

# *Someone Is Watching*

## Chapter 1: The Varsity Wrestling Squad

Zac was like a wildcat; sleek, strong, and quick. I'd always had a certain admiration for him. He had a bit of an attitude and was kind of a punk, but his skill as a wrestler couldn't be denied.

Anyone could tell, just by looking at him, how powerful he was. His shoulders and chest were broad and thick; his arms were knotted with muscle. He had tremendous upper body strength, as well as powerful legs. He was a force to be reckoned with.

He stood waiting on the mat

"Ethan!" Coach Zeglis called me forward.

Mentally, I thought, *Oh shit! Not me!* Outwardly, I approached the mat with calm and confidence. I could feel the other guys looking at me with relief that *they* didn't have to take on Zac. I was an excellent wrestler and had some slick moves, but Zac was a match for anyone. My heart raced. I knew this was it. This is where I proved myself to Coach. How well I did against Zac would determine if I made varsity or if my uncle would force me off the team. I didn't necessarily have to win to make the varsity squad, but I needed to make a good showing against Zac.

We shook hands. Zac eyed me cautiously. He knew I was no pansy. One of the things that made him so damned good was that he never let his guard down. He never allowed himself to get overconfident. He treated each opponent as someone who could take him down.

Coach put me in the referee's position. I got down on my hands and knees and Zac took his position with one arm around my waist. I could sense Zac's watchfulness as we waited for the whistle. His body was taut and just waiting to spring into action. All eyes were on us. Everyone knew it would be an exciting match to watch. I narrowed my focus to just Zac. No one else mattered. I concentrated on his arm encircling my waist. I was keenly aware of my own muscles, tensed and ready to act. The gym grew still. I could hear nothing but the sound of my own breath and that of Zac. It was as if time had slowed.

Coach blew the whistle and I snapped into motion, fast as lightning. Zac was ready for me. His strong arms held me, muscles bulging. I struggled to break free, channeling every ounce of power in my body to escape. I shifted my weight, but Zac followed me, kept his balance. His arm still encircled me, holding me prisoner. I couldn't break free. I concentrated on his stance in my mind, pictured where his feet were, and calculated his center of balance. I surged sideways, causing him to shift position to maintain control. Zac was ready for me, but he wasn't ready for the next move. I shifted straight back, a position he could not accommodate in his new stance. I broke free and jumped to my feet!

In a real match, my escape would've been worth a point. During my tryout, it was worth much more. I was exhilarated that I'd accomplished an escape from Zac, but our match was far from over. We circled one another like two lions; muscles tensed, ready to pounce. Our eyes searched for weakness and error. We collided, each with his own agenda, each with his own moves and counter

moves. It was a game of strength and skill, ever changing, ever shifting. Both of us knew there was far more than mere strength involved. This was a contest of wit as much as of muscle.

I fainted; Zac ignored me, crushing my ploy, swatting me down like an annoying insect. I didn't let it bother me. I just tried a new tack. Zac came after me. I was ready. My shoulders weren't going down on the mat. I fainted again, Zac countered in a way I'd not expected, opening himself in a manner I had not considered. I adapted and slammed him to the mat. I fell on him, using my weight to subdue him. He lifted me into the air. I forced his powerful arms back down. Our muscles bulged and strained. It was a show of pure brute strength, then skill, and then strength yet again. It was an ever-shifting contest.

If it'd been a scored match, I would've had three points to Zac's zero. My escape was worth one and the takedown was worth another two. I was gaining more confidence. I was beating him. I knew anything could happen, however. The situation could change with lightning speed in a wrestling match. I'd seen more than a few wrestlers get beat when it looked like they clearly had the upper hand. All Zac had to do to win was pin me to the mat. If he did that, my points wouldn't matter. And if there was one thing Zac was known for, it was pinning his opponents. I was doing well, but it was far from over.

Zac and I struggled, each of us seeking the advantage. His bulging muscles, curly blond hair, and intense green eyes were a distraction. I'd taken him down, but I couldn't pin him. I couldn't quite force his shoulders to the mat. I had to focus.

