

Masked Destiny

I'm just an ordinary guy; you need to understand that right off. I never meant to be doing the things I'm doing. If you'd told me even a few weeks ago how my life was going to change, I wouldn't have believed you. I'd have laughed and maybe even slugged you for good measure. Some things happened that I didn't plan, however, and other things happened I didn't even think were possible. Life's like that—it throws stuff at you that you never saw coming. You probably won't even believe it when I tell you...but, no, I'm not going to tell you yet. You have to experience it from the beginning, just like I did, otherwise it will just blow your mind. So that's where we'll begin, at the beginning...

Early September 1997

Skye

I lowered the hundred pound sack of chicken feed into the back of old man Koch's 77' GMC pickup and then dusted off my hands.

"Thanks, Skye."

"No problem, Mr. Koch."

I turned and stepped back into *Wahlberg's Farm Store*, the bells jingling on the door as it closed behind me. I didn't mind my job in the old store too much, but I'd rather have been working in an *Abercrombie & Fitch* or *Structure* or someplace similar. That was out, though, because the nearest *Structure* was in South Bend and the closest *A&F* was in Glenbrook Square Mall in Fort Wayne—neither would do for an after-school job. One cool thing about *Wahlberg's* is that Glen (Mr. Wahlberg) was real cool about letting me work around football practices, games, and whatever else I needed to do. I even did my homework when things were particularly dead in the store, which wasn't too infrequent.

I walked past the displays of paint, racks of *John Deere* and *Pioneer* caps, and bags of alfalfa pellets as I made my way to the stock room, which was piled floor to ceiling with every farm related article imaginable, from fan belts to tractor tires. Rare was the day when we didn't have what a customer wanted. I pulled back the heavy sliding door and stepped out onto the loading dock. A delivery of roofing tar had arrived right before Mr. Koch came in for feed. There were six pallets, each with nine metal buckets of tar. I'd only carried two into the store room before I'd been interrupted—just fifty-two left to go. I grabbed another pair of buckets by the handles, carefully lifting the forty-pound containers with my knees. I wasn't about to risk a back injury. That'd set me back no telling how far. My biceps bulged as I curled my fists in towards my body. Those tar buckets were almost as good as my Bowflex when it came to curls. They'd give me a little extra workout before I went home.

I could've asked Oliver to help me, but he was about useless when it came to lifting things.

Oliver handled most of the counter stuff and I did the stocking and lifting. His full name was Oliver Twist. Swear to God, his parents actually named him that. What kind of parents would do that to their kid? Oliver didn't need a geek name. He had enough problems. The boy probably couldn't get a date if he begged and word was he was queer—so maybe he didn't even care that he couldn't get a girl. I don't know if it was true or not, but it might as well have been for he had nothin' going for him. He was heavy and had messy black hair and round plastic glasses that made him look a *lot* like Harry Potter, which was not a good thing at Verona High School, not if you want to fit in anyway. Don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking him. I'm just saying the boy had problems.

Oliver had his uses. With him there, I could do my homework, because he took care of most of the customers. We didn't talk much as we had little in common. At fourteen, he was two years younger than me and there was a world of difference between us. While I played every sport I could get into, Oliver always had his nose stuck in some damned book. I swear, every time I saw him he had a different one. He must've read at least one a day. But, enough about Oliver—I've taken that topic about as far as it can go without boring anyone into a coma. If you need to, you can take a nap before reading any further. I'll be right here when you get back.

I made one trip after another with the cans of tar, curling each one. My biceps were pleasantly aching, which meant I was doing them some good. *No pain, no gain*, that's what a lot of weight lifting books said. Coach Brewer said that was only true to a certain point, though. He said I might feel a little sore now and then after a workout, but if there was actual pain, it meant I was working too hard. Soreness equals muscle growth, but pain equals damage and that's no good. I figured Coach Brewer knew what he was talking about. He was thirty somethin' and way better built than anyone on the team, except for Jimmy. I listened to what Coach had to say about stuff like working out, even if he did live an *alternative lifestyle*.

