

1: SCHOOL DAZE

Tommy Ford smiled happily as he looked around the noisy dorm lobby. Heinz Hall, a four-story red brick building, was the oldest and only all-male dormitory on the Timian State College campus, and it had no air conditioning. Even with all the windows and doors open, the lobby of the Fdorm was hot and stuffy, crowded with students and parents fanning themselves with papers or magazines. A dozen students waited in line to check in and receive their room keys. Older students greeted one another with easy familiarity, while excited yet nervous freshmen like Tommy quietly surveyed their new surroundings.

As he patiently waited for his room key, Tommy looked around at the people in the lobby, overhearing portions of the assorted conversations going on around him. Suddenly, he felt the atmosphere in the lobby change. Everyone appeared to stand still, and the noise faded to silence. He watched as a handsome, well-built young man walked through the lobby with another student. The guy was tall and muscular, with black hair, mustache and goatee, a slightly crooked nose, sparkling blue eyes, and a smile that seemed to brighten the room. Wearing a pair of black jeans and a white t-shirt, he strode through the lobby with an air of confidence and assurance. He glanced toward Tommy and smiled. Struck by the attractiveness of the man, Tommy turned his head to watch the two men as they left the lobby.

"Yo, Ford, Thomas. Here are your keys," a young man called out, looking up from the dorm room assignment list.

Tommy blinked and shook his head as the noise from the people milling about the lobby returned in a rush. Episodes like that had happened to him before. His grandmother, a Wiccan practitioner, had explained that some people's life energy could be strong enough to overwhelm a person who was a sensitive. During the years that he had lived with her, she had trained him to control his own energy and how to recognize it in others. Nevertheless, it was rare enough that he was still surprised when an episode occurred. Hearing his name called again, he stared down at the person who was speaking.

"Welcome to Heinz Hall. You're on the third floor in room 301. This is your dorm key, your room key, and your mailbox key," he rattled off, pointing at each key. "Try not to lose them." He chuckled as he handed the keys to Tommy.

Tommy read the name badge. "Thank you, Jay. I'll make sure to keep them with me." He held the keys tightly. *At least Jay has a nice smile to make up for that bad hair.* Tommy smiled at the guy with the shaggy-dog look.

"I'm the resident assistant for the third floor. I'm in room 310, which is in the middle of the hallway," Jay said. "If you notice any problems on the floor, or if you have any problems with other students, please let me know. It's my job to keep things orderly. Serious issues will be handled by our resident director."

"Okay. Thanks."

"One more thing," Jay said, stopping the young man. "Your roommate is a freshman named Scott Smith. He hasn't arrived yet, so you get dibs on which side of the room you want."

"Cool." Tommy picked up his suitcase and turned.

"Don't forget to go to the student center and get your class assignments," Jay called after him.

"All right. Thanks," Tommy replied, then left the lobby to find his dorm room.

Tommy walked up two flights of stairs and to the end of the third floor hallway. Standing in front of the door to his room, he looked down the noisy hall where other students were moving into their rooms, happy that he would be in the end room on this side. There was one room next to his, number 303, and then a stairwell leading down and out of the dorm, separating the two end rooms from the rest. He hoped that it would be quieter than the center of the hallway, surrounded by other rooms. He opened the door, looked around the twenty by twenty room and started to laugh.

The walls and ceiling were beige, and the floor was covered with light green tiles. The steam heating unit and north facing windows, covered by dark beige curtains, were located on the wall opposite the door. The wall to the right of the door contained two floor-to-ceiling cabinets for hanging clothes and storage, and there were two four-drawer dressers located between those units. Two desks with shelving units above were situated in the middle of the floor, helping to divide the room in half. There were two desk chairs, one for each of the desks, and one large ugly green chair for guests. One twin bed was located next to the windows, and the other was against the corner of the walls to the left of the door.

The room was stifling, even without direct sunlight coming through the windows, on this late August Sunday morning. Tommy was grateful that he had first choice, as it appeared that the side of the room next to the windows would be the more comfortable. After putting his suitcase on the bed, Tommy opened the three windows to allow air into the room. He sat down on the bed and smiled wryly. It wasn't as comfortable as the queen-sized hotel bed he had slept on the previous night.

An hour later, after two trips to his car, Tommy had finished putting all of his clothes and personal belongings into his half of the room and making his bed. He placed his grandmother's old wooden trunk next to the head of the bed to use as a nightstand. It was a small trunk made of oak that had darkened over the years, with black owl-head metal handles on each of its sides. He had inherited the trunk and its special contents after his grandmother's death. On top of the trunk he placed a small white vase containing a single red silk rose. Then he stood back, wiped the sweat from his face, and looked around the room.

"Well, that's a little more livable."

A tenor voice spoke up from the hallway behind him, where he had left the door open to allow the air to circulate through the room. "It would be better if the walls weren't so damn ugly." The young man dropped his duffel bag on the floor and stood by Tommy's door.

Tommy laughed as he turned to see who had spoken. "Hi. I'm Tommy Ford." He walked over to shake hands.

"I'm Welby, Kyle. Freshman. Room 302. Don't lose the keys," he stated robotically as he held the keys up in front of him and then laughed. "It's nice to meet you, Tommy." He shook Tommy's hand. "I'm getting tired of hearing my last name first."

"I hear you, Kyle. And I still have to go pick up my class cards."

"If you wait up, I'll walk over with you. I have to do that too." Kyle picked up his bag, unlocked the door to his room, and took his bag inside.

Following Kyle into room 302, Tommy noted that it was a mirror image of his own. "Your room is much brighter than mine."

