

Chapter Ten

WHY ME?

Brian found himself becoming more of a social creature on the weekends. School seemed to take up all of his time during the week, and since he had discovered that they were expected to do homework it was worse. School work is work done at school, why work at home after school? But the classes he took made demands and he had to try harder knowing full well that eleventh grade would be worse.

He decided to hang out with his new friend Liz. Lord what a brain. She offered to help in his math assignments and Brian would have been a fool not to respond favorably. His mother liked the idea of her son sitting at the kitchen table with a cute young lady doing homework. She plied them with cookies and attention until he explained that they weren't getting anything accomplished with all that constant hovering.

Liz had not suggested that they kiss again. She didn't even bring up the first time. Instead she moved onward, making the friendship more meaningful by paying attention to his education and social life.

It was as if she had bigger plans in mind for their future together, something Brian knew wasn't going to happen. Maybe Hungarians planned their marriages at an early age? It was enough to keep him on his toes around her. Like the dinner to which she invited him. He would finally meet her family. It was all carefully tucked away inside a discussion about Hungarian food, and his admission that he had no clue why it could be so different than the Irish he knew and loved.

"You know every culture's eating habits are basically the same," she declared one afternoon. "Ingredients and climate are what differ of course, but everyone has to adapt. Like, the Italians and Greeks eat very late suppers. It gets too hot to eat right after sundown like we do. It takes hours for their houses to cool down and then they often eat on the roof."

"It gets hot here too, we just open the windows," Brian said. What a lame comeback and he knew it.

But she persevered. "Hungarians have a more mountainous landscape, the higher altitudes are cooler. We have meat and dairy, summer wheat and winter cabbage."

"Cabbage and potatoes, I like that."

"Would you like to try Hungarian food?" she asked.

And that is how Brian found himself at the Kovacs' dinner table one Sunday afternoon. He was all cleaned up and actually wearing a tie to impress them. Her mother and grandmother fussed, the choir boy image earned him that much. Her father and brothers eyed him suspiciously, but they knew all about his boxing conquests and that earned a grudging respect.

He learned to say the word Perogies, for the little dough like dumplings filled with cheese and meat. He ate too many of those, but Mrs. Kovacs kept passing them, it was only polite. But then they were served a goulash and Brian wasn't sure that sour cream was on his list of favorite foods until he tasted it. Mrs. Kovacs beamed when he asked for seconds.

The dinner went well enough that Brian was allowed friend status and that meant he could date their daughter if he so desired. Liz seemed to understand his reluctance to

expand the friendship and she didn't press for dates, but he did offer to take her to the movies if they double dated.

Sean seemed up for it, saying that he would help maintain the public image. But when it came to his choice of dates Brian balked. Sean wanted to take Mary.

"I thought that was a past thing?" Brian said.

"Oh, I'm not sure I could ever be serious with her," Sean replied.

"And you'll invite her because...?"

"She needs a better class of friends, man, she needs us."

"Saint Sean is it? Going for that halo already?"

"Spare me the sarcasm. She'll behave, I promise."

And she did, although Brian didn't know how Sean pulled it off. Mary was a lot quieter than he remembered and even Liz whispered in his ear that she seemed almost...nice. Gone was the outrageous clothing and the heavy makeup, Mary looked like an ordinary kid. But much later, after the film and after they had seen the girls home, Sean explained things.

"She had a real scare this past winter, she was almost pregnant."

"There is no almost, Sean. What happened?"

"Tommy Bailey did it with her and the condom busted. She thinks he did it on purpose, maybe poked a hole in it first or something like that."

"Oh shit, but he's like nineteen or something," Brian said.

"Yeah, but that was the old Mary. Amazing what a little scare can accomplish."

"But what about..."

"She went three months and lost it, God's will I guess," Sean said. "The doctor said she was too young or too immature, something like that. Anyway, she won't have sex for a while, she told me that."

"Good for her, time to slow down."

"Not exactly, she offered to blow me if we went out on a date. I said no, aren't you happy?"

"I'm not in a contest, Sean. I love you, she doesn't."

"I know that, I'm still yours."

And then Mary threw another party just before school ended. Brian expected this one to have a little more class, less beer and pot smoke, or so he thought. Sean handed over an invitation with both their names on it. Now that was confusing or was she just trying to get them both to come? But Liz was invited too and so Brian brought her along.

Someone had strung Christmas lights across the back yard and the drinkers and dopers went out there. That was pretty stupid with the neighbors only on the other side of the fence, but it wouldn't be Brian they busted.

