess I was born with a pencil in my hand. But seriously, I was stationed in Korea for two years. Not much to do so I drew the country and the people. I had too much time on my hands, couldn't do much else except pull guard duty."

"I hear you, well it sure paid off. I like the drawing you did of the boys, you ever think of going pro?"

Pat laughed. "Sure all the time, what artist doesn't?"

"Maybe we can get you to do a program cover for us. You come see us whenever you get the chance," Hanson said. They shook hands again and the coach went to look after his equipment.

The boys and Sam had been standing to one side as the two men spoke, but Pat gave them a smile.

"Guess that went pretty well," Pat said. "He seems like a nice guy."

Brian and Sean groaned in unison. "You have no idea what a hard ass he can be," Brian said. They were about to leave when Mark approached Brian at the door.

"I'm sorry, Brian...I shouldn't have hit you after the whistle. I lost my cool today."

"Thanks, I'm good with that. You have a good hard right. I'll have to keep my eye out for that in the future."

"That was sweet," Sean said after Mark left.

"I forgive him now, but next time I knock him out of the ring."

Sam drove the boys home. It seems he and Pat had met at a bar up in the city. And despite Brian's hope that the man would write a story about their boxing it seems he didn't do any sports work for the paper. But he promised to get a sports guy out to see them real soon.

"Have to do that before you guys all become famous and won't talk to the press, it happens all the time," Sam said.

"He's pretty cool," Brian whispered to Pat when they got out in front of Sean's house. He got a hug in response. "Thank you," Pat whispered in return. "But you'll always be my number one boy."

It was kind of wonderful that Pat was in a relationship. Brian hoped they would be happy together. He put an arm on Sean's shoulder and gave the boy a squeeze.

"We did alright today," he said. "Even though I had you outclassed all the way."

"Like hell you did," Sean replied. "You're just lucky to be standing."

"I could have won, but I was distracted by those tight shorts you're wearing."

"Oh, now you're asking for it."

"And I'm still distracted..."