"It's also much hotter because of that damn southern exposure," Kyle replied, as he began putting his things away on the side of the room away from the windows.

Tommy walked over and looked out the windows, where the sun was shining in. "But you have a beautiful view of the dining hall," he teased.

"I hope we don't get the beautiful smell from the dining hall as well," Kyle responded wryly. "Are you ready to go, Ford Tommy?"

Tommy laughed. "Yes, I am, Welby Kyle."

"I love this campus, all these trees and grass courtyards. There are a lot of places to sit and watch the world go by." Tommy took a deep breath of the pine-scented air.

"It certainly helps to have all this shade on such a hot day," Kyle replied.

"I wouldn't have thought it got this hot in the mountains," Tommy said as they walked through the campus on their way to the student center.

"Heat rises, although we do have all these beautiful shade trees that help keep the heat contained."

Tommy glanced around the area. "I never thought about it like that. I'm from South Jersey, where it's always hot and humid during the summer, even in the shade."

Walking by the college radio station, they noticed a group of students and parents trooping after a woman from Administration. Tommy recognized her from his orientation visit during his high school's spring break in April. Kyle stopped, and he and Tommy stood back to listen.

"Timian State College began its history in 1867 as a seminary and normal school, educating and training men to become teachers. In the mid-1920s, it began training both men and women and became a teachers' college. As this area grew, and more students began coming here, Timian became fully accredited in the state university system," the woman lectured.

As they left the group behind and continued their stroll to the student center, Kyle smiled at Tommy and mimicked the stock presentation. "Over here on your left is the library. It was built in 1920."

"No, dude, that's the science building. It was built in 1974." Tommy laughed and slapped Kyle on the back.

"Are you sure it's not the English building, built in 1953?" Kyle asked facetiously.

"Obviously, we shouldn't have been daydreaming as she was telling us about all of the buildings."

"They must have missed orientation this summer." Kyle smiled sympathetically toward the group.

"Signing into the dorms, getting the class schedules, *and* having to listen to her on the same day — that's brutal," Tommy said as they reached their destination.

Tommy and Kyle looked around at the hundreds of students standing in lines snaking throughout the inside of the student center. Most of the students were talking and laughing, raising the decibel level way beyond loud. The majority of the lines were for those who had not pre-registered during summer orientation and now had to select from whatever classes were still available. A smaller section of the center had lines for the students who had pre-registered. Tommy and Kyle walked over to that area and stood in their respective alphabetical lines.

"Last name?" the young man asked without looking up from his seat behind the table.

"Ford, Thomas," Tommy replied, looking down onto a head of wavy brown hair. He smiled as he watched the guy's long fingers flip through the stack of envelopes.

"Here we go — Ford, Thomas." The young man looked up and smiled. "Check out the class cards inside and make sure they are the classes that you selected."

Tommy stood there for a second, staring into a pair of sparkling emerald eyes. "Uh, okay," he stammered as he accepted the envelope.

"I'm Jack," said the young man with the striking eyes. "I notice from the envelope that we'll be in the same psych class."

Tommy was having difficulty keeping his mind off Jack's eyes as he thumbed through the six cards that listed the class, its day and time, and the professor. "Uh, that's cool," he managed to mumble. "Sorry. These all look right to me."

"It's okay, Thomas."

"Tommy," he said quickly. As he looked away from Jack's face, he saw the red and black Kappa Lambda Pi crest on the black t-shirt.

"Relax, Tommy. It's the first day; freshmen are always a little nervous. I'll look for you in class this week."

"Okay, Jack. Thank you." He turned away, shaking his head and feeling stupid about getting caught staring. Although Jack didn't appear to be offended by his attention, he couldn't believe he had acted like such a fool.

Kyle rejoined Tommy outside the student center. "Did you get all your classes?"

"Yeah, it's a tough schedule," Tommy said, still distracted by his actions inside.

“Try being pre-med.” Kyle slapped Tommy on the back. “Let’s go get lunch. I’m hungry enough to try the cafeteria,” he said with a laugh.

After lunch, Tommy and Kyle walked over to the campus bookstore to purchase their textbooks. Tommy also bought a pair of shorts, a muscle t-shirt, a short sleeved t-shirt, a pair of sweats and a sweatshirt in the school colors of navy blue and gold. As they returned to their rooms, Tommy saw his door slightly ajar. Bidding good-bye to Kyle, he walked into his own room.

“Hi, I’m Tommy Ford.” He tried not to look startled by the pale young man’s spiked hair — dyed black with blue tips — or the pointy stud sticking out beneath the young man’s lower lip. He put out a hand to greet his roommate.

“Hey, dude. Scott Smith.” The young man smiled brightly at Tommy and shook the offered hand. “I’m finally getting some freedom from my parents. It’s so cool.”

Tommy returned the smile. “It is cool.” Tommy noticed that he and Scott were both six feet tall, but Scott was much thinner and paler. “What’s your major?”

“Business administration. What about you?”

“I’m hoping to get degrees in psychology and sociology.”

“Whoa, dude. A Brainiac!” Scott teased as he continued putting his belongings in their place. “How’d you get stuck in the jock dorm?”

“I’m going to try out for the tennis team in the spring,” Tommy answered.

“Good luck. I’m hoping to make the varsity baseball team as a shortstop. They’ll probably put me on the junior varsity, though. Some people have a bit of a problem with my Goth look.” He briefly stood in the middle of the room with his arms spread out and waited for a reaction.

Tommy chuckled. “It is different, but we’d have a pretty boring world if everyone looked and acted the same.”

“That’s cool, dude, an open-minded Brainiac. I like you. I hope you don’t mind my techno music.”