Liz had brought some cassette tapes and she dragged him down to the basement where the stereo equipment was located. She put in a tape and he listened to the unfamiliar music.

"What is this?" Brian asked.

"Tony Bennett, it belongs to my father," she replied, "it's dance music, Brian."

"I don't know how to dance, seriously, I don't."

"So you learn, and I'll show you."

Trapped, no place to run, he learned how to dance to the slow moody music. It wasn't so bad once he got the hang of it. At least the guy had a beautiful voice. Step, two-

three-four, it was all just memorized patterns, what a cinch. And Liz seemed to enjoy his hand at her waist, the other on her shoulder. They danced through a half-dozen songs.

"You did very well for the first time," she said.

Several others had danced to the music so Brian didn't seem too out of place. A guy from their school came over as they stood changing the tape and asked Liz if she would dance with him. Brian had no hold over her so she began dancing with him while he took a seat on the couch.

A new group of kids came downstairs and he didn't pay them much attention until this girl named Veronica came over and asked him to dance. Ok, a challenge for those newly learned skills.

But Veronica started off differently and Brian was at a loss. Instead of holding his waist she put her hands on his ass and pulled him right up against her body. He had to put his hands on her back which was uncomfortable. She maneuvered them into a corner and started grinding her body against his. It wasn't until Brian felt her hand slide around and start rubbing his crotch that he felt trapped. When she grabbed at his cock Brian pushed her away.

"Stop it," he hissed, not wanting to make a scene.

It might have ended there but she grabbed for his waistband and unsnapped his jeans. He wasn't wearing a belt so his pants started to slide. He couldn't allow this to happen any further, he pushed her against the wall and she slapped him across the face.

"What are you, a fag? I heard that you were."

Out of nowhere Brian just reacted. He slapped her back, maybe a bit harder than he should have. "You bitch. I don't do charity work so keep your hands off." His voice almost squeaked when he shouted.

Brian refastened his jeans and turned away from her as she leapt towards him, claws at the ready. "Faggot, faggot," she screamed.

The fist came over his shoulder and crashed into her face. The girl went down after hitting the wall and she started crawling away. Brian turned to see Liz standing there rubbing her knuckles. "Leave him alone, bitch...he's mine," she yelled. Veronica got up and ran up the stairs.

The place had gone dead silent except for Tony's voice singing sweetly in the background.

"Yours, huh...we'll have to talk about that," he said, "You know I couldn't have hit her like that."

"Hell no, " Liz grinned," we'd still be picking up the pieces."

"You have a wicked right cross, lady," he said with a smile. "Care to dance?"

"You betcha," Liz laughed.

Brian owed her one for getting him out of that awkward situation, but he was more worried than ever. He had been called a faggot in front of everyone and knew how rumors flew at school. It might end up with someone saying that faggot named Brian had hit this girl Veronica at Mary's party and some other girl had to defend him. But that was minor compared to Liz saying he was hers.

Sean walked with them as Brian took Liz home. He waited on the sidewalk as they exchanged a friendly kiss up on the front porch. When he came down Sean grinned.

"You kiss your mother better than that," he laughed.

"Well you can kiss her if you like, she wants to marry me."

"What? Where did that come from?"

"Oh, I don't know. She acts like I'm hers. It freaks me out," Brian said. "Are you spending the night?"

"Yeah, I guess, but...Mary gave me head tonight. I had to tell you," he said.

"Oh, and how was it?"

"Look, Brian, don't get pissed..."

"I'm not. I just asked the question, that's all."

"It was ok, but she isn't good like..."

"Don't say it. I am not going to let you compare me to Mary."

"Now don't start that with me, she is no longer a whore."

"Fuck it, Sean. I've been through a lot tonight. I don't need your shit too."

"Then stop acting like some bitch. I wanted to see what it was like and you were down there dancing with Liz..."

"Go home. Sean. Just go home."

He walked away and Brian immediately regretted his choice of words. He hadn't explained himself, but Sean had to know what Veronica had done. Didn't he care? He was just down the block when he turned to look back.

"Sean," Brian yelled, and took off running.

"What now?" Sean said.

"I'm sorry...I need you, don't be mad at me."

"Damn, Brian, make up your mind."

"It's just that...so much happened tonight..."

"I heard," Sean said. "Can I still come over?"

"Please..."

And as always Sean put his arm on Brian's shoulder and pulled him close as they walked down the street. Sean would end up talking half the night about Brian's problems. For who else knew him so well?