Zac twisted and turned, all the while grappling with me, trying to get me on my back. I was glad I'd wrestled "up" all those years, competing in the next higher weight class. By doing so, I was matched against boys bigger than me; some of them as much as nine pounds heavier, which might not sound like a lot, but believe me, it can make a big difference, especially if that nine pounds is all muscle. I needed every ounce of strength and experience I had to wrestle Zac. I was proud that I was doing so well against him. I hoped my good showing would earn me a spot on the varsity squad.

I perceived my chance—dangerous, possibly fatal, but I took it. I slammed Zac to the mat. He wasn't quick enough to counter me, to make the move that would easily have put him on top of me. If he'd seen his chance and taken it, I would've been doomed. He missed the opportunity, however. Instead, he squirmed beneath me, unable to break my hold, his powerful body impotent against my maneuver. I leaned into him, pressing his shoulders to the mat—closer, closer...almost there. We strained against each other with everything we had. Zac's shoulders touched the mat. Coach pounded his fist down near us. I'd done it! I'd won!

Zac and I rose from the mat, hearts pounding, breath coming in gasps, sweat trickling down our torsos. I smiled, thrilled with my victory. Zac glared at me. He didn't like to lose. That's where we were different. Zac was all about winning, where I was all about wrestling. It was the contest that mattered to me, the struggle—winning was the goal, but losing only meant the chance to try again. Zac turned his back to me and stalked away. I looked over at Coach. He gave me a thumbs up. I'd done it! I was in!

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I slammed the screen door and ran upstairs to my bedroom whooping like a maniac. I couldn't restrain my joy at making the varsity squad. Uncle Jack would almost *have* to let me wrestle. Even he had to recognize making varsity was a big deal.

I stripped off my shirt and jeans and changed into my work clothes. This was one day that

I wanted to get to work fast. Being on the varsity team would take up a little extra time and I wanted to prove to Uncle Jack that I could handle both that and my work on the farm.

I ran back downstairs and grabbed the orange juice from the fridge. I took a few quick gulps from the carton, and then set it back on the shelf. I closed the door. There was a note stuck to it with a magnet, “Ethan, your girl called, she wants you to call her back as soon as you get home.” I looked at the phone, then thought better of it. I was half an hour late already—Kim would have to wait. I raced out the door and sprinted to the barn.

I repeated most of the chores I’d performed in the morning. My life was a never-ending circle of feeding chickens, watering cattle, and performing an endless succession of similar tasks. I didn’t really mind it all that much. I liked being around all the animals, especially the horses. I derived a certain satisfaction from straining my muscles and pushing my body to its limits. It was just that sometimes I felt like all I ever did was farm work; everything else took a back seat to it, and more often than not, my work kept me from doing other things most boys took for granted. I don’t know how many times I’d passed up invitations to parties, movies, cookouts, and the like because I had to work on the farm.

I lifted a hundred-pound feed sack, dumping it into the feed bin. It didn’t feel like it weighed a hundred pounds to me. It wasn’t light, but most of my friends couldn’t have lifted it, and I whipped it around like it was a five-pound bag of sugar. I watched my biceps as they flexed. That’s one thing I got from farming. If I’d been a city boy, I probably wouldn’t have been half the wrestler I was. I surely wouldn’t have had nearly as good of a build. I was proud of my body. I worked hard on it, and took great pains to take care of it. After all, what was I but my body? Sure, I valued my thoughts, my personality, and all that, but the truth was most of what I could do, I was able to do because of my body. My mind was important to me too, but I saw even it in physical terms. Weren’t thinking, studying, and all that like working out? Reading a book or figuring out a math problem strengthened my brain, just like lifting heavy sacks of grain strengthened my back and arms. I didn’t ignore my mind, I just thought of it as another muscle.

I brushed the feed dust off my shirt and headed for the new fencerow. I knew Nathan would be there setting poles. We’d been working on that particular task for days, and still would be for days to come. I felt a little sorry for Nathan. Digging all those postholes seemed too big a task for him.

I eagerly anticipated chatting with Nathan; I couldn’t wait to tell him about wrestling practice. Nathan was a good listener, hanging on my every word, taking it as gospel. I remember when he first starting working for Uncle Jack. He was quiet and shy; he spoke little, but he listened intently as I explained how to hoe the garden, how to drive the tractor, and how to do the thousand other things that a farm required. Nathan knew next to nothing about farming, but he was a quick study. His bright eyes sucked in every detail, and his sharp ears committed every instruction to memory. It was a rare day when I ever had to explain anything to him twice.

