



# HITMAN

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Afterword

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my loving mom,  
Helen "Tiger Belle" Hart*

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I want to thank my children for giving me the time and space to write this book, especially after sacrificing so much of our time together during my pro wrestling career. Thanks to David Moraniss and Joe Fiorito for their encouragement throughout. Thanks also to Bruce Westwood and his staff at Westwood Creative Artists; and to Anne Collins at Random House Canada for an absolutely brilliant editing job, and for helping me to pull it all together. Thanks to all Hart family members, especially Ross and Alison; and to Julie, for putting up with me for as long as she did. I need to give special thanks to Marcy Engelstein for her amazing and tireless devotion to helping me write this book, which would never have been written without her. That's the plain truth of it. Thank you, my friend. I'll never forget the time and energy you've given me through some very difficult times. Thanks to Dave Meltzer and Bob Leonard for preserving history. Thank you to all my fans around the world: I hope I haven't disappointed too many of you by being as truthful as I've been in these pages. Lastly, to every wrestler mentioned in this book—the good, the bad and the ugly—and even more so to all the wrestlers I worked with from the start, I thank each and every one of you for working with me, and for trusting me like a brother and a friend. I'm free at last.

One thing you will discover is that life is based less than you think on what you've learned and much more than you think on what you have inside you from the beginning.

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— MARK HELPRIN, *Memoir from Antproof Case*

## PREFACE

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IT SEEMED LIKE AN ETERNITY until the pastor called me to the podium. I rose slowly from my seat, away from the insulation of loved ones—Julie, our four kids, my friend Marcy and Olympic wrestling champion Daniel Igali. I felt them all take a deep breath as I made my way to the aisle.

My father's funeral service was held on October 23, 2003, at the biggest church in Calgary, yet it overflowed with an eclectic throng of thousands who came to pay their respects to the legendary Stu Hart, old-time pro wrestling promoter extraordinaire.

I moved slowly, a silent prayer resounding in my head, "Please, God, help me make it through." I am an experienced public speaker, but my confidence had been shattered by a major stroke.

It hadn't been that long since I'd been trapped in a wheelchair, paralyzed on the left side, unsure whether I'd ever walk again. Since then I'd been having emotional meltdowns triggered by the most unlikely things; this is common among stroke victims. I didn't know how I was going to deliver a eulogy worthy of my father and not break down. It was also hard for me to walk tall when I felt so many eyes measuring the difference between what I was now—my body stiff, the chiseled edges softened—to what I'd been.

But when I walked past the pew where my brothers and sisters sat—my limp more noticeable than I wanted—I sensed, perhaps for the first time in our lives, that they were all behind me, even those with whom I'd had differences. *Do it for Dad, Bret. Do it for all of us. Do us proud.* There'd been twelve Hart kids, and now there were ten. Our beloved mother, Helen, had died just two years earlier. We'd all been through so much, traveled such a long, long road.

This wasn't just the end of my father's life, this was something deeper, and I think we all felt it. So many times over so many years I truly thought this godforsaken business was dead to me, but this was the day pro wrestling died for me—for good.

In the front pew sat Vince McMahon, billionaire promoter of the WWE (once the WWF), who'd made a failed attempt to steal my dignity, my career and my reputation. Beside him sat Carlo DeMarco, my old friend turned loyal McMahon lieutenant. They were doing their best to look dignified, but I knew—and they knew I knew—that McMahon's presence at Stu Hart's funeral was more about image than anything else. It only made me more determined to climb the steps with my head held high. *You don't matter to me anymore, Vince. I survived you, and everything else too.* I had thought it was wrestling's darkest hour when I'd had my heart cut out in the middle of the ring by the son of a bitch. Then the Grim Reaper of wrestling took my youngest brother, Owen, and that was the blackest day.

Keep walking, I told myself, for Davey, Pillman, Curt, Rick, Liz . . . so many of us are gone, so young, and directly on account of the wrestling life. Hell, even Hawk. People told me he had wept like a baby when he heard Stu had died of pneumonia at eighty-three . . . and then Hawk died that very night. One more for the list. And surely not the last.