Maybe even then Brian knew that he was losing Sean to the other side. The boy had never given him any false hopes about being together forever, that fantasy was always his. But over the following month or two, as their relationship changed, Brian knew he couldn't love the boy any less. A best friend is someone that makes you feel real important in their life and Sean wasn't there as a casual observer.

NEW FRIENDS

Summer came and as expected Liz wanted to spend a lot more time with him. Brian appreciated her company but it also felt like he was being pushed in a direction that made him uncomfortable. Fortunately, Father Dominic set up a schedule for the choir that doubled their practice time. They were finally learning some new music that would allow them to tour and give concerts in other parts of the city, and it was all in English.

Not to be outdone, Hanson took in another group of new boys and admonished the more experienced guys to help them out. Between singing and boxing, Brian had some good excuses to use on Liz. He should have known it wouldn't work.

She came to choir practice and made herself useful to by turning the pages of the sheet music used at the piano. The whole time her eyes were on him and the other boys started ribbing him about it. At least there would be no suggestions made about him being a fag in the choir.

The following Saturday morning she showed up at the garage with a huge box of muffins that Mr. Wayne innocently offered to sell at his coffee counter. Brian could see them standing over there by the coffee machine and knew they were talking about him. Sean gave him a nudge and pointed her out just in case he missed her entrance.

"I see your fan club is here," he chuckled. "Good for your image, I guess."

"I had nothing to do with it, she's just been following me around...I can't stop her."

"Girl has the hots for you, boy, better face it."

"And that's a big zero," Brian said. "It's not like that at all, she never even talks about sex."

"Maybe she already knows."

"How? You haven't told anyone, have you?"

"Me? Remember who you're talking to, Brian. What could I say?"

"Oh, nothing, I guess."

"Liz is pretty straight up, she probably wouldn't even mind if she knew."

"But let's not tell her, ok?" Brian said.

"Your call, not mine," Sean replied. "Oh yes, and here comes your new challenge."

Hanson had assigned one of the new boys to each of them in hopes that the experienced boys would help out. Mentoring he called it. But there was just too much going on during practice for him and Mr. Wayne to keep an eye on everyone so it made sense.

Adam Farmer was Brian's intern. A word meaning he had complete control over the boy's training until Hanson had time to take over. Adam was one of the juniors that had come over from Brooklyn High School. By now no one was kidding themselves; the team had become too popular to remain just a one school program.

The garage had been purchased by a group of local businessmen and was undergoing some renovations during the weekdays. The CBBL was the official owner of the building, but now it was a non-profit organization, whatever that means. Hanson said it wasn't something that the boys needed to worry about. He explained that it meant the community was a hundred percent behind the team, and that was all that mattered.

Having a seventeen year old under his wing could have been awkward except that Adam seemed to hang on Brian's every word. Sean caught onto that right away and kidded him about the new puppy. His own intern was a goofy kid named Ben that could barely punch a leather bag, much less understand his left foot from the right one. Sean had his work cut out for him there.

Adam turned out to have a great attitude about boxing. He wanted to kill everything that Brian made him punch. It took a while for the boy to understand that just hitting something wasn't the answer. There was a lot of anger in this boy.

Having said all that, there was also a rugged beauty in Adam's face and Brian saw great potential in his thin muscular body. Apart from a severe case of acne that currently disfigured his skin, he was a seriously good looking young man. Brian had seen what exercise did in the case of several other boys and told Adam that his problems would soon be clearing up.

"Nothing like a good sweat to wipe out that junk on your face," Brian told him. "Boxing will change your life for the better. You will eat better. But stop drinking soda; it's nothing but empty calories, no protein. Meat and veggies, that's all I eat now, my mother doesn't even offer me sugar anymore."

"How can you do that?" he asked.

"I'm in training, that's all. If I don't stay fit I'll get my ass kicked in the ring and that isn't even an option for me. I got too many kids gunning for me now."

And that was the truth. Interclub standing was based on points and Brian was at the top of the ladder after that first tournament. Some of his teammates would enjoy nothing better than to see him stumble on the path to glory and get pushed aside. It wasn't that they didn't like him; it was just the way things were in such a competitive field.

After a few weeks of workouts, Adam felt comfortable enough to answer a few personal questions.

"You have a lot of friends at school?" Brian asked.

"A few, that's all I need," he said.

"What do you guys do?"

"Not much, sit around and listen to music mostly. Is she really your girlfriend?" he asked, pointing at Liz.

"She's a good friend, that's where it stands for now," Brian said. "Why, you want an introduction?"

"Oh no, she's too pretty for a guy like me. Pretty girls are nothing but trouble."