When I caught up with him he was hard at it. His chest and back were covered with sweat mixed with grime. There were little trails down his torso where the sweat had streamed down, washing away the dirt that had adhered to his slim body. Nathan was red faced and breathing hard, but doggedly attacking the earth with the post-hole digger. One thing was for sure about Nathan—he was a good worker. Even Uncle Jack had remarked on that a time or two. If Uncle Jack thought someone was a hard worker, they were without question.

“The cavalry has arrived,” I announced, taking the post-hole digger from him. Nathan dropped down on his butt, clearly grateful for the break.

“Where ya been, Ethan?”

“Wrestling.”

“Yeah, how’d that go?”

“I made varsity!” I chattered a mile a minute. Making varsity had me all excited and I was just bursting to talk to someone about it. Nathan smiled and listened as I went on and on while sinking the digger into the hole.

In just a few minutes, I was sweating up a storm. The sunlight was practically gone and evening was settling over the farm, but it was still hot as blazes. I paused for a moment and pulled off my shirt, before attacking the posthole once again. Nathan and I talked for a long time about wrestling, and then went on to other topics. We seemed to have discussed everything in the few weeks he’d been working on the farm, but there was always something else to talk about just around the corner. I’d never found anyone who was half as easy to talk to as Nathan. I even found myself telling him things I wouldn’t have shared with anyone else. Nathan was always interested in whatever I had to say. It didn’t seem to matter one bit what I talked about, he listened like I was telling him the secrets of the universe. I liked that.

I rested on the handle of the digger for a moment, allowing Nathan to take another turn at digging. We’d managed to set two posts for the new section of fence while we were talking. We were far from done. That seemed to be the way of farmwork; no matter how I strained my back or worked my muscles until they were sore, there was always another task that lay before me. It was the eternity of the Indiana farm.

I wiped my sweaty brow and chest with my shirt, and then hung it from my belt loop once more. I raised my hand to my eyes, shading them from the setting sun, and could just make out the figure of my uncle driving the tractor along the edge of the huge cornfield to the north of the house. Jack was always demanding, but he put in every bit as much time on the farm as I did, and more. He was a little rough around the edges and often pissed me off, but he was my only real family and there was a special bond between us. Both my parents had been killed in an accident when I was only ten and I’d lived the last seven years of my life on my uncle’s farm.

I watched Nathan as he worked. His slim muscles tensed and flexed as he jammed the posthole digger deep into the earth, drew the handles apart, and lifted the dark soil out of the hole. Nathan was a good four inches shorter than me, standing at only 5’6” and was underweight for his height. His slim body looked better now that it was tanned, but his ribs still poked out, giving him the look of someone who didn’t get enough to eat. Nathan’s family was dirt poor and I wondered if maybe he didn’t go without sometimes.

I helped Nathan drop the post into the newly excavated hole and then he held it straight while I shoveled dirt around the pole and tamped it in.

“Supper time,” I said.

I was drenched in sweat. Nathan’s hair was plastered to the sides of his face, making it look almost brown instead of blond. Nathan was a cute boy, despite his slight build. His face possessed an innocent beauty that was set off by his light blond hair and blue eyes. I pulled my mind away from such thoughts—I didn’t like that I noticed.

Nathan and I walked to a great, spreading maple tree that offered plenty of cool shade. Not far away was an ancient water pump that still worked, despite years of rust. I pumped the handle several times and chilly water rushed out the spout. Nathan leaned over and dowsed his entire upper body, washing away the sweat and grime. Then Nathan pumped the handle while I took my turn under the cool, refreshing water—a pure delight on a humid August evening. I gathered a few mouthfuls in my hands and drank. The chilly liquid felt as good sliding down my throat as it did

coursing over my sweaty body.

We seated ourselves under the maple, much refreshed. I pulled a couple of sandwiches out of a pack I always carried to the fields and handed one to Nathan. He gladly accepted. His eyes really lit up when I pulled out big slices of chocolate cake and a couple of cold soft drinks. Nathan and I shared a love of all things chocolate.