I reached into my breast pocket and took out my notes, carefully unfolding them on the slippery, polished surface of the oak podium. I surveyed the crowd, my gaze stopping at the young apprentices Chris Benoit, Edge and Storm, who looked back at me with respectful anticipation. Next I glanced at the company of stalwart ring veterans—The Cuban, Leo, Hito, even Bad News—all more ruminative and

melancholy than I'd ever seen them. I read it in their faces, the unspoken truth that burying a man like Stu Hart was truly the end of what we had lived for—and too many had died for.

And then the sight of old Killer Kowalski, in his good suit, transported me back four decades, to before Owen was even born.

I am a survivor with a story to tell. There's never been an accurate account of the history of pro wrestling. All the public knows is what is packaged and sold to them by the industry. Since I'm no longer in the business, I'm in a decent position to tell the truth, without fear of recrimination. With this book, which is based on the audio diary I kept through all my years in wrestling, starting in my early twenties, I want to put you in my shoes so you can experience what pro wrestling was like in my era, through my eyes. It's not my intention to take needless jabs at those who made the journey with me, but I'll pull no punches either. Not here.

Wrestling was never my dream, and all too often it was my nightmare. Yet ingrained in me from birth was the instinct to defend it like a religion. For as long as I can remember, my world has been filled with liars and bullshitters, losers and con men. But I've also seen the good side of pro wrestling. To me there is something beautiful about a brotherhood of big, tough men who only pretend to hurt one another for a living instead of actually doing it. I came to appreciate that there is an art to it. In contrast to my father, who loved to proudly tell people who the real tough guys, or shooters, of his generation were, I can just as proudly tell you who the great workers, or pretenders, of my generation were. Unlike so many wrestlers with their various made-up names and adopted personae, I was authentic, born Bret Hart into a wrestling world I couldn't escape. I can't say life's been easy, but I can say it's been interesting.

I've always thought of myself as a quiet, easygoing kind of guy, and I believe I was well respected by most of my peers. Some have labeled me as arrogant, and others say I lacked charisma. Admittedly, I wasn't the best talker or mic man in the business, but I more than made up for it with my technical proficiency in the ring. I don't think anyone can rightly dispute that I was a wrestler who put the art first and gave everything I had to the business—and to the fans.

I've always been grateful to have been a world champion who actually did travel the world. People from all walks of life, from New York to Nuremberg, from Calgary to Kyoto, have told me that I inspired them in some way and that I represented everything that was decent about pro wrestling, the way it used to be, when there was still honor in it. It seems like all the world loves an honest battler.

I worked hard to bring out the best in my opponents. I gratefully acknowledge the hundreds of wrestlers I worked with in thousands of matches over twenty-three years, and am proud that I never injured another wrestler to the point that he couldn't work the next day. Regrettably, I can't say the same about some of those who worked with me. I took it as a challenge to have a good match with anybody. I respected both the green-horn jobbers, whose role it was to lose or put me over, and the old-timers, the big tough men of wrestling who allowed me the honor of standing over them with my hand raised. I refused to lose to a fellow wrestler only once in my career, and that was because he refused to do the same for me and others.

The public record is filled with false impressions of me from those who think they know me. Sadly, that includes some members of my own family. My youth wasn't as loving and sweet as the fable that's been perpetuated in wrestling lore. I've been hurt and betrayed by some of my brothers and sisters, yet I don't feel I ever let them down. Some of them sometimes behave as though they

begrudge what I've achieved, even though I've paid my dues in ways they can't even imagine. The truth is, my family knows very little about me.

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It wasn't easy growing up the eighth of twelve kids, with seven brothers and four sisters. As a child I was drawn to my sweet mother and intimidated by my gruff father. Stu had a temper so fierce that some would consider his corporal punishment child abuse. Too many times I limped around bruised and battered, my eyeballs red and ruptured because of his discipline. On more than a few occasions I thought I was going to die before he was done with me. Often, as I was on the verge of blacking out from some choke hold of Stu's, he'd huff, "You've breathed your last breath."