“As long as you don’t mind my country music,” Tommy returned with a laugh.

Over at Kappa Lambda Pi House

“*Hola, hermano*,” a deep Mexican voice called out from the third floor hallway of the Kappa Lambda Pi fraternity house. “The goatee and mustache look good.”

Mark Young looked up from his computer and smiled at his friend and fraternity brother, Oscar Jimenez. “*Hola*, Oscar. Welcome back.” He walked over and shook hands.

“How cool is this? We’re finally seniors, with our own rooms on the upper floor of the fraternity house.” Oscar’s teeth gleamed a bright white as he smiled at Mark.

“It’s pretty cool, man,” Mark said, following Oscar into the room next door.

“I’m gonna be right here, buddy. Better keep the sex noises down.” Oscar grinned.

“That won’t be a problem,” Mark said frowning. “Sally and I had a disagreement during her family picnic on the Fourth of July. It was a disaster.” He shook his head as he sat down at Oscar’s desk. “I just can’t figure that chick out.”

“What’s that now, three or four break-ups since you two met last fall?”

“I lost count, dude. I don’t think she knows what the hell she wants from me, and I certainly don’t know what she wants. She said that she’d have to think about our relationship and would talk to me when we got back to school.” He sighed as he thought about Sally Brown. She was a senior, a beautiful young woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. He had been intrigued with the Delta sorority sister since they’d met at a Greek mixer the previous year. They seemed to have a lot in common during their first semester together. They liked dancing and going to the movies, and enjoyed having sex. Sally seemed interested in him, but would not make a commitment to their relationship for reasons she wouldn’t explain. There was a small part of him that was glad that she wouldn’t commit to him, but he would have liked to understand her motivations.

“I’m sorry to hear that, *hermano*.” Oscar patted Mark on the back. “On a lighter subject, how’s your knee? I certainly hope you’re ready for the season.”

“The knee is fine. I’ve been rehabbing it since last season.” Mark gave his knee a whack for emphasis. “It’s been holding up through these first two weeks of practice, and the team is looking pretty good.”

“Let’s hope you guys can win the first game and draw in some pledges for us,” Oscar teased.

“So, you appear ready to lead us, Pledge Master. How many pledges are you looking for this semester?”

“We’ll discuss that tonight, when the house council is all together. Now get out of my room so that I can finish unpacking.”

“All right, brothers, the sooner we get this meeting started, the sooner we’ll finish,” Oscar shouted over the noise in the third floor meeting room. He waited as the other eleven members of the Kappa house council found seats and quieted down. As Kappa Lambda Pi’s pledge master, Oscar was in charge of making sure that the national rules for pledging new members into the fraternity were followed.

The twelve members of the Kappa house council had been chosen at the end of the previous semester. They would vote on which new students would be allowed to pledge the fraternity, and then vote again on which of those pledges would be accepted at the end of their probationary period. The four senior members of the ruling council were automatically members of the house council: Dave, the president of Kappa; Joe, the vice president; Brent, the secretary; and Rick, the treasurer. If enough pledges

were accepted during Rush Week, each of the senior and junior members of the house council would select one of the pledges to be his little brother for the duration of the pledge period.

"Welcome back, brothers." Oscar looked around the room. "Rush Week begins in two weeks, and our first rush party is scheduled for the 15th. We need to start looking for and considering new students as pledges for our fraternity. We'd like to have between fifteen and twenty in the pledge class."

"We need to get some lively candidates," Mark commented from the back of the room. "Last semester's group was pretty bland." Mark saw Paul, the second semester freshman, turn around and glare at him before smiling.

"I concur." Dave laughed and others joined him. "We need to find some interesting guys to add some flavor and life to this house; otherwise people will think we've become a group of bookworms."

"Should I scout the drama department?" Jack asked, a big smile on his face.

"No," several members called out in unison.

"We don't want that much flavor," Dave said.

"That's discrimination, big guy," Jack replied, still smiling.

Dave brushed that aside with a laugh. "Sorry. We need guys who want to be brothers, not guys who want to sleep with brothers."

Jack and Oscar smiled at one another and shook their heads while the others laughed.

"We'll do our best to find good candidates," Jorge said.

"Great. I'm in need of a housekeeper," Mark said.

Oscar laughed along with the rest. "I pity the pledge you get for a little brother, Mark. You were a sloppy roommate; our room was always cluttered with your stuff. I'm glad you have your own room this year."

"So am I, Oscar. Your snoring was loud enough to wake the dead," Mark responded, causing another bout of laughter.

"Okay, brothers," Oscar called out over the laughter. "I'll run down the schedule for you. Sunday the 13th, Rush Week begins. Tuesday the 15th, our first rush party. Saturday the 19th, our second rush party following the football game." He looked to the back of the room at Dave, Mark, and Donald. "Hopefully, it will be our second win and hook us a few recruits."

"Go to hell, Oscar," Dave replied, as the room broke out in laughter again.

"Sorry, brothers." Oscar smiled and then quieted the room. "Let me go over the rest of the schedule, and then we're done. Sunday the 20th, the house council meets to review the students and select those we'll invite to pledge. Monday the 21st, we begin inviting those selected. Friday the 25th is the first meeting with our new pledges. And, finally, Saturday the 26th is our first mixer." He looked around the room at the others making notes. "Are there any questions, comments, or concerns?"

"No," the Kappas yelled.

"All right, then, go out there and find some good recruits. Make sure all the other brothers know that they can assist us in the search." He looked around the room and then slammed down his gavel. "Adjourned."

Getting Started

"Holy shit, dude!" It was Monday morning and Scott was preparing to go to the shower room. "Is that your fucking schedule?"