Speaking of alternative lifestyles, there were sure a lot of queers around. There was Coach Brewer and his...friend, room-mate...whatever you'd call him. And then there were the Selby's, who were in and out of *Wahlberg's*, buying all kinds of stuff for their farm. There were even some queers at school, like Sean and Nick who were both juniors, the same as me. Well, they weren't the same as me. They'd actually been seen kissing each other a time or two. I did a lot of kissing, but only with girls.

There were less queers around than there had been. In the spring, three of 'em were murdered. I shit you not. Some whacked out cult or religious group was going after them. Two guys from my class got iced: Marty, who was shot in the head out behind the school and Ken, who was found beaten to death. I didn't know either of them well, but I had some classes with them. It was kind of freaky that they were there one day and gone the next. Ken was kind of an activist, always pushing gay rights stuff in everyone's face, which I didn't like. He was kind of like one of those religious types who are always bugging people to be saved—just plain annoying. Marty was real quiet. I don't know if I'd ever spoken to him. Some freshman was killed, too, Tony...something. I didn't know him at all. He was found near the park beaten to death with a baseball bat. Our little town had made the news there for a while.

I didn't really care one way or the other about queers. They were just there, like the bleachers by the football field or the drinking fountains in the halls. I didn't like the real swishy ones, but there was no one like that in Verona. Queers like that were just in the movies and on TV, I guess. Don't get the idea that I didn't care when those boys were killed. I did, but people were murdered all the time, only it usually happens somewhere else. It isn't pretty or nice, but it's just the way things are. By the time I found out about the murders, they were over and done with, so there was no reason to

dwell upon them. It's not like I could've prevented them after they happened.

Two by two, I hauled the cans of tar into the store room. I curled each pair of them like they were dumbbells, so by the time I'd finished, I'd done twenty-three reps. When I worked out, I did fifteen, but I was also curling way more than forty pounds per arm then. Still, it was cool to work in a little exercise while earning money.

After I unloaded the pallets and stacked them to the side, there was nothing to do. I could've tried to read *Wahlberg's Farm Store Established 1902* backwards through the plate glass windows, or sweep the floor, or neatly stack the farmer's almanacs on the counter, but those were Oliver jobs. Instead, I pulled out my U.S. History text and tried to plod through our assigned reading. Mr. Morrison actually made history interesting most of the time (an unbelievable feat believe you me), but our book was as dry and dull as...as things that are dry and dull. Okay, that didn't sound so good, but, hey, I'm not a writer, so give me a break. If you want artsy writing go read William Shakespeare or Anne Rice or one of those fancy smantsy writers—I'm just tellin' you about me.

After three pages, I nearly slipped into a coma, so I jumped down to the floor and did a few push-ups to wake myself up. Oliver all but ignored me. He just went on straightening up the gallon cans of red barn paint—like they had to be spaced perfectly—please! He was used to me doing pushups on the floor or chin-ups on the bar over the door that led into the storeroom. We each kind of pretended the other wasn't there, except when we got bored enough to talk to each other.

I returned to my book only to be interrupted when two customers came in at the same time. Rush hour! While Oliver was taking care of Mr. Franklin, I got to weigh out roofing nails for old Mr. Evert. Yes, the fun never ends at *Wahlberg's Farm Store*. Come on down for the excitement!

We locked up at nine. Oliver had his own set of keys for when Mr. Wahlberg wasn't around, which was practically always. If he was in one day a week it was a rarity. I hopped in my Cutlass, drove straight home, and ran upstairs to my room, shouting a quick "hello" to Janelle, my older sister, and Colin, my nephew, who were sitting in the living room watching TV. Oh, I should mention I live with my sister because our parents are divorced (and both dating someone half their age). My sister was pretty cool to live with. She pretty much lets me do my own thing, probably because I'm paying half the bills and she needs all the help she could get with Colin growing so fast it seems like he needs new shoes every week. Anyway, I'll tell you more about Janelle and Colin later.