There was something special about eating outside. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but the sandwich just tasted better and the soda seemed sweeter and colder. I leaned back against the trunk of the tree and relaxed. It was a beautiful evening and the sky was turning a brilliant rosy-purple. I loved being outdoors.

One would think that being outside wouldn't have been such a big deal to me. After all, I was outside more often than not. There were times I didn't like it, especially during the icy Indiana winters when the temperatures dropped to near zero. Most of the time I reveled in it. I loved the summer best. There was nothing better than pulling my shirt off and getting all hot and sweaty on a steamy summer's day, unless perhaps it was diving into a pond a little later to cool off, or dowsing myself under the water pump. I enjoyed the fresh smell of spring too, when everything was new and green and the lambs were beginning to walk on wobbly legs. I also liked the autumn with its cool crisp days when a flannel shirt felt so warm against my skin. Even winter had its attractions. There was no snow quite so beautiful as the snow that fell on Uncle Jack's farm. It lay in a giant carpet, undisturbed, as far as the eye could see. Of all the seasons, summer was my favorite, however. It could never get too hot for me.

As we ate and talked, my eyes roamed over Nathan's jeans and the worn shirt that hung at his side. He wore the same clothes every day. I'd even seen him in those same jeans at school. They had a sizable tear on the right thigh that revealed Nathan's tanned flesh. The knees were worn nearly through, and even the belt loops looked like they'd seen better days. I'd have used them as work clothes, or just tossed them out, but they seemed to be Nathan's only pair. He always wore the same shoes too, a pair of work shoes that resembled hiking boots.

Nathan wolfed down his sandwich, making me wonder if he'd had any breakfast or lunch. I wondered if he'd get anything else to eat when he went home. I made a mental note to make sure I gave him something before he left. His protruding ribs spoke of many missed meals.

"Crappy way to spend an evening, huh?" I asked.

"It's not so bad," said Nathan.

"Wouldn't you rather be swimming, or watching a movie, or just hanging out, or doing anything?"

"Yeah," Nathan admitted, "but this is okay too. Besides working for your uncle is like joining a health club. I get a workout here every day, *and* he pays me!"

I laughed. "I guess you could look at it that way."

"I'm a lot stronger than I was when I started."

"Yeah, I can tell," I said. I felt myself turning a little red, but my face was so flushed with heat I doubt Nathan could detect the change.

"Really?" Nathan was clearly pleased that I'd noticed the improvement in his musculature.

"Sure, you're a little broader in the shoulders and chest, and your arms look a little thicker. Just a little, but I can see a difference."

"That mean someday I'll look like you?" Nathan spoke with such open admiration I was embarrassed. I'd never learned to take compliments well. Nathan's eyes roved over my torso, admiring the thick muscles of my chest, my baseball sized biceps, and my flat, hard stomach. He had

a look of hero worship in his eyes that kind of made me feel proud of myself.

“Sure,” I answered. “I’ve been doing this stuff for seven years. Of course, I also lift weights to train for wrestling, when I get the chance.” I looked at Nathan’s slim form again. “How old are you anyway, Nathan?”

“Guess.”

I was a junior at school and Nathan was a sophomore. He looked about fourteen, but he couldn’t possibly be that young. I took a stab at it.

“Fifteen.”

“Nope. Sixteen, almost seventeen. I’m surprised you guessed even that high. Most people think I’m just a little kid.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Nathan was kind of small. Instead of responding, I unwrapped my cake. The plastic wrap stuck to the icing and pulled a good deal of it off. I licked it clean before dumping it back in the pack. Nathan did the same and laughed.

“You know, I think it just might be a sin to waste good chocolate,” he said. I couldn’t have agreed more.

Nathan looked at me thoughtfully.

“Don’t you like it here?” he asked.

“Sure I do. It’s just that I’d like to have more time to do other things. I’d like to be able to go out with my friends, have some fun, and just hang out like most of the guys I know. I have to spend most of my free time working.”

“I don’t have many friends,” said Nathan quietly. I could tell the words issuing from his lips saddened him a great deal.

“You have me,” I said. Nathan jerked his head up. He looked more than anything like a dog that had just been invited for a walk.

“You mean it?”