Tommy looked over at the schedule he had taped onto his dresser. "Yeah. It's a little heavy, but I think I can handle it." He had been awake since before six o'clock, gone out for a run, and had already taken his shower. Now he was getting dressed to go to breakfast.

Scott stood naked by the dresser and read down Tommy's schedule.

Monday, Wednesday, Friday:

6:00 Run

8:30 — 9:30 Euro History

10:00 — 11:00 English 101

12:00 — 1:00 Algebra 101

4:00 — 5:00 Personal Time.

Tuesday, Thursday:

6:00 Run

8:30 — 10:00 Sociology 101

11:00 — 12:30 Psych 101

2:00 — 3:30 Earth Science

4:00 — 5:00 Personal Time.

"You are crazy, dude. You didn't leave enough time for partying. That's why I took the minimum number of credits this semester, and none of my classes start before ten o'clock. I'm going to ease myself into the party scene and *then* deal with the academics."

Tommy laughed. "Whatever works for you, Scott. I'm hoping to get out of here in four years." He turned away from Scott's scrawny, naked body. He thought his roommate looked anorexic, but realized his skeletal frame might be attributed to too much partying.

"I'm thinking more like five years, dude. Gotta party on!" Scott put on his bathrobe and opened the door to go to the shower room. "See ya in English, Brainiac."

"Hey, teacher's pet, wait up." Tommy heard a loud voice yell as he was leaving his Tuesday psychology class. He turned and looked at the tall, muscular guy walking toward him. Tommy had noticed the guy's dark brown hair and brown eyes during class; he had always been a sucker for dark good looks.

"I'm Brian Walker," the young man said.

"Tommy Ford." Tommy noted the long fingers as he grasped Brian's hand and looked up at him. "Nice to meet you. Did you want me for something?"

Brian smiled, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "How did you know all those answers already? It's just the first day of class; I haven't even cracked the book."

Tommy thought he noticed a strange look in Brian's eyes, but decided to ignore it. "I took some pre-college courses in high school, and I cracked the book for a sneak peek at what I was getting myself into."

"How about joining me for lunch?" Brian asked.

"That would be great," Tommy responded.

"Why do you sit in the front row?" Brian asked, putting on his sunglasses as they made their way to the dining hall. "You know that's where profs always pick people to answer questions."

Tommy laughed. "Why do you sit in the back of the room? If the professor gets tired of hearing me answer his questions, he's going to start picking on you."

Brian slapped Tommy on the back and laughed. "Then, let's hope he doesn't get tired of listening to your voice," he said softly, glancing over at Tommy with a smile.

Tommy looked at Brian suspiciously, wondering whether the guy was coming on to him. As much as he hoped to have a relationship at some point, Tommy was more interested in getting his academics in order before dealing with emotional involvements. Deciding that it wasn't bad to have somebody flirt with him, he smiled over at the taller man. "Stop teasing the freshman."

Brian led the way through the cafeteria line and then to a table in the back of the dining area. The cafeteria was divided into two separate halves, with the kitchen work area in the center of the building. Two large salad bars separated the dining areas, making it easier for students to enter or exit from either side of the cafeteria.

"So, let me tell you a little bit about myself." Brian glanced over at Tommy. "I'm a sophomore, majoring in general education. I'm a guard on the varsity basketball team and hope to coach basketball someday. I'll probably start in my hometown high school and then work myself into the college ranks."

Tommy sat quietly eating lunch as Brian rambled on about basketball. He smiled from time to time, hoping that Brian thought it was because he was listening. There were two other reasons for his smile. One, he found Brian's long fingers arousing. He also thought Brian was a self-absorbed jerk, albeit a good-looking jerk. *Too bad the first reason isn't enough for me to stop thinking of Brian as a jerk.*

"And I'm a brother with the Gamma Theta fraternity. If you're interested in joining a fraternity, ours would be a good one to pledge. You could be my little brother." He winked.

"I'm still getting myself acclimated to the campus and my classes. I really haven't given thought to joining a fraternity."

"You know, being a part of the fraternity system is a great way to network for your future. The brothers of Gamma Theta would help you, and so would I."

Tommy pondered the pointed comment and the look that Brian was giving him. He was about to respond when they were joined by another student.

The new guy looked over at Tommy and winked as he sat down next to Brian. "Bri. New meat?"

"Tommy, this is one of my fraternity brothers, Andy. Andy, this is Tommy. He's in my psych class."

Andy reached over to shake Tommy's hand. "Nice to meet you, Tommy."

"You too, Andy."

"Trying to recruit already, Bri?" Andy asked as he nodded his head at Tommy.

"It's never too early to start looking for new guys," Brian responded, with a wink at Andy.

Despite the fact that they were both trying to be discreet, the tone of their voices and the way they were glancing over at him led Tommy to understand exactly what wasn't being said. When Tommy was twelve and realized that he had a preference for boys over girls, he talked with his gay uncle about his feelings and to get advice. His uncle talked to him about being gay and how guys acted around one another.

"Gentlemen," Tommy stood up, "if you'll excuse me, I have a class to attend." He looked at Andy. "It was nice meeting you, Andy." To Brian, he said, "I'll see you in class on Thursday." With that, he took his tray and walked away from the table.

Brian and Andy watched as Tommy walked away from them.

"Nice ass," Brian said as he watched Tommy.

"Sweet," Andy replied. "You going to try for that one?"

"Pretty boy, smart in class, but clueless to the ways of the master." Brian sat back smugly and pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes. "I should have him nailed before rush week."

"Hi, Tommy, Jack Rosenberg." They were walking out of their Thursday psychology class. "We met when you were getting your class cards on Sunday."