I stepped into my room. There it stood, my most prized possession, my Bowflex. It cost me over \$1,200 of hard earned money, but it was worth every penny. I'd destroyed two previous weight lifting machines—one I'd picked up at an auction for \$50 and another I bought new for \$400. The first one I just plain wore out. I used it so much that it got all out of line and when I was benching I was grating steel on steel. It got so bad I had to junk it. The \$400 machine didn't last near as long as it should've. I was doing butterflies one day and the left arm of the machine just kept on coming in when it should've stopped. I checked it out and discovered the metal had actually ripped. I guess it'd fatigued with use. Still, I was pissed, especially because it left me with no weight-machine. I had to empty my savings to get the Bowflex, but it was worth it. I'd had it a year and not only did it show no signs of breaking, I was getting better results from my workouts and that's what mattered. Their advertisements said something like "get the results you want in eight weeks." I knew that was bullshit. There was no way I could get the results I wanted in eight weeks or even eight years. Still, it was working for me. Man, I sound like a commercial for Bowflex don't I? Well, it's a good machine.

I pulled off my shirt and changed into my workout shorts—*Abercrombie & Fitch* cargo

shorts, the *only* way to go. I set up the machine for chest presses, putting on 175 pounds of resistance, which equals *way* more than 175 on a regular machine. I do 225 or so on the machines at school, but the Bowflex is more difficult, especially because it makes you work all the time, even during the release. On a regular machine, it takes almost no muscle to lower the bar after a rep, but on the Bowflex releasing is just as hard as lifting. That's what's been giving me way better definition.

I leaned back on the bench, grasped the holds, and pushed forward. The rods bent as I strained against them. I could feel my pecs flexing as I pressed and the muscles stretching as I eased off. I loved working out. It was like a drug. I guess it was really—endorphins, that's what they're called, are released into the body during exercise and it feels awesome! I love the way I feel after workouts too, all tight and toned and pumped.

My workout was far from finished. There were three sets of chest presses, fifteen reps each, and then I'd do the same number of butterflies, lateral pull-downs, and so on, ending with curls and ab crunches. My workouts usually took a little under an hour and a half. I was getting awesome results with crunches. I was getting nice definition in my six-pack and I was hoping to work on an eight-pack.

Jimmy had an eight-pack, at least he had an awesome six-pack with the beginnings of an eight-pack. Jimmy was the only guy on the team better built than me, which meant he was pretty much the only guy in school with a better bod. Yeah, I know what you're thinking—that I'm a conceited cock. Well, that's not exactly true. Yeah, I know I look fine, but dammit, I worked for it. I've played football, baseball, basketball, soccer, and I've wrestled and run track. Unfortunately, a lot of the seasons overlap, so I can't participate in as much as I'd like. Football is my number one priority in the fall. Baseball and track are both in the spring, but the coaches are real good about letting me split my time when necessary. I haven't played basketball or soccer since I was younger, because of conflicting schedules, but I'm doing one sport or another pretty much all year 'round. On top of all that, I've worked out every other day since I was twelve. I only miss a workout if I'm sick or dead tired.

I deserve my body. I made it. I've watched what I eat too. I can't just pig out on everything like some guys. If I let myself have too much pizza or ice cream or whatever I'd get pudgy, but I watch what I eat. It's work. I make plenty of sacrifices to have what I do, so if I'm conceited, I have a right to be. I don't think that makes me a dick, though. I don't look down on anyone because they're not as buff as me. It's not like I look at Oliver and think *fat ass*, or something like that. I'd sure never put him or anyone else down for being overweight or out of shape. Maybe being fit isn't their thing. I know some people have other interests, but being in shape is mine. I'm proud of what I've done, but aren't scientists proud when they make some discovery? Aren't actors proud when they make a good movie? Why shouldn't I be proud of my body? I'm sick and tired of people saying shit about guys like me. They act like we should go around being all humble and totally ignore the main thing we've got going for us. If the only thing I had going for me was a gorgeous face, it would be different, but there's more to me than that—I'm buff and I worked like a dog to get that way. By the way, I do have a very handsome face, but I'll not say anything about it because *that* I didn't work for, it just came with the basic equipment.

Okay, I'll get off my soapbox now. Anyway, I had a good workout and then it was time for some homework, and then bed. I won't tell you what I did right before bed because it's none of your business and if you think about it, you'll figure it out. I'm sixteen and I'm a guy...hmm...what could it be? If you can't figure it out, tough for you. What planet are you from anyway?