And maybe he shouldn't have asked or put on his therapy hat, but Brian found himself wanting to know more about what made Adam tick. There were a lot of reasons to be curious, he told himself. The boy was appealing...physically. That appeal had occurred the first time they ended up showering together after practice.

Sean had been there too, along with a half-dozen other boys, so it wasn't just some private show and tell. It had been the inaugural test of the new locker room and shower facility, courtesy of the CBBL booster's club. There is something about unlimited hot water that appeals to the teenage mind and the boys were having a ball.

Sean gave Brian the old wink and a nod when Adam stepped out of his practice trunks and revealed a hanging set unrivaled in the short history of their club. Oh yeah, the boy was hung and he deserved respect for the show.

So why would a boy with such fine equipment feel so down on himself when it came to girls. Brian had his reasons, and his inquisitive mind wanted to know. He invited Adam to have a juice and some fries at the Hardee's after practice. At least Brian stuck to half of his diet plan. Fries are a veggie, or so he told himself.

Ever since the tournament, Brian's father had seen to it that he received a regular allowance, a whopping ten dollars a week. It was enough to take Liz to the movies and buy popcorn, or even the occasional OJ and fries, to which he now indulged himself. Adam managed to produce a whole quarter and Brian covered the rest.

"Can I put ketchup on them?" Adam asked.

"Sure, the President says ketchup is a veggie, go for it," Brian replied. Lord, he hoped this boy was going to be around for a while.

"Can I ask you something...ah, personal?" Adam asked.

"Go on," Brian said.

"Why did you start boxing?"

"I wanted to make myself strong, that's pretty much it. I respected Mr. Hanson too and he gave me the chance to change myself. I felt pretty weak and helpless before I learned to throw a punch."

"I saw you beat that black boy last month, it was awesome," Adam said.

"He's a good fighter. I beat him with skills he didn't know about. Next time I see him in the ring I'll have to work my ass off. Being a good boxer is a long learning process, I learn something new every time I get in the ring."

"I won't ever box against you," Adam said.

"And why not? You get it in your head that I can beat you and the fight is already over. You don't have your skills developed and your body won't handle the punishment it takes to win, not yet anyway."

"But I know how to fight," Adam said, "I've been fighting with my older brother for years."

"Not boxing, I guess?"

"No, he used to beat me when he did drugs."

"You think that boxing will help you beat him back?" Brian asked. That explained all the anger.

"Maybe, but he's in jail for a while. I can wait."

"If Hanson heard you talk like that he'd kick you off the team. This isn't about learning to beat someone's ass, it's a skill."

"He'll be ok if he leaves me alone," Adam said.

"And your parents just watched this happen?" Brian asked.

"It's just me and my dad, my mother died two years ago. My dad is a...I can't tell you."

"He's too weak to stop it, I guess."

"He's a drug addict. But I shouldn't have told you that."

"It doesn't mean you'll do it too, that's crazy," Brian said.

Adam stared at him. He wanted to say something else but it just wouldn't come out. Then Brian knew this wasn't going to be one of those good endings.

"One of his friends molested me when I was a kid," Adam finally said. "He did it a lot before my Mom found out. My parents split up over it and then she got cancer. My brother stayed with my father but when she died I had to go with him too. I got beat up the very first day."

"Does anyone know about this?" Brian asked.

"No, I can't tell anybody. Child Protective Services would take me away," Adam said. "My brother blames me. He says I'm a fag too."

"But you're not," Brian said. "You like girls?"

"Yeah, I suppose I like girls." And with that one sentence Brian knew he was lying to the world, and maybe himself.

Brian felt excited over the discovery. Could he really be gay in his head and just too afraid to admit it? Boy, could he identify with that. Then maybe Adam wanted it both ways like Sean.

"You have to let me think about all this," Brian said.

"Yeah, it's complicated," Adam said. "I like you, Brian. But I can understand if all this makes you nervous, we don't have to work together if you want."

"Like hell, give me your hand," Brian said. He took Adam's hand and shook it. "We're partners until I teach you how to kick some serious ass, ok? We'll work on the rest of it later."

He saw some serious emotion rise to Adam's face and the boy's eyes had tears in them. Brian understood how much this meant and it made him feel good to be able to reach out.

"Thanks," Adam said, "it means a lot to me."

The boy was a good four inches taller and had at least a six inch reach on Brian. He was sure Adam had another four inches on him in other places as well. But for now, Brian wouldn't be up against him in the ring so he taught with a vengeance, showing Adam everything he knew.