"I remember. I was a nervous wreck." Tommy smiled and politely shook hands.

"Would you like some company for lunch?"

"That would be great." He felt a sense of déjà vu as they quietly walked toward the dining hall.

As Jack led the way through the cafeteria line and to a table in the back of the dining area, Tommy hoped that this lunch wouldn't be a repeat of Tuesday's with Brian.

"So, why don't you tell me about yourself: where you're from; what your major is; how you're enjoying the college experience so far. That kind of stuff." Jack looked over at Tommy expectantly.

Inwardly appreciating that Jack was not self-absorbed, Tommy nodded. "I'm from South Jersey; I'm majoring in psychology and sociology; I have an interesting roommate; and, so far, I'm really enjoying my experience at college."

"What's so interesting about your roommate?"

Tommy chuckled. "He's Goth. His spiked hair is black with blue tips, he has a stud through his lower lip, and he listens to the strangest techno music I've ever heard."

Jack laughed. "Yep, that's definitely interesting."

"What about you?" Tommy asked. "Tell me about yourself."

"Let's see. What's interesting about me? I'm a junior, pre-law. I'm a pitcher on the varsity team with eight wins last season. I have too many friends and not enough time to devote to them. And that's about it. No strange piercings or anything like that." He looked over and smiled. "So, what vampire clan do you belong to?"

Tommy was taken by surprise. "What?"

"The tattoo on your left calf. I noticed it when you left the student center on Sunday. It's White Wolf's vampire ankh for the role playing game."

"You recognize it! Most people don't know what it is!" Tommy exclaimed. "I'm Ventrué," he said with a smile.

*"Same here," Jack replied. "Did you watch *The Kindred* on TV?"*

"Yeah. I was disappointed when they cancelled it."

"Hi, Jack," a voice called from another table. Jack waved an acknowledgement.

Tommy shot a quick glance, then watched the handsome, black-haired guy sit down two tables away from them. It was the man he'd seen when he was checking into his dorm, when he'd had the sense of time standing still. "Who is that?"

Jack followed Tommy's stare. "That's Mark Young, senior quarterback on the football team. When he hurt his knee last year, we lost the final game of the season. Then we lost the western division game, which kept us from going to the state championship."

"Is that his girlfriend with him?"

Jack considered. "They've been dating, but she's not sure what she wants."

*Tommy looked at Mark's profile. *I know what I'd want with a guy like Mark.**

"Hey, Jacko." A deep voice startled Tommy out of his thoughts. "How's it going?"

"Good, Ken." Jack made the introductions.

"Nice to meet you, Tommy." Ken reached across the table to shake hands.

Tommy looked directly into Ken's eyes. "That's a good grip you've got there."

"It better be." Ken pulled his hand back with a chuckle. "I'm a tight end on the football team. I better be able to grip the football and keep hold of it." He began eating. "So, what were you guys talking about before I interrupted you?"

"Just getting to know each other." Jack looked over at Ken and smiled.

"I don't have to worry about competition, do I?" Ken whispered in Jack's ear.

Jack chuckled. "No. We'll talk later."

Tommy discreetly watched the interaction between the two similarly built men. They made a good looking couple, Ken's blond hair and blue eyes contrasting with Jack's brown hair and green eyes. He smiled to himself as he realized that there was a connection between the two; he could see it in the way they looked at each other.

Ken glanced over at the other table. "Is Mark back with Sally again?"

"Yeah," Jack grunted in response to Ken.

"I wonder if that bitch will ever decide what she wants," Ken said roughly, and then looked over at Tommy. "Sorry, man, I didn't mean to be rude. I'd have dumped her after the first time."

"What do you mean, first time?" Tommy inquired.

Jack shook his head. "She keeps him on a string like a yo-yo. When she needs him, she keeps him close. When she's through with him, she pushes him away until she needs him again."

Ken looked over at the other table. "I just can't believe that he lets her play him like that."

Tommy followed Ken's gaze. Mark was a very handsome man, especially with the mustache, goatee, and stubble of growth on his face.

"Well, that's enough about Mark," Jack stated. "There's got to be something else we can talk about."

"Are you recruiting pledges yet?" Ken asked.

"We're looking around," Jack replied evasively.

"Tommy, be careful around this guy. He can be very convincing when he wants something." Ken smiled at Jack to remove any sting from his teasing.

"I haven't talked with Tommy about pledging."

"Good. Maybe I can convince him to join Gamma," Ken declared.

Jack shot a wry smile at Ken and then looked over at Tommy. "Now you're in trouble. He's the president of Gamma. Talk about convincing others, he's a pro."

"I didn't convince you, did I?" Ken teased.

Jack's face turned pink and he lowered his head. "Not about joining Gamma," he said, glancing shyly at Ken, who laughed and slapped Jack on the back.

"I have to get to my next class." Tommy stood with a smile. "You guys are good together."

Jack frowned. "I hope you'll keep that to yourself, right?"

"Of course, I will. It was nice meeting you, Ken."

"Think about pledging Gamma," Ken called after Tommy.

Tommy raised a hand and waved good-bye to both of them. *I could be friends with those guys,* he thought as he walked away.

"I'm sorry about what happened this summer," Sally said sweetly. "My parents lectured me for half an hour after you left the barbecue. They told me that I was being a spoiled brat and that I shouldn't have treated you the way I did." She glanced shyly at him. "Will you forgive me?"

Mark looked into Sally's blue eyes and smiled broadly. "How can I say no to those beautiful eyes and pouty lips?" No matter how many times she broke up with him, he always took her back.