Oliver

I could hear it calling to me from the kitchen. Why wouldn't it leave me alone? I wished Mom hadn't made it, but she knew how much I loved it and she was only trying to be nice. That was the problem with Mom, she showed her love through cooking—cakes; chocolate chip, oatmeal, and sugar cookies; butterscotch pudding; peanut butter and chocolate fudge; blueberry muffins—it was endless. My stomach rumbled. I looked down at it, pushing against my shirt, as if I might be in the early stages of pregnancy. I hated the way it looked and felt. It was uncomfortable, like a too tight shirt or socks that kept slipping down my ankles. It called to be again. I gave in and walked toward the kitchen. What did it matter? What was one more piece of cake?

“Hi, honey,” said my mom.

She was standing there in an apron, looking like Alice from the *Brady Bunch* or Mrs. Cleaver from *Leave it to Beaver*. My mom was an old fashioned mom. She stayed home and did housework, gardened, and cooked—most of all she cooked, twenty-fours a day it sometimes seemed. That's the way she liked it, though. She had friends with careers and they tried to tempt her into joining them, but she said she was happy at home. It's what she wanted. She knew she was free to be anything she desired and staying at home was it. Her friends didn't believe her, but I did. She was happy about pretty much everything, except her weight. She was heavy, like me, only not as heavy. I guess I'd inherited my fat from her. I appreciated my green eyes a lot more.

“Hey, Mom.”

She was looking at me, just waiting for me to take a slice of cake. Her eyes lit up as I pulled a small plate from the cabinet and cut myself a nice sized piece. It was chocolate—a large, flat cookie cake with creamy icing and pecans. It might've been the best thing in the whole world.

“Do you want a little ice cream with that?”

“Sure, why not?” I asked. What was a little vanilla ice cream when I was already having cake?

I sat down at the table and ate it—so delicious, chocolaty, and sweet—like heaven made into a dessert. When I finished I felt overfull and guilty. I shouldn't have eaten the cake and I especially shouldn't have had the ice cream on top. I was already filled to the brim with supper—pork chops, mashed potatoes with a little pool of margarine in the center, and corn.

I looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost time to leave for work. Every day I came home from school, had an early supper, and then went to my job at *Wahlberg's Farm Store*. I liked it there. It was quiet, mostly, and the pay was good. Mr. Wahlberg practically let me run the place. He didn't care that I was fourteen. I could handle the register and the inventory and I was good at keeping the place in shape. I loved the old store. I loved all old things. *Wahlberg's* was one of those real old-fashion stores that was all wood and lots longer than it was wide. It had worn wooden floors and a counter that'd been there from the beginning. I loved to just gaze at the brass cash register with the little slab of marble above the drawer. I loved the sound of the bell when I pushed down the keys and the door popped open.

There was lots of way old stuff in *Wahlberg's*, old stock that had never been sold, like the cream separator parts, old graniteware pans and pails, and even clothing left over from the depression. The candy jars were all nearly a hundred years old, there from the beginning, like the counter and the register. There was plenty of new stuff too, like packets of seeds in the spring, wheels for lawn mowers, paint brushes, horse and cattle feed, and more. I liked the old stuff best, however. It made me think of a time when people were nicer and the world was a better place.

I shook myself from my thoughts, gave Mom a kiss on the cheek, and stepped outside, letting the screen door slam behind me. I loved the sound of it. I don't know why.

I only lived three blocks from the farm store, so my commute to work wasn't long, which was a good thing since I couldn't drive. I was gonna get a car someday. I was saving up for it. I wanted an old one, like from the 1950's or '60's maybe.

After a short walk I arrived at the store, and Mr. Wahlberg greeted me with a smile. I knew he would be leaving pretty soon. He almost always took off as soon as I got there. I guess I would too if I'd been there all day long. He watched the store during the day and I took care of things in the evening and night. Skye worked there too. He was a football player at school. I didn't like him much. Well, that sounds kind of wrong. I don't mean I disliked him, I just didn't *like* him, if you know what I mean. He didn't have much to say to me and he was kind of stuck up. He was one of those guys whose hair is always just right, like maybe he'd freak out if it wasn't. He had a thing for labels too. It was a rarity when he didn't have *Abercrombie* slapped across his chest or thigh. I bet he would've died if he had to wear something from *Wal-Mart*. At least he wasn't a jerk. He wasn't ever actually mean to me or anything like that.