“Sure I do. You didn’t know we were friends?”

“I just thought we worked together was all,” said Nathan.

“Well, we do that sure, but I like you. I enjoy your company and I like talking to you. It’s a lot more fun when you’re here. Sounds like we’re friends to me.”

Nathan smiled. It was good to see him smile; he did it all too infrequently.

“We can do something together sometime, away from the farm,” I said. “If you want.”

“I’d sure like that,” said Nathan.

“We’ll do it. As soon as we get the time.”

All too soon it was time to get back to work. Uncle Jack would have a cow if we took too long a break.

“Here,” I said, tossing Nathan a couple of apples. “I’m stuffed. If you don’t want them you can feed them to the horses later.” Nathan made a bag of his shirt and secreted them away. I knew the horses would never see those apples.

We walked back to the fence row and I started digging a new hole.

“What’s your little brother like?” I asked.

“He’s cool. Seems pretty smart for a nine year old.”

“You’ll have to bring him with you sometime. He might like seeing the farm.”

“Yeah, I think he’d enjoy that.”

I’d never met Nathan’s little brother, Dave, but I’d seen him walking with Nathan after school a couple of times. He had blond hair just like his brother and seemed almost like a miniature

version of him. He had the same gaunt, underfed look, the same serious expression on his little face. He was smiling when I saw him, however. He seemed a happy boy, which was more that I could say for his big brother.

“How are your parents?” I asked. Nathan suddenly grew quiet. I knew I’d said the wrong thing, but it seemed an innocent enough question. I made a mental note to avoid that topic in the future, but I wondered what bothered him about it.

There was silence as I continued to dig. It was a companionable silence, however. I found Nathan’s presence comforting and I think he was at ease around me.

“Here, help me with this pole,” I said, as I dug out the final few inches of dirt.

Nathan and I lifted up the heavy, creosote-soaked pole and let the end slide into the hole. It fell away from our hands and dropped straight in until it hit bottom. Nathan held it level while I shoveled dirt around the sides and stomped it down. It was one more fence pole in an endless line. I felt like the railway workers must have when they were laying the transcontinental railroad.

“Come on—let’s see if we can finish another before it gets completely dark.”

Nathan followed me, measuring out the distance to the next pole. When he selected the spot, I started digging again.

It was dark before we finished setting the next pole in place. It was too dark to do it properly, so we left the filling and leveling until the next day. We stood and talked for a little bit more. It was a clear night, with the stars shining bright and beautiful. I could see a gentle glow to the east that was the little town of Verona, its streetlights lighting up the night sky. On the farm, all was dark and no light obscured the heavens. I gazed at the stars, wondering what was out there. The immense vastness above me made me feel small and insignificant. What was my life when compared to all that? I was just a tiny speck in the universe. Somehow I found that comforting.

It was growing late. Nathan bid me farewell, gathered up his sweaty shirt, and walked towards home. I strolled across the pasture to the house, still looking at the stars.

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Uncle Jack still wasn’t in from the fields yet, so I grabbed a quick shower, pulled on a pair of boxers, then walked downstairs. Being able to walk around practically naked sure felt good on a sultry August night. Even so, beads of sweat were beginning to form on my brow. I looked at the note on the refrigerator. I knew I needed to call Kim, but I wasn’t exactly looking forward to the conversation. I still wasn’t quite sure how she’d ended up becoming my girlfriend.

I should’ve known I was headed in that direction that day at Koontz Lake. I could tell by the way Kim’s eyes drifted over my body that she was interested in me. A lot of girls looked me over, especially when I wasn’t wearing a shirt. Sometimes I even liked to check myself out in the mirror. Anyway, Kim was checking me out as we talked and I noticed some of the guys watching us. She was pretty and all curvy, but I wasn’t all that interested in her. She was certainly interested in me, however, that much was obvious. The guys were watching us and listening in on our conversation. They knew as well as I did that Kim had a thing for me. I knew they’d think there was something wrong with me if I didn’t do something, so I asked her out. She said “yes” almost before I was done asking.

