
* CHAPTER ONE *

My heart sank when I saw the dry-erase board:



I'd been dreading it all week, ever since Coach Kilshaw had warned us there'd be an in-class competition in gym. I turned to my best friend, Jasper, who wasn't any happier than I was.

"Now guys can beat us up for school credit," I said.

"Won't they match us with someone our own size?" asked Jasper.

In my case, that meant "short." I scanned the possibilities in my gym class: Pinky Shroeder. Ethan Fogerty. Jasper. That new guy with wild black hair. None of us were in danger of being chosen "Athlete of the Year" at Gerald Ford Middle School.

"I hope you're right." I looked at the beefy jocks across the room, kids like Bruce "Bruiser" Pekarsky, "Abs" Tanaka, and Kyle Larson. They were bouncing around like restless zoo animals.



Coach Kilshaw blew his whistle.

"Today I'm assigning matchups for the tournament," he roared. "Now, you've all heard rumors about wrestling injuries – don't believe 'em. Rick Lambretta did NOT have a ruptured spleen."

Who's Rick Lambretta?

"Or spinal contusions." Coach shook his head. "Anyway, he's doing a lot better."



Jasper and I exchanged looks. Now Coach was reading off the first-round matchups: "Kirby Hammer – Quinn Romanoff. T-Bone Farrell – Luke Strohmer. Danny Shine –"

I held my breath.

"Bruiser Pekarisky," he finished.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!

My stomach dropped to my knees. The guy outweighed me by at least fifty pounds – besides, he was a Neanderthal who'd probably be out for blood! Jasper looked at me and groaned. It was the worst possible news.

For Bruiser too apparently. He frowned as he looked me up and down. "Oh, man."