I did enjoy looking at Skye. He was handsome and had an incredible body with lots of muscles. Yeah, I know what you're thinking—I'm gay. Well, guess what, you're right! I always have been, born that way, you know. I don't keep it a secret, exactly, but then again I've never told anyone, so maybe I do. My parents don't know, that's for sure. I think they might be okay with it, but it's not something I want to discuss with them. Some of the guys at school call me "queer" and less friendly names, but they don't really know anything. The only way they could know is if they could get inside my head, unless I've let my eyes wander too much, which is a possibility, although I try to control it. I work especially hard at not staring around Skye, 'cause we work together and he could pound me into a pulp with ease. Plus, he's more worth lookin' at than any other guy, so I have to watch myself all the more.

Skye came in a little late from football practice, which wasn't unusual. I was glad to see him because Mr. Koch had just bought a hundred pound bag of chicken feed and I wasn't looking forward to lugging it to his truck. I would've had to use the dolly and even then it would've been a struggle. That was one good thing about Skye, he jumped right in when there was something heavy to lift. He actually seemed to like lifting stuff. I hated lifting because it made my arms ache, but Skye seemed to think it was fun. Maybe he'd taken one too many footballs to the head. Who knows?

Skye set to work on the tar shipment that'd come in during the day. I'd left it for him. He handled the heavy lifting and I took care of the counter. That was our unspoken agreement and it was much to my liking. I'd much rather take care of customers and organize displays than strain my guts out lifting stuff, and there was plenty of heavy stuff to lift in the farm store. That's probably why Mr. Wahlberg hired Skye.

Sunday was drawing closer and I was nervous. I promised myself that Sunday was going to be *the day*. I'd procrastinated and worried long enough. It was time to just get it over with. I was dying of curiosity and who knew what might happen? I know you don't know what I'm talking about, but I think I'm going to keep it that way for a while, just in case I chicken out. If I do, you don't need to know about it anyway. If I don't, you'll find out soon enough.

Skye

I grinned as I walked away from my locker. Sherry Benson was looking me over good as she pretended to search in the top of her locker for whatever. I liked being checked out, because that meant I was succeeding. Sherry was a looker herself, so it meant even more. When one of the hot babes wanted you, it was a sure sign you were looking good.

I didn't have very much time for girls. Between school, work, sports, and workouts, I didn't have a spare second, and it's not like I could give any of those up. I had to go to school if I wanted to get anywhere in life; besides, there were laws about that. Sports and working out were untouchable. I wouldn't have minded dropping work if I didn't need the money, but paying half the bills for my sister took way more than I would've ever dreamed. College was coming up, too, so I needed money for that. No, I had to keep working.

I had precious little time for girls, but, before you start thinking I'm queer or something, let me tell you that I do go out with *a girl* sometimes. It's just that I don't have time for a steady girlfriend. Most of the girls at Verona High School are just too plain stuck up to date anyway. They think they're doing a guy a favor if they go out with him. Yeah, they've got what guys want, but guys have what they want too, so it's not a one-way street like they like to pretend. To hear 'em talk, you'd think they got nothing out of dating at all. If that was true, then why did they bother? Actually, guys got the raw end of the deal, unless a girl put out. Guys usually had to pay, and then they got nothing for it. That's another reason I didn't date much. Why invest my hard earned money in something that probably wasn't going to pay off?

First period I had English Lit. The stuff we read is more okay than you'd think. I don't like to read. It's a humongous waste of time, but since I have to do it anyway, I try to make the best out of it. Mrs. Kafka doesn't help. She has a way of sucking all the fun out of it, as if there weren't little enough fun to begin with. If she taught a film-appreciation class, I bet she could find a way to make *Independence Day* or any of the Arnold Schwarzenegger films boring. Arnold kicks ass, by the way.

Jimmy sits right in front of me in English Lit. His broad shoulders are a constant reminder that I'm not king of the hill. Sometimes I wish he would move to another state or something, but then he *is* an awesome football player and being around him all the time makes me work harder. When my sister's trying to lose weight, sometimes she'll tape a picture of a thin model to the refrigerator to remind herself what she's working toward. Jimmy is like that for me—if I keep working out, I can look like him. Jimmy's got it down—cool body, cool clothes. He lives *the* life.