I hadn’t planned to have a girlfriend. I hadn’t even really thought about it. But, all of the sudden, I had one. We walked to this little burger place not far from the lake and I bought her a milkshake. We sat there and talked a long time. I did enjoy her company, but I wondered what I’d

gotten myself into. The way she kept looking at me made me a little uncomfortable. I felt like I was a juicy steak and she was a dog drooling over me. I know Kim wouldn't have appreciated the comparison, but that's how I felt.

She called me that very evening, and then twice that night. She made me promise to call her the next day. I did. Later the same day she called me again. Just before I went to sleep, I called her. I thought it was the thing to do. I felt like I lived on the phone. Uncle Jack had even taken to teasing me about it. Why did Kim have this need to talk to me every five minutes? What was it about girls? We hadn't been on our first real date yet and she had to be constantly reassured I liked her. Arrrrrrrrgggggggggggggggggggh!

I dialed her number. I sighed. I already knew it by heart.

"Kim, hi, it's Ethan."

"Ethan!" I could almost hear the swoon in her voice. I must admit, it kind of made me feel good about myself.

"My uncle said you called. I was out working."

"Yeah, you just get my message?"

"Yep," I lied. "I called you the very first thing."

"Really?"

"Of course." I wasn't big on lying, but what did it hurt in such a case? It was just a little lie to make her feel good.

"How were tryouts?"

"I made the varsity squad!" I was getting enthused. The thing was I wasn't nearly as excited telling Kim about it as I had been telling Nathan.

"Great, I knew you would. I bet you look so sexy in your uniform." Oh geesh! I ignored her last comment.

"Want to come watch one of my matches sometime?"

"I want to watch all of them, at least the home meets."

"We won't have one for a couple of weeks, but I'll let you know when it is."

"I'm really looking forward to Friday night," she said.

"Me too." I couldn't figure out if I was lying or not this time. Part of me was looking forward to Friday night, part of me wasn't. It would've been cool going with Kim just as friends, but I wasn't too keen on the whole boyfriend-girlfriend idea. It was all new territory for me, and kind of scary.

The rest of our conversation was pretty dull, not that it had been too exciting up to that point. I thought I'd never get off that phone. Every time I tried to end the conversation, Kim started in on a new topic. Girls!

When Uncle Jack came in he was bone tired and kind of grumpy. I decided not to say anything about varsity until I could catch him in a better mood. I was on the brink of exhaustion myself. Wrestling practice, then a few hours of digging, had siphoned away my strength. I closed myself in my room and did my homework. It was midnight before I finally got to bed. My muscles ached. I think I fell asleep before my head even touched the pillow.

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I awoke at five A.M. the next morning, just like I did practically every morning. Farm work was always staring me in the face as soon as I opened my eyes. I sat up and stretched my arms above my head, then stood, allowing the sheets to fall from my naked body. My morning hard-on swung

between my legs as I walked into the bathroom to take a leak. I splashed cold water on my face to bring myself to consciousness, and then walked back into my room to pull on boxers, jeans, and a t-shirt.

As I did every morning, I walked to the barn, fed the chickens, gathered eggs, slopped the hogs, filled all the troughs with water, and performed an endless series of tasks. In the winter my chores were even worse. In addition to everything else, I had to feed the horses and cattle and break up the ice that formed in the troughs. The cold of the northern Indiana winters could be almost unbearable, too, adding to my discomfort. Winter was far away, however. The cattle grazed in the pasture and the horses ate sweet grasses on the hilltops. Still, I had more than enough tasks to perform.

Once done, I headed back inside, undressed, showered, shaved, dressed for school, then made myself some toast for breakfast. I liked my toast best with plum or blueberry jam. It was a routine I knew only too well. Occasionally the pattern was broken—sometimes Uncle Jack made breakfast, and sometimes I didn't need to shave.

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I was still a little tired when second period P.E. rolled around. My body never seemed to quite recuperate from the rounds of farm work and wrestling practice. Juniors didn't have to take P.E., but it was something I enjoyed. There were only about five of us juniors in a class of twenty-eight, the rest were sophomores. It was the one class I shared with Nathan. It was a little odd, but Nathan and I didn't talk much at school. Of course, he was a sophomore and I was a junior. Few juniors would degrade themselves by talking to a lowly sophomore. We all tended to hang out with people in our own class.