My father was two different people. At an early age I began to call one of them Stu, and I was terrified of him. Dad was the father I loved. When I was little I used to think Stu overlooked the bad behavior of his favorite kids and ignored the goodness in the kids who didn't matter as much to him. Looking back I can see that he was hardest on the ones he thought had the most potential. He instilled in me a tenacious drive to succeed by implanting in me his own strong fear of failure. For most of my youth, he teetered on the brink of bankruptcy while I feared becoming the first Hart kid to fail a grade in school. My empathy with his fear connected us.

Like my father, I developed at least a couple of alter egos. At home I kept to myself and generally did whatever my older brothers told me to do; it was just easier that way. At my father's wrestling shows every Friday night, I played Joe Cool, popular with the girls and on top of the world—all part of the show. At school I was shy, but the fights were real. All the Hart kids were bullied for wearing hand-me-downs, and I was always scrapping to defend the family honor. The wrestling fans on Friday nights had no idea that I often attended school wearing shorts in the winter because that's all I had, or that I got my first pair of new runners when I was fourteen.

Later on in life I was one guy on the road, another at home and yet another in the ring. Which one is truly me? They all are.

# PART ONE

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## STAMPEDE DAYS

## HART BOY

MY EARLIEST MEMORY OF WRESTLING goes back to 1960, when I was three years old. There were nine Hart kids then, and we were huddled in the kitchen on a Friday night, watching my dad's TV show on a flickering black-and-white screen. My mom, pregnant with Ross—it seemed like she was always pregnant then—held my baby sister Alison in her arms. Though back then she never liked to watch wrestling, she, too, was riveted to the TV as Sam Manecker, the wrestling announcer, repeated frantically, "Kowalski has broken Tex McKenzie's neck! He's broken his neck!" My eyes popped out of my head and my mouth hung open. I was watching my very first wrestling angle.

Tex was a handsome, dark-haired cowboy. I loved cowboys, and I was wearing my Roy Rogers holster and six-shooters at that very moment. Killer Kowalski was an agile, bald-headed brute with an angry scowl on his face. Just as I was wondering what kind of man calls himself Killer, Kowalski climbed to the top of the corner ring post and leaped off, high and hard, driving his knee into Tex's neck. Now Tex lay there quivering, his cowboy boots shaking and kicking.

We watched the ambulance attendants load Tex tenderly onto a stretcher, sliding him out and under the bottom rope. Manecker said Tex might be paralyzed. I asked my ten-year-old brother Bruce, my most reliable source of information, what that meant. Bruce stared hard at the television. "It means he'll never, ever walk again."

Suddenly Killer was back up on top of the turnbuckle, and he jumped off and landed on Tex, knocking him off the stretcher and onto the floor. The audience screamed, and the stretcher-bearers ran for cover. I was terrified. Kowalski really was a damn killer!

It didn't occur to me to wonder why Smith, my oldest brother, who was twelve at the time, had such a big grin on his face. He remarked on how well Tex was selling it. From what I could tell, poor Tex wasn't selling anything. And I couldn't understand why my tender-hearted mom seemed more concerned about how well the match came across on TV than whether Tex would ever walk again. Only much later did I realize that she was happy my dad's TV show was back on the air; they could catch up on the bills again.

That night the Hart brothers stayed up into the wee hours of the morning, talking about the match. Even though it was all so frightening, it was very exciting too! I was relieved to hear my older brother Dean say that my dad was not only the toughest, greatest wrestler of them all, but that he could tie the Killer Kowalski up into knots any time he wanted. Our dad was utterly invincible.

I shared a bed with Bruce, who looked after me most of the time back then. When he got up early every morning to milk Daphne the cow, I'd sit on the warm radiator and watch him from the big picture window of the boys' room, walking down past the front of the house in his blue-checked flannel jacket, swinging the milk pail. In the distance, I could see the sprawling city of Calgary glinting in the early-morning light and the Bow River winding through the valley. I knew even at that young age that way out there past those lights was New York City, where our mom came from. New

York City was where our mom met Stu.

My dad was born in Saskatoon in 1915 and grew up in Edmonton in extreme poverty. He managed to lift himself up out of poverty through his drive to succeed and his athletic ability. He spent a lot of time hanging around the YMCA in Edmonton and got into amateur wrestling and football. He was a kicker and defensive tackle with the Edmonton Eskimos in the late thirties. But what he really excelled at was wrestling.