I don't let him know I think that way, because we're kind of rivals. He can do more chin-ups than me, but I can out ab-crunch him. He can bench more, but I can run faster. We're pretty well balanced, but I have to admit he's got the better bod and he's stronger. We've both got our eye on the quarterback spot for next year. It's out of the question for this season, because Jeremy Herrington has it all wrapped up. He's not as built or as strong as Jimmy and I are, but I've got to admit he's a kick-ass quarterback. He's a senior, so next year he'll be history.

Woohoo! No Mrs. Kafka today! A substitute walked in—a college girl who looked like she should be sitting at one of the desks instead of standing up front. She put us to reading, though, which didn't thrill me. I guess it wasn't too bad. It was still better than listening to Mrs. Kafka drone on, and I could get my English Lit work out of the way and maybe have some free time after practice and work.

I drew a look from the sub when I snorted fifteen minutes into the period, but she didn't say anything. I laughed because Marshall, who sat one row to the right and one desk up, was reading a *Fangora* that he'd carefully hidden behind his Lit book. He wouldn't have been that ballsy with Mrs. Kafka, but I guess he thought he could get away with it with a sub. Substitutes were usually

easy prey. They never knew what was going on and sometimes didn't care.

The one sitting in for Mrs. Kafka was kind of a looker. I occasionally gave her the eye. She was looking at me too. *Yeah, Babe, you want me, don't you?* I bet she'd have fantasies about me when she went to bed and would probably tell all her college girlfriends about the hot guy she had in her English Lit class.

I looked back at Marshall. He was a freak—obsessed with monsters and the occult. He practically ignored everyone around him, except for his girlfriend. He had started wearing more fashionable clothes, though—*Structure* today, if I wasn't mistaken. It was definitely an improvement over what he used to wear, not as cool as *A&F*, of course, but better than his former all-black wardrobe. He wasn't even a Goth or anything; that's just how he dressed. It was weird, but he'd always looked like he shopped at *Ghoul-Mart*, and then one day he just changed. He came to school wearing cool clothes, a gold chain, and he was sporting a new hairstyle. Just after that, Kate Camden started dating him. Marshall didn't have a bod, but he cleaned up okay. I guess Kate was happy with him because they were still dating. Maybe she liked the strange and silent type.

English Lit went pretty fast, unlike the usual twelve hours that seemed to pass until the end of the period. My whole day spun by, and soon I found myself in the locker room, changing for practice.

Glen Barrett just about knocked me over, because he was hopping up and down on one foot while trying to pull the shoe off his other foot, the dumb-ass. I didn't say anything to Glen, but glared at him to let him know I was higher in the food chain. Sometimes guys had to be reminded where they stood, kind of like in the animal kingdom where the Alpha male keeps the Beta males in line. To be honest, Jimmy was the Alpha male in our pack, but I intended to alter that. Sooner or later, I was going to come out on top. Glen mumbled a quick "sorry" and lowered his eyes, so I was appeased for the moment.

I looked across the locker room at Ben Tyler. He was another Beta male I'd have to put in his place soon. Ben was nicely built. He wasn't anywhere near the level of Jimmy and me, but he had a bod. He also had a face. He was downright pretty. He didn't give me any real trouble, but I could sense something from him. I didn't think he quite knew his place, so he'd have to be reminded. Order had to be maintained.

"Dude, don't be such a fag," said Alex Allerbrook. I didn't know who he was talking to, but he wasn't talking to me, so it didn't matter. *If it's not happening to me, it doesn't matter*—that's my motto. I stole it off of Murphy Brown on TV.

"Don't let Coach hear you say that," said Glen.

"What? Fag? Why?"

Alex was new. He just started at V.H.S. in August, so he didn't know about Coach's alternative lifestyle.

"Coach Brewer has a boyfriend."

"What? You're shitting me!"

"No and you'd better knock off the fag talk. He doesn't stand for it."

"He's a fag?"

"Hey!" yelled Elliott, one of our linemen. "I'd better not hear you say that again. Coach Brewer is cool. He's the best football coach this place has ever had!"