Second period was also the only class I shared with Jon, my best friend. I was so busy I rarely got to see him outside of gym, lunch, and a few minutes before I had wrestling practice and he had soccer practice. We went out on Friday nights quite a bit too, since that was the one night I was usually spared from farm work. There was also the occasional Sunday together, but I didn't get to see Jon nearly as much as I liked.

I caught sight of Jon in the locker room as he was undressing. Jon was one good-looking boy. In fact, he was almost too good looking to be a guy, although I'd never have told him that. Hell, I'd never remark on his looks at all. I didn't fail to notice them, however. Jon had coal black hair, which he wore kind of long in the back. His eyes were brown and that, combined with his finely arched eyebrows, made him look both cute and serious at the same time.

My eyes roved over Jon's chest. He didn't have quite the build I did, but his torso looked like some artist had sculpted it to perfection. He pulled off his briefs as he was facing away from me, exposing his taut, well-rounded little butt. I tore my eyes away and focused on changing into my gym uniform. I felt guilty about looking at Jon the way I did sometimes. I wasn't even sure what it was all about. I just knew that I liked looking at him, just like I enjoyed being with him. Jon was a lot of fun and hilarious as hell. I was always happy when I was with him.

I found my eyes drawn to him once more as we did calisthenics. Jon looked good in the blue and white colors of our school. Hell, Jon looked good in anything. I couldn't help but watch as his biceps bulged while he did push ups. We took turns holding each other's ankles while we did sit-ups. Jon's shirt was a little short and exposed his midriff. He had a hard, six-pack stomach and a thin trail of dark hair just below his navel that dipped into his shorts. Looking up his shirt made me breathe

a little funny. Sometimes I got a weird feeling when I looked at Jon; a feeling I didn't quite comprehend. I wasn't so sure I wanted to understand.

I knew I shouldn't be looking at Jon the way I did, but I couldn't help it. My eyes seemed drawn to him as if guided by some unknown power. Perhaps it was just our close friendship. Just looking at Jon made me remember all the laughs we'd had and all the crazy shit we'd pulled. Jon was a wild boy; well, so was I. We were forever doing something crazy (and quite often stupid). Any Sunday might find us exploring an abandoned house, scaling a cliff, or climbing high enough in trees to break our necks if we ever fell. I could go on forever just listing the many ways we risked our lives. I loved it; it made me feel so alive and was such a departure from the routine of the farm.

Still, there was something more about Jon, something that drew me to him. I pushed the thoughts out of mind, as I always did when I started to think too much about Jon. Sometimes too much thinking wasn't a good thing. Some thoughts were better left un-thought.

I turned my mind to wrestling. I wished I'd been able to talk to Uncle Jack about it the night before. He'd never been thrilled that I wrestled. Each year he resisted it more, and every season I had to swear not to let my chores slip before he'd let me join the team. He hadn't said anything specific about it recently, but he'd been hinting around that he didn't want me on the wrestling team this year. Thank God I'd made varsity. If I hadn't, that would've been it for wrestling. Jack would've said I'd wasted enough time on it, time better spent working on the farm. He wasn't being unreasonable. There was more than enough work to do. We even had acreage we couldn't use because there just weren't enough hours in the day.

I couldn't bear the thought of life without wrestling. It meant the world to me. I can't quite describe just what it was about the sport that I so loved, but love it I did. There was just something about pitting myself against another guy, with no one to help me, with only my own brains and brawn to depend upon. I thrived on the competition. When I was struggling against another guy, the sheer power and strength I felt coursing through my body made me feel vital and alive.

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"Ethan!" Jon slapped me on the back as I dumped my books in my locker and slammed it shut.

I followed him out of habit. Every day after school, we each bought a Coke and sat together until it was time for practice. Jon was a soccer player and not a wrestler, but our practices were at about the same time. I always enjoyed our little talks. Jon had the ability to make every moment fun. I was usually content just to be near him and watch his face. Being close to Jon brought me a peace and contentment I seldom experienced.

"Ethan, when are you going to teach me to ride like you promised?" asked Jon.

"Huh? Oh yeah!" I smiled at the thought. "Um, I'm taking Kim out Friday night, then..."

"Hold it, back up there—you're what?"

"I'm taking Kim out. Oh yeah, I didn't tell you about her, did I?"