Mid-summer brought muggy weather that made everyone sweat like hell as they practiced. Hanson wasn't a fan of air conditioning, although they did have some big electric fans going most of the time. Cold air would give them cramps, he warned.

Unfortunately all the heat did was make Liz wear skimpier outfits and that attracted the other boys. Oh, if only she would try and like one of them, Brian thought. The only thing that kept the boys at bay was their knowledge of his relationship with her. Let them think what they wanted; Brian sure didn't want to have any fights over honor.

He spent more time working with Adam than he did with Sean, his usual partner. They still sparred together but Sean seemed to understand the loyalty to his intern. And even though Hanson had taken most of them back under his tutorage, Adam was left with Brian. But throughout those days of training, he always felt Mr. Wayne's watchful eyes and occasionally saw him smile when he thought Brian wasn't looking.

For his part, Adam was shaping up nicely. He adapted to the drills very quickly and did his best to keep pace on the speed bag which was always a bitch for the new guys. It taught quick hand movement, although a boxer was unlikely to ever hit an opponent that fast unless they were already unconscious.

Brian was a fan of the heavy bag. A four foot long leather bag filled with sand that hardly gave an inch when punched. It simulated the human body quite well and Adam beat the hell out of it. Brian finally put a yellow tape line across it to mark off an approximation of the human waist. Adam had a habit of punching below the belt and he had to be cautioned on that score several times. But finally he developed enough skill to step into the ring.

Brian had spent weeks with him practicing the necessary sparing skills. Wearing the flat padded mitts, Brian had allowed the boy to punch away, moving them around like miniature targets for him to hit. Adam didn't know how to use all his upper arm strength yet, but the potential was there. His body was changing and it would take time for him to feel that power and use it effectively.

Mr. Wayne tactfully suggested that Adam and Brian shouldn't spar together.

"You know his weakness, and he respects you too much to go flat out. Be a bad match up all round. You think he's up to taking on Bill?"

Bill had come a long way mentally, but he wasn't one of the best boxers physically. Brian knew he was occasionally doing drugs and wasn't sure if that was part of it, but the boy never seemed to learn from his opponents. It was always full on for Bill and he had been beaten several times for that ignorance. Adam wouldn't find him intimidating and it would be a good test of skill.

"Yeah, that's a great match," Brian agreed.

It remained to be seen if Adam could handle taking a punch but he was willing enough. Brian stood in Adam's corner as Mr. Wayne laced him up and placed the headgear snugly on his head.

"You be fine, boy," Mr. Wayne said, "got yourself one crackerjack coach."

Adam looked down and Brian smiled, giving him the thumbs up sign. Wayne took both boys to the center of the ring and gave them the instructions. He backed off and dropped his hand between them to start the bout.

Bill must have thought it would be an easy match by the way he tried to wade in and scare Adam, but the boy just backed off as he had been taught. Bill met nothing but leather as he tried to get past Adam's defense. But then Adam seemed to tire of just waiting his opponent out and he went after Bill.

For a while it was all Bill could do to keep the boy's gloves away from scoring points on his body but Adam was getting through with some of his shots. Back and forth they moved across the ring, circling and punching as they went. Adam took some straight arm blows to the head but he kept on target and never flinched away. His gloves seemed to be in the way every time Bill made an attempt to get inside.

The round ended and that was all Adam was getting his first time in the ring. He climbed through the ropes and looked to see what Brian thought.

"You did that just fine," Brian said.

"I liked that," Adam said, grinning from ear to ear, "when can I do it again?"

Brian envied that enthusiasm, remembering his first time in the ring. The boy had an ability that seemed to second guess his opponent. Much like Sean, he thought.

"You showed commitment and that counts a whole lot. If it had been a real fight you would have taken that round on points alone," Brian said.

"Really?" Adam's eyes were still bright with excitement, his heart pounding. Lord, he was looking more beautiful every day.

It was that afternoon when Hanson told them the team had been invited to Arlington for a return match up. They might be up against the same kids as this past spring but by now those boys were a little wiser and that made them more dangerous in the ring. Brian's only hope was that he wouldn't be matched against Jamaal again. It was too soon for a rematch.

And Hanson must have felt the same way about it because Brian saw another boy's name on the fight sheet with his. The idea of taking a trip down to Virginia was exciting enough. His whole life Brian had only been to the beach twice with his parents and once on a school trip to the Nation's Capital. But never before had he been allowed to take a trip without one of his parents. The thought was liberating.