Elliott scowled at Alex until he got the message. Alex was shaken, although I couldn't tell if it was fear of Elliott or if he was just freaked out that our coach was queer. Every year one of the new guys kind of lost it when they discovered Coach was gay, but they chilled out pretty fast when

they found out he wasn't going to stand around in the locker room checking us out. All of us older guys stood up for him because we respected him. He was the best coach ever, and he'd never given any of us cause to fear him. As far as I knew, he'd never put the moves on a player. Occasionally, some parent stirred up some trouble for him, but it never went anywhere, because others stood up for him. Everyone respected Coach Brewer, so the whole queer thing kind of got ignored.

We started practice with running, lots of running. I peeled off my shirt and tossed it on the bleachers before I starting jogging around the track that surrounded the football field. I liked to go shirtless whenever I could. I'll admit I was showing off, but so what? Besides, a display of strength helped keep the Beta males in line. It was a way of maintaining order and I didn't even have to punch anyone.

As always, running was a silent contest between Jimmy and me. We each pushed to outdo the other. Not once had either of us made a challenge or called our competition a race, but even though unspoken, it was a contest nonetheless. I pulled out ahead of Jimmy, just enough to let him know that in this, at least, I was his superior. He had a better bod and was stronger, but I was faster.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and chest. Soon, I could feel it running down my torso. My heart pounded in my chest as I continually pushed myself to keep ahead of Jimmy. I had to keep ahead of him. I couldn't let him beat me in this, too. Some of the other guys tried to keep up with us, but they failed. A few could hang in there for a few laps, but as we neared the end, they dropped off one by one. I was forever the front runner.

I did cross country in track, and I was usually the front runner there too. I'd tried to be a kicker, to hold back until near the end and then sprint out the last of the race, but it didn't work for me. I just couldn't stand being in the pack. I had to be out there ahead. That could be tough in track. Some of the lighter guys had the advantage there. That was okay, though, because football was my thing.

Coach blew his whistle and called us onto the field. We collapsed around him, gasping for breath, hearts pounding in our chests. Coach talked as we caught our breath, outlining the practice for the day. I was pleased to hear we'd be running scrimmages. A lot of the time we just practiced passing, receiving, blocking, and all the rest. That was fine, but I liked scrimmages the best. They were closer to an actual game.

I smiled when we faced off. Ben Tyler was directly across from me. It was the perfect opportunity. He mistook my smile for friendliness and grinned back. I'd seen him use his smile like a weapon to disarm people. He could charm the pants off most people because he was so good looking. Even Mrs. Kafka cut him slack. Mrs. Leander, the art teacher, practically fawned over Ben. There were rumors floating around that Ben slept with Mrs. Leander. I didn't know if it was true or not. I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to give Ben any suspicion that I thought he might have the prowess to seduce a teacher. Besides, I'd never know for sure if he told me the truth anyway, so it was pointless. There were a lot of bullshit rumors floating around the school at all times, but I kind of believed this one. Mrs. Leander was divorced, in her early 30s, and a looker. I could see how Ben would go for her. A lot of boys lusted after her. I could see where she'd be attracted to Ben too. He had a good bod, that pretty face of his, and light blond hair. A guy like that was probably a divorcees dream. The whole forbidden aspect of such a relationship made it hard to resist, I'm sure.

Jimmy snapped the ball to Jeremy and I plowed into Ben. I drove my shoulder right into his chest and lifted him off the ground before knocking him on his ass. I struggled through the defensive line, but Alex fumbled the ball before I got anywhere. Coach Brewer shouted some instructions and we lined up again.

Ben looked slightly fearful and he took up his position across from me. I was satisfied with his expression. It meant he feared me, but not enough yet. The Beta male needed to be put in his place.

I slammed Ben again, setting him out on his back. I dropped on him and lay full length on top of him. “What’s the matter, pretty boy, can’t take the heat?” I said in a stage whisper.

“Get off me,” he spat.

I just lay on top of him, keeping him trapped beneath me for a few more moments, letting him know who was in control. *Yeah, I bet you do Mrs. Leander*, I thought, and then got up.

We scrimmaged some more, and then Coach had us passing. He wasn’t happy with Jeremy’s long passes and he wanted the rest of us to practice them as well. Jeremy did the bulk of the passing, but any of us could be called upon to do so at any time. Jimmy and I especially had to be ready to fill in. If Jeremy were injured, Jimmy was the backup and I was next in line. I thought again how wonderful it would be if Jimmy moved away or something. It would be nice to have him out of my way.