"No-o-o-o!" said Jon with great exaggeration. "Dude, spill!"

"Well, just before school started, I saw her out at Koontz Lake, you know, that day your parents made you go to your aunt's in Ohio? Anyway, we were talking and she was kinda giving me the eye..."

"Hot for your bod, huh?"

I smiled and turned a little red, but chose not to answer.

“I could tell she had a thing for me, so I asked her if I could buy her a milkshake. We went to that little burger place near the lake, you know the one. Anyway, we had fun. We’ve been talking a lot on the phone since then and this Friday, we’re going on a date.”

“Why didn’t you take her out last Friday?”

“I was with you.”

“Yeah, but I would’ve understood if you wanted to go out with her instead. What are friends for?”

“Well, uh…” I didn’t really know what to say. The truth was I enjoyed spending time with Jon more than I did with Kim, or anyone else for that matter. Something told me it wouldn’t be wise to admit that, so I kept my mouth shut about it. I knew girls were supposed to be the number one priority of every teenaged boy, but they weren’t that high on my list. I guess I was a “late bloomer”. I was excited about going out with Kim, I guessed, but I’d really rather have been spending time with Jon.

“Anyway,” I said, to get the conversation back on track. “I have to work all day Saturday, but you could come over on Sunday. I’ll probably have some stuff to do in the morning, but if you get there about noon, we’d have the rest of the day to goof around.”

“Sounds good. Now tell me more about Kim!”

“There’s nothing to tell. We just talk on the phone.”

“Come on, give! She’s got a hot bod. You gotta feel of it yet, huh?”

“There’s nothin’ to tell, man. Really! Hey, I can make up some shit if you like, but nothing’s happened—so far.”

“Okay, I’ll believe you—for now.” Jon looked at his watch. “Shit! We’d better get going or we’ll be late. See ya!”

Jon was gone in a flash. I made my way to the locker room and changed, eager for my first practice as a member of the varsity team.

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I didn’t get a chance to talk with Uncle Jack for two days. That wasn’t surprising. Uncle Jack was generally little more than a profile in the distance, riding a tractor or checking on fields of corn, wheat, or soybeans. Sometimes I almost felt as if I lived alone, unless I wanted to be by myself. Then Uncle Jack was right there. He seemed to have a knack for being around just when I wanted him elsewhere.

I was apprehensive, but at the same time I wanted to get things settled. I didn’t like not knowing if I’d be allowed to continue wrestling or not. Despite making varsity, I felt a cloud of doom over my head. I didn’t know why I felt that way, but I did. I hoped it wasn’t some kind of bad omen.

Just after returning from practice, I found Jack in the kitchen, fixing himself a sandwich.

“Little late, aren’t you Ethan?”

“Yes sir, I had wrestling practice. I made the varsity team.”

It was the first chance I’d had to tell him. He paused for a moment, but gave no hint of his reaction to my news. I swallowed hard. I had that queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that sometimes appeared when I was in a difficult situation.

“So this varsity team takes up even more time than junior varsity?”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I thought, *Oh shit, here it comes*. I just knew I’d be getting the “I need you here” lecture.

“It doesn’t take up much more time, just half an hour a day, sometimes less.”

“I see.” Jack took a bite of his sandwich and chewed slowly. My heart pounded in my chest. I didn’t say anything.

“You know I had to hire Nathan to take up some of the slack created by you being at school.”

“Yes, sir. I appreciate that. And I know that wrestling keeps me away even more, but...”

Jack held up his hand. I waited for the ax to fall. I could see where this was going.

“Just don’t let it interfere with your work.”

That was it—that was all there was to it. As simple as that, I could stay on the team. I was elated, especially after thinking I was on the verge of losing wrestling. I was practically walking on air.

“Thanks, Uncle Jack!”

I detected the slightest hint of a smile on Jack’s face; it was practically an emotional outburst for him. Jack wasn’t much on showing feelings. He had a good heart, though.

“Nathan’s out working on that fence row. Get your butt out there and see if you two can get something done this evening.”

“Yes, sir!”

I ran upstairs and changed as fast as I could manage. Moments later I was running across the pasture as if my feet had wings. I felt as if I could dig a hundred postholes before dark.