Brian asked his father, figuring he was the most supportive of his son's boxing career. He agreed it was fine and asked if there were enough chaperones going along. Brian told him there were already six men going on the bus. Just the thought of a parent coming along would have burst his bubble of excitement.

But Sean couldn't go and he was thoroughly disappointed.

"My Mom scheduled a dentist appointment that day, can you imagine? She says it's already hard enough to get into that guy's office without changing things at the last moment so I'm screwed."

He said all this while lying on Brian's bed; the both of them flush from their most recent activity. Despite the occasional date with Mary, Sean still figured to be in Brian's

arms on the weekends and that wasn't about to be stopped. He was still the same Sean, kind, considerate and all that. Brian was the one that had other thoughts in mind, including some slight fantasies about Adam lying on top.

And it thrilled him when Hanson asked if any of the new boys wanted to come along and observe. He knew Adam would go if encouraged and so he did just that.

"You want me there?" he asked.

"How else are you going to get the feel and taste of a real fight?"

"I'm sure my dad will let me go, I'll ask him tonight," Adam said.

It would be great if Adam could go, Brian thought as he walked home from practice that day. He was about to cross Hazel Street when the blue car pulled up beside him and stopped. Brian froze at seeing Pullman after all this time. But they were out in public and there were a lot of people out on the streets around them.

"Need a ride home, Brian?" Pullman asked.

So the guy knew his name, what the fuck was he doing here?

"I don't ride in cars with strangers," Brian said from the safety of the sidewalk.

Pullman opened his door as started to get out.

"You can stop right there," Brian said. "You won't be playing any games with me. I'm not some little kid you can push around with that badge of yours."

"Aw, Brian....what have I ever done to you?" Pullman said.

"Nothing...and that's where it stays. You don't need to be hanging around talking to me, so you can just leave me alone."

Pullman hesitated and that was all Brian needed to see. He turned up Hazel and took off running. The cop would have to turn the car around to follow him but Brian ran to the next corner and sped south towards Church. In less than thirty seconds he stood panting in front of Sean's house and there was no sign of Pullman following him.

Mrs. Williams smiled when she answered the door but told him Sean wasn't there. Brian couldn't very well say that a perverted cop was chasing him so he asked to use the bathroom. He could still see the look of shock and fear in his eyes when he looked in the bathroom mirror. Had Pullman seen it too? No, the only emotion Brian had felt at the moment he saw the cop was anger.

Why after all this time had the man decided to talk to him? There had been no time to prepare for the encounter and yet Brian was sure he had presented himself well. At least Pullman knew that Brian wasn't going to give up without a fight. He wasn't some weak little kid anymore and Pullman had to understand that now.

Gabe had been physically weak. That had been his flaw and Pullman knew it. Somehow Brian knew that if the man had laid a hand on him he would have beaten the bastard right there on the street. That would have brought the whole thing out into the open and Pullman couldn't afford that. Hanson knew about him, there would have been repercussions, but Brian knew he would have won.

He washed his face and thanked Mrs. Williams before he left. Let Pullman come after him, Brian was ready for the man now. Yeah, the boxing had given him a whole new sense of worth.

The following week they headed south for the boxing matches and the encounter with Pullman was a thing of the past. A whole two hour bus ride sitting next to Adam was Brian's idea of a good time. The team enjoyed every minute until they got to the Arlington recreation center where the opponents made their home. It was an impressive

building. "Taxes must be big down here if they can afford this place," Hanson said on the bus.

Adam stuck with him most of the time and Brian had the chance to introduce him to Jamaal. Unfortunately the kid still had a scar on his upper lip but he laughed when he showed off his gold tooth.

"My Daddy bought and paid for it," he said, "cost some bucks too."

"Very impressive," Brian said, "didn't it hurt?"

"Not as much as the punch that knocked the tooth out," Jamaal laughed. His gold tooth flashed and Brian just hoped he took care not to lose this one too. He too seemed relieved that they weren't a match in today's fights.

"You against Bobby Johnson. Good boy, he give you a nice fight," Jamaal said.

"Thanks for telling me," Brian said. What he heard in Jamaal's voice was that he had better watch his ass. Of course the boy could just be pulling his leg, but Brian needed to prepare for anything.

Adam was all wide eyed at the other team and Brian knew he was sizing them up. He suited up with Brian and the rest of the team and then they did warm ups together. Adam had taken the partner concept quite seriously and Brian was glad to have the company. He was up second and Adam sat with him during the first fight.