Sally giggled as she gently slapped him on the arm. "Stop. You sure know how to make a girl blush." She looked up at him through her lowered lashes.

"What's the problem with us, Sally?"

"I don't know, Mark."

"What do you want after we graduate?"

Sally looked away from him, took a deep breath and let it out. "I want to get married and have a family, but I also want to have a career. I don't want to end up being just a housewife."

"I have a feeling that housewives of the world would rebel against you for that comment," he said with a smile.

"What I mean is that I don't want to be stuck at home with children while my husband has a career. I want it all, Mark. I just don't know what I want first."

Mark reached over and held her hand. "My mother has it all, Sally. She married after college and began a family. She sold cosmetics and worked her way through grad school, earning her doctorate in psychology. She was a wife, a mother, a businesswoman, and a student. And I believe that she did a damn good job."

"I can't do what your mother did, Mark," she stated firmly.

"How do you know that?" He thought she might be lacking in confidence.

"That's too much for me to do by myself."

"My father gave her all the support she needed to get through it."

"I'm sure he did, sweetie. But, I want to do one thing first and then let the others follow into place. I can't decide which is more important to me." She smiled sadly at him. "That's why I'm scared about making a commitment to you. You seem to know exactly what you want."

Mark chuckled softly at the comment. "Yeah, well that's all a façade, Sally. I want to have a career, and a family, but most importantly, I want to share my life with somebody. I fell in love with you last year. You're beautiful, smart, and sexy," he said, watching her smile. "I thought we'd make a good couple, and not just because our fathers know each other. I enjoy being with you. But ever since New Year's, I don't understand all the break-ups we go through."

"I'm really sorry about that, Mark," she said, looking away as he scowled. "I enjoy being with you, but I'm not ready to make a commitment. And I won't be ready until I decide what I want."

"I can respect that. Besides, my dad told me that I need to be patient when dealing with women."

Sally giggled. "Why don't we take it slowly this semester? You've got football and your fraternity, and I've got my sorority events. We'll get together when time allows."

"Okay, I can agree to that." He looked at her solemnly. "But I don't know how many more times I can deal with our break-ups."

Sally leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You need to shave."

Mark shook his head in disbelief. He would probably never understand the control she had over him. "Yes, boss, but the goatee and mustache stay on." In the back of his mind, Mark wondered if getting back together with Sally really was the best thing for him.

It was fairly quiet around campus during the Labor Day weekend, since many students had gone away for the three day holiday. Tommy spent part of the weekend running through different areas of the small town of Timian and getting a head start on his classwork. He spent some time in the library doing research for a paper and some time sitting outside reading or watching students around campus. The weather had been hot and humid, and there was little relief in the warm breeze that blew through the window.

"Come in," Tommy yelled from his desk in response to the knock on his door.

"What are you doing in here on such a gorgeous day, Ford Tommy?" Kyle asked as he entered the room.

Tommy smiled. "I'm working on a paper that's due on Friday, Welby Kyle."

Kyle made a face. "I know it's Labor Day, but you're not supposed to be laboring."

"I can't help myself. I didn't have anything better to do."

"Well, come on. Let's go down to the river." Kyle looked over at the other side of the room. "Where's your roommate? I never see him around."

Tommy laughed. "He's partying with his off campus friends this weekend."

"See? Even your roommate knows the meaning of Labor Day."

"You don't understand, Kyle. He parties every night. That's why he only has four classes this semester, and none of them start before ten o'clock."

"Oh, I see, *every* day is Labor Day." Kyle pulled back on Tommy's chair. "Come on. Let's get out of here and have some fun."

"All right. Lead on."

"I really have to thank you, Tommy," Jack said as they sat down to eat lunch following their psychology class. "I was pretty sure I had the right answer, but I started questioning myself when Professor Kimball said I was wrong. Then you saved me."

"Come off it, Jack," Tommy said modestly. "I simply explained how your answer could also be correct."

"Yeah, right. That's why he looked shocked when you challenged him. Did you get in trouble after class?"

"No. He just wanted to talk," Tommy replied briefly. He noticed Jack wave at somebody.

"Mark," Jack yelled, "come join us." Jack smiled at the faint blush that rose to Tommy's cheeks. Tommy lowered his head and continued eating his lunch.

"Hey, Jack." Mark sat down across the table from Tommy.

"Mark, I'd like you to meet Tommy." Jack waited for Tommy to lift his head. "Tommy, this is Mark Young, the school's star quarterback."

"Stop it, Jack." Mark held out his hand. "Hi."

"Nice to meet you, Mark." As Tommy reached over to shake Mark's hand, he looked up into a smiling face and bright blue eyes. All the noise in the cafeteria seemed to disappear for a brief moment.

"It's good to meet you, Tommy," Mark said as he shook Tommy's hand and felt a charge of energy rush through him. Mark glanced quizzically down at their clasped hands, then up at Tommy. He smiled faintly as he settled back in his chair.

Tommy wasn't sure how that had happened. He hadn't been practicing any magic since before his grandmother's death. He smiled back at Mark across the table.

"Tommy is in my psych class," Jack said. "He's a brilliant student and saved my ass today."

Tommy blushed and lowered his head. "It wasn't that big a deal, Jack."

"Somebody is always saving your ass, Jack," Mark commented with a laugh. "Good for you, kid. There's nothing wrong with being ahead of the rest of the class."

"Thanks." Tommy looked at his watch. "I need to leave for my next class. See you later, Jack." He stood up and grabbed his books and tray, then looked over at Mark. "It was really nice meeting you, Mark."

"You too, Tommy."

Mark watched as Tommy left the table, then looked back at Jack. "A curious young man. Humble. Unlike you."

"Go to hell." Jack laughed. "He really is a smart kid."

"Are you going to recruit him for Kappa?"

Jack shrugged. "I haven't asked him about it. He didn't seem too interested when Ken mentioned pledging Gamma."

Mark smiled at Jack. He suspected that Jack and Ken were more than just *buddies*, but that wasn't something that concerned Mark because Jack was his friend. "He might make a good pledge," Mark persisted as he continued eating his lunch.

"At least think about it," Brian pleaded.

"I don't know, Brian," Tommy demurred. "I have a full class load. I'm not sure I could devote the necessary time to pledging."

Brian leaned closer. "But I'd be your big brother; you wouldn't have to worry about anything."

I'd only have to worry about you. "All right, I'll think about it, but I'm not promising anything."

"That's fine. I'm just glad that you've agreed to think about it. In the meantime, would you like to go with me to the first football game on Saturday?"

"I'm sorry, Brian. My roommate asked me to join him and his friends for the game."

"Come on, Tommy. I promise you'll have a lot more fun at the game with me than with your roommate."

Tommy looked pointedly at Brian. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were coming on to me. But we all know that jocks don't play with boys." He gathered his books and stood up. "I'll see you later." Tommy smiled to himself as he walked away.

"Damn kid is going to be harder to crack than I thought," Brian mumbled as he watched Tommy walk away. "I'll get him, though. One way or another, I'll get him."

Are You Ready For Some Football?

Excitement was rife on the campus as the first game of the season arrived on a warm Saturday afternoon in mid-September. After two full weeks of classes, the everyday routine was finally broken. Timian State College was a small Division II school

with roughly five thousand students. The old-style football stadium had originally been built in the early 1960s on an open field at the other end of town from campus. The home team seating was on one side of the field, and the visiting team seating was on the opposite side. The students and fans of Timian filled the fifteen levels of metal benches built onto a concrete base that stretched from one 20-yard line to the other. The students and fans for the visiting team had to be content with seven levels of metal benches that went from one 30-yard line to the other.

As they walked through town toward the football stadium, Scott and several of his friends passed a joint back and forth. When it came around to Tommy, he passed it along to the others. Some of Scott's friends also had flasks filled with vodka hidden under their shirts. Tommy was more interested in enjoying the game than in getting high or drunk.

He was excited. While he enjoyed the sport of football, his true fascination was with the muscular players. His best friend had been a linebacker on their high school team. They had grown up together and had started fooling around when they were young boys. His best friend's becoming a football player had been the catalyst for his obsession with the sport and the men who played it. Tommy knew that he wouldn't overtly make an advance on a straight college player; that could result in retaliation. That knowledge didn't dampen his enjoyment of the game or appreciation of the players.

Tommy, Scott, and his friends sat in the center of the first row of the stands, where they had a terrific view of the players on the sideline. From that vantage point, Tommy was able to watch Mark throughout the entire game. After a series of plays that set up the team's first touchdown, Mark took off his helmet and grabbed a cup of water behind the team bench. With the aid of binoculars, Tommy could see the sweat running down Mark's face and muscular neck. He watched as Mark's long, thick fingers combed through the sweat-dampened wavy black hair matted to his head. As he talked with another player, the smile on Mark's face softened the hard look that the black mustache and goatee gave him. Tommy saw the bright blue eyes glimmer as Mark talked to and congratulated other players on the sideline.

While Tommy watched Mark, he was being watched by others in different sections of the stands.

"Tommy Ford. That's the guy I think would make a good brother," Jack said to Oscar as he pointed toward Tommy.

"He's with the potheads," Oscar said, recognizing a couple of the older guys in the group sitting around Tommy. "We don't tolerate drug addicts in the fraternity."

"Trust me, Oscar, he's not a pothead. The kid with the freaky look is his roommate, Scott. I'm sure he's with them just as we're with other Kappas, to have somebody to go to the game with," Jack countered. "Tommy is a bright student and has a demeanor that causes people to like him. If he were a pothead, he wouldn't have that kind of attitude, and he wouldn't be so well-prepared for class."

Oscar looked at Tommy, then back at Jack. "Are you sure?"

"Trust me. He's in my psych class. Whenever Professor Kimball asks a question, he's the first person with his hand up. The professor has even started to ignore him and pick on those of us trying to avoid being called on. Tommy saved my ass once by correcting the professor when I gave an ambiguous response that could have been either right or wrong." Jack grinned. "The other students in class really like him. Most of us feel a little jealous that he knows all the answers, but he doesn't come across as a know-it-all, and he doesn't flaunt his intelligence. Seriously, Oscar, he's a good kid; he'll make an even better brother."

As he studied the freshman, something about the young man caught Oscar's attention. Tommy looked toward the group of Kappas, and Oscar felt a rush of energy go through him as their eyes connected for a brief moment. He nodded thoughtfully.

"Invite him to the party on Tuesday, and we'll see how the others feel about him," Oscar said to Jack.

In a different section of the stadium, several members of Gamma Theta rooted for their brothers on the team. Brian had been watching Tommy. "There he is, front row center, sitting with some of our pot buddies." Brian pointed toward Tommy for the benefit of his senior brother, Andy. "I really think he'd make a good brother."

"Have you made a move on him yet?" Andy asked, looking toward the potential pledge.

"We've had lunch together a couple of times," Brian stated. "I'm still trying to get to know him better."

"I bet you are, dog." Andy chuckled. "Invite him to the rush party on Wednesday night. Since sweet-talking hasn't worked, maybe if you got him drunk and high first, you'd get him into your bed."

Brian smiled as he watched Tommy cheering for the team. "The thought had crossed my mind."