Bill from their side and some Asian kid from the Virginia team had a go at it for three rounds. It was a dead even match all the way and Brian could see that the judges were having a hard time figuring out who was ahead on points. They finally gave the fight to the Asian boy and some of the Bay boys thought that was a rip off. But Brian could tell Bill had been pressed to stay even and he was just glad it was over.

Adam was all smiles as he walked with Brian to the ring. Mr. Wayne was waiting and he slipped the mouthpiece in and gave Brian a smile.

"So far I don't get a feeling for this Bobby boy. He might be easy for you or it might be a game. You good for it so go find out."

The match started off so uneven Brian almost laughed in Bobby's face. The boy seemed slow and heavy, preferring to put his back in the corner, which kept Brian from dancing around him. It was a total waste of time but Brian still kept an eye on him. Someone had thought enough to match them together and they had a reason behind it.

About halfway through the first round Bobby seemed to wake up and smell the coffee. He came out of that corner like a powerhouse, changing his tactics and swinging all over the place. It was like fighting an animated sand bag. Brian's body blows didn't seem to faze the boy although he managed to get in the right number of facial jabs to score points. The bell ended the opening charade.

"What's up," Brian said after spitting out the mouthpiece.

"What you got here is a pain junkie," Mr. Wayne said. "He don't feel the body blows all that much, he might even like it this way. It's his way of wearing you down."

"Oh crap," Brian said.

"You can dance him into the ground but that ain't gonna score, you need to find his weakness, go for the head."

Adam was outside the ropes listening. Brian hoped he would really learn something if this clown took the match. He'd told the boy right up front that he couldn't win every contest. Sometimes there are just bad days and better boxers. Brian was beginning to feel this might be his first bad one.

"He's over there scratching his ear with the right glove," Adam said to no one in particular. Brian wasn't supposed to be coached from outside the ring but he heard the comment. He looked up just as Bobby ran the glove across his ear again. Had he been injured there in the last round?

The bell sounded and Bobby stood up right away and came straight on. Brian batted away the first series of blows but allowed one or two to get through. It gave Bobby the false sense of confidence to try more risky moves. The first opening he gave, Brian put a glove into his right ear with a punch up side the head. It staggered Bobby all the way back to the ropes.

Now he knew Brian was after that side of his head, it wouldn't be easy to hit him there again. Bobby came back and kept leading with his left to defend the right side of his head. Brian had to respect his ability with that left even though it seemed he was right handed.

Bobby caught him unaware in just a split second and his right glove popped Brian's head back with a blow to the chin. Brian danced right just as Bobby put a tremendous effort at his head with a left hook but leaving himself open. Brian swung back with a right and connected with the side of the boy's face. Brian caught a piece of his nose and Bobby shook his head to clear the pain.

Damn, Brian was in awe of this boy's ability to take the punishment. They traded body blows for the rest of the round until the very end. Brian controlled the fight with footwork but it was like avoiding a mad bull and this one had real horns.

Bobby tried that left trick again, withholding his right until the last possible second, but Brian read him this time. He pushed off the right-handed punch and threw his own in Bobby's face. Blood and the bell came at the same time, but Brian took the round away from him. Bobby returned to his corner where the trainer immediately started to work on his bloody nose.

"Thought you had him there," Mr. Wayne said, "but you got his number now. This fight gonna be won on points and you ahead for the moment."

It was his way of saying, play it smart, the points mattered. If Bobby pulled off something grand Brian would lose and that was the name of the game. When the bell rang Bobby stood up. No sign of the blood and Brian would have an even harder time getting back inside at the boy's nose.

This time Bobby favored his right jab and Brian suddenly figured him out. The boy wasn't right handed at all. He had been faking all along, saving his best shot for this round. His instincts were real good. By withholding his left, he knew Brian just might leave an opening in his defense. So far only a few smart twists and turns had kept that hand at bay, but now Bobby thought he had Brian figured out.

Brian shifted right and right again, encouraging the boy to use his left. About the third time Bobby took the bait. His left caught Brian on the side of the head and rang his chimes but not before Brian put his right arm motion with a vicious uppercut to the chin.

But suddenly Bobby's right glove was in the way and he deflected the blow leaving Brian open. When the left hit the side of Brian's face it staggered him back and all the internal alarm bells went off. There was a sudden pain over his eye and Brian tried to shake it off. He jumped away, dodging left and just in time to avoid the right hook Bobby threw.

Brian danced left and right, dodging the blows by keeping his gloves in the way. This was no good. Bobby had scored big points with that combination and might even be ahead by now. One of his shots pushed the right glove against Brian's face and when it came away there was blood on the leather.