Timian's football team won the first game of the season in a 35-32 upset of Antelope State, their biggest conference rival. Fans were ecstatic as they left the stadium.

"What a fucking great game!" Scott exclaimed. The group walked along a back street so that they could smoke a joint on the way back to the dorms.

"Mark was on fucking fire, man," Bill shouted, passing the joint to Tommy.

Tommy passed it on to one of the other guys without taking a hit. "I was impressed with the running touchdown that he made."

"Yeah, man, that was so cool. Who was that tight end that caught those two touchdowns?" Scott asked.

"Ken," Tommy immediately supplied. "That second catch that he made in the end zone was amazing."

"It was awesome." The joint came around again, and again Tommy sent it on its way without a toke.

As the rest of the guys smoked and talked about the game, Tommy's mind lingered on the one moment of the game that had meant the most to him. While the offense was getting ready to go back on the field for the winning drive, Mark had been standing near the water table behind the team bench. He had been scanning the stands when their eyes met for a moment. The crowd noise seemed to vanish as Tommy looked into Mark's eyes. That instant had been long enough for Tommy. He would be fantasizing about Mark for a long time.

"Why don't you come over with us and party?" Scott asked his roommate.

"Thanks, but I'm going back to the room and finish my class work."

Scott laughed as he slapped Tommy on the back. "All work and no play makes Tommy a dull boy."

"That's okay, Scott. Somebody has to be dull. It's not going to be you, so it might as well be me."

"All right, see ya later." Scott gave him a wave as he and the others turned down another street.

Tommy walked through town alone, whistling the school fight song, and thinking about Mark.

Tommy's morning routine began with a run at six o'clock. He loved being outside as the sun was beginning to rise. The air was fresh, and there were few people to get in his way. During the first few days at Timian, Tommy had run through campus, learning where all the buildings were and finding shortcuts to his classes. After he was familiar with the campus routes, he started running through the residential areas and then widened his scope and began running along Main Street, through town, and out to the stadium. He loved his morning jogs through the small town.

Donning his navy blue and gold running shorts and muscle t-shirt, shoving his feet into his sneakers, and placing his CD headphones over his ears, Tommy was ready to set his mind free. The only distractions were the occasional coal trucks rumbling through town, blowing dust around the street and sidewalk.

Leaving his dorm behind, Tommy ran north through campus to Main Street and then turned west. He ran through the center of town, five blocks of businesses on both sides of the street and a movie theater at each end, then past City Hall and the little central park. The rest of the town was residential. He ran along the tree-lined Main Street for a mile until he reached the turnoff for the cemetery, his preferred route. If he had continued forward, he would have passed the football stadium and then would have had to go downhill toward the river.

The cemetery, surrounded by a stone wall around its perimeter, was located three blocks off Main Street. There was a slight incline up to the black iron main gate. Inside, Tommy could sense the peace and quiet, as if all noise was kept outside the gate. He loved the scent from the pine trees that were scattered amongst the gravestones and the sound of the birds singing in the early morning light. Running up the inclined dirt road and around a bend, he passed the graves of soldiers who had died during the American Revolution and the Civil War. The worn gravestones were overgrown with moss and barely legible. He rounded another bend and ran along the road in the back end of the cemetery, looking out over the open fields of grass toward the wooded areas half a mile away. A dozen pine trees lined the central spine of the small hillside where he ran. Tommy's favorite meditation spot was at the top of the hill, between the pine trees, looking out over the open western fields.

As he ran out the front gate, Tommy turned right and began running uphill, passing the masonry buildings where the grave-digging equipment was stored. Beyond the peak he ran downhill and around the bend that led into the trailer park at the end of town. Over the music of his CD player, he could hear dogs barking, and he smiled at the familiar early morning distraction.

Tommy ran through the trailer park and back into the nicer residential areas of town. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, he often turned right and continued out toward the mall and freeway, adding two miles to his route. On weekdays, he kept to the residential areas. He ran down the quiet, tree-lined neighborhoods leading back toward the campus. He was looking forward to the sight of all the green leaves changing to bright reds and golds once autumn arrived.

Tommy had a lot on his mind this beautiful Sunday morning. He had loved the first couple of weeks of classes and the new friends he had made. His roommate, Scott, was strange, but the two of them had been getting along well, especially since Scott was always out partying. Kyle was a really great guy, and the two of them had quickly become friends. He also liked Jack a lot and believed that they had a secret in common, especially after meeting Jack's friend Ken. Tommy wasn't sure how he felt about Brian. He sometimes felt uncomfortable around him, as if he were being sized up. Other times, Tommy enjoyed his company and didn't mind the attention Brian paid him.

As he reached the end of the trailer park, Tommy decided that he needed to run the extra distance out to the mall. There were still a few things on his mind that he needed to mull over. Both Jack and Brian had invited Tommy to their first fraternity rush parties, one on Tuesday and one on Wednesday. Tommy wasn't sure he wanted to pledge any fraternity, but it wouldn't hurt him to go to the parties and see what they were all about. If he did decide to join one of them, he knew which one he would pick and the primary reason for pledging it. Mark Young.

Tommy had not been able to get Mark off his mind since the first time he'd seen him walking through the lobby of his dorm. He fondly remembered the day that Mark had joined Jack and him for lunch, when Tommy had felt the charge of energy that surged between the two of them. He had also enjoyed watching Mark on the football field. From the little he knew, there were a lot of good things about Mark, so Tommy couldn't figure out why he put up with his girlfriend's behavior. He deserved someone better, even if that was another woman. Tommy smiled to himself. *I'd be happy just to be friends with Mark.*