Bobby had opened a cut above Brian's eye. But he couldn't focus on that now, there should only be a few moments left in the round. Brian went for it and watched as Bobby batted away the attack. Brian managed one more shot to the right side of Bobby's head and the bell ended the fight.

At the very end, just after the bell, Brian happened to look through the ropes and saw Jamaal standing ringside. The boy looked up, flashing that gold tooth with a knowing smile. And at that moment Brian knew Bobby had taken the match. It was his first loss on points.

The referee approached Bobby and raised his arm. The boy nodded and shook his fist in the air as his teammates cheered. Then he turned to Brian and strode across the ring.

"I saw you figure me out, it was a good fight," Bobby grinned. "Maybe next time it will be different." They touched gloves and Bobby turned away, raising both arms as the team cheered him out of the ring.

Mr. Wayne pulled Brian towards the corner and said something about blood but he wasn't listening. He climbed out of the ring and pulled off the headgear. He couldn't unlace the gloves without help but rather than ask he walked away from Mr. Wayne and kept on going until he reached the locker room.

"Brian...Brian?" Adam had followed him down the hall.

"Take these off," Brian said, holding out his hands.

Adam unlaced the gloves and Brian ripped them off when he could. There was little satisfaction in it, but he threw them against the wall.

"It wasn't your fault, Brian. You just lost it on points."

Brian started laughing and Adam looked puzzled.

"Didn't you see? He almost knocked me off my feet," Brian said. "Damn, I just didn't see it coming."

He sat down on the bench and put his head in his hands, still laughing. "It could have been worse, I suppose, but I deserved to lose. It took me too long to figure him out. I was damn lucky."

Adam moved in behind and pressed a wet paper towel against his eyebrow. "You got a little blood coming out there," he said.

"It would have been a lot of blood if he'd connected with that left. Right or left, I didn't figure it out in time."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Adam said. "It's only one loss."

"I don't care if I lost, that's not the point. I should have been good enough to read him and I wasn't. I failed to see what was right in front of me. I'm a lousy boxer."

Adam rested his hands on Brian's shoulders. "No, that's not true," he said. "You're an amazing boxer. I wish I could be just like you. I can't wait to get in the ring so you can teach me everything you know."

The boy is so good to me, Brian thought. A knot formed in his throat, emotions rising. He opened his mouth to thank Adam for the support but instead his real feelings came tumbling out. It was as if fate had it in for him completely today.

"I don't want to fight you, Adam...I just want to love you," he said.

In the silence that followed Adam leaned over, his arms encircling Brian's body. He felt the boy's warm breath on his neck.

"I know, Brian...I know."

Brian started to cry. "You know?" he managed to croak. "Oh God, I love you so much."

"Yes, I know. I just...I didn't know how I felt about it until now."

Adam's hands still held on tightly as Brian turned his head and their lips met. The warmth of that kiss lasted only moments when they both heard the door open and Adam pulled back.

"Brian? Are you ok?" Hanson asked.

"He's just upset, Coach," Adam said

"Ok, Brian, I know it hurts to lose. Boxing is a tough sport, it takes tough people. Next time it might be your nose that gets clocked. You guys clean up and come on out and sit with the team, ok?"

"Yes, sir," Brian said.

"Be right there, Coach," Adam said.

Hanson left and Brian looked up at Adam. "He wouldn't understand if I told him. I needed to lose this match. It made me understand that I still have a long way to go." Then he smiled. "But now I have a reason to get there."

"Probably gonna piss off that cute little girl that keeps hanging around you," Adam said, but he was smiling too.

"Have you always known about me?" Brian asked.

"No, but I hoped. I wasn't sure of my own feelings. But you're the first friend I've ever had that I can say this to. Being with you, any way you want it...well, I'm not scared about it anymore."

"So I guess you wouldn't mind coming over and spending the night at my house some time," Brian asked.

"I can do that," Adam said.

Brian stood up and placed a hand on Adam's cheek. "I lost something today...and found something better. Maybe the Lord is trying to tell me something," he said.

"God loves all his children, the minister tells us on Sunday."

"Yeah, I forgot, you're Methodist. This could prove interesting in many ways."

They held hands on the bus ride home. Quietly...covertly, Brian had found love. He couldn't deny that feeling anymore. The raw emotions of the day washed over him and he fell asleep leaning against Adam's shoulder.

But Adam was no longer the skinny, pimply faced kid. His face was bright and clear, glowing with feeling and pride. Drifting off to sleep Brian smiled inwardly. Adam was all he had ever wanted, someone to share his deepest feelings. He was done looking for angels to love.