When the Second World War broke out, Stu Hart was the undefeated Canadian heavy-weight amateur wrestling champion, and if the war hadn't intervened, he might have won an Olympic medal for Canada. Instead, he joined the navy. When the war ended, he went to New York, where a tough old promoter with cauliflower ears by the name of Toots Mondt hired him to wrestle in the New York territory. Being an Olympian was a dream he had said good-bye to for-ever. But Stu never said good-bye to his dreams easily.

He was thirty-one years old when he met Helen, on a beach on Long Island in the summer of 1946. She was one of the five daughters of Harry J. Smith, a famous 1908 Olympic marathon runner, and his Greek wife, who was known to us only as Gah-Gah. Helen married my dad on New Year's Eve 1947, even though her mother didn't care too much for him. It didn't help that all five of her girls paid Stu a lot of attention, which he enjoyed. Helen was beautiful and intelligent and could have married someone of higher social standing, but she was smitten with my dad, even though he was a little rough around the edges and she thought wrestling was a dirty business. She'd quip, "We got married in a snowstorm, and I've been snowed under ever since!"

My dad saved his money, and he and Helen left New York in 1948, headed for Montana, where he started a pro wrestling circuit. During the next few years he bought out and took over all the wrestling businesses around him. Then in 1951 they sold their house trailer in Great Falls, Montana, and moved to Calgary with everything they had, including their two boxer dogs, Bing and Demitasse, and their three young sons, Smith, Bruce and Keith.

Television, a recent invention, was just starting to become widespread. Since wrestling (along with boxing) was easier to light and film than team sports such as football or baseball, it was suddenly very popular on the tube. Across North America, wrestlers such as Gorgeous George Wagner, Lou Thesz, Whipper Billy Watson, Pat O'Connor, Argentina Rocca and Verne Gagne became household names. Mirroring the tensions in the world at the time, the villains were called the Kalmikoffs, Fritz Von Erich and Shinji Shibuya. There were midget wrestlers such as Sky Low Low and Little Beaver, a French Canadian with a Mohawk who wasn't even a real Indian. And there were the giants: Haystack Calhoun, a big, fat farm boy, and the former World Heavyweight boxing champion Primo Carnera. There were lady wrestlers too. I remember one called The Lady Angel, who was bald and had her teeth filed down to points. In those days most of the ladies of wrestling were anything but beautiful. I never found much enjoyment in watching them drag each other around by the hair.

With TV, and the start of his *Big Time Wrestling* show, my dad had fallen into a gold mine. Throughout the 1950s the Hart family prospered and he bought land. We grew up in a big, red-brick, twenty-one-room Victorian mansion high on a hill in the desirable southwestern outskirts of Calgary with pointy-finned Cadillacs parked all over the yard.

In Calgary, Helen had another baby boy, Wayne, and then another, Dean, before my dad finally got what he wanted most of all—a baby girl. Ellie was followed by Georgia, and then me, on July 2, 1957. My dad said that when he saw me for the first time, he looked at my hands, with long fingers like my mother's yet thick like his, and knew I would be the biggest of his sons. I lost my glow as the new baby pretty quickly because Alison soon followed, and then Ross. Ross once climbed all over my

mom's desk while she was working and tipped over a bottle of ink, earning him the nickname Inky. Ross never strayed very far away from my mom and that desk. After him came another sister, Diana, and finally my baby brother, Owen.

By the time I was born, interest in wrestling had waned, and things weren't quite so rosy at Hart house anymore. My dad had made some poor investments and was barely making ends meet. Then wrestler Iron Mike DiBiase said something bad about Canadians on my dad's TV show: "If nickels were brains and ten cents could get you around the world, the average Canadian wouldn't be able to get across the street." That was all it took for the TV bosses to take *Big Time Wrestling* off the air. By 1962, the days of the Hart boys wearing new Hush Puppies and matching sweaters embroidered with our first names were over. My parents endured, running live wrestling cards throughout Alberta and Saskatchewan and down into Montana, working a thousand-mile circuit out of Calgary. But without TV, it was all they could do to hang on.

I was four when I learned about death for the first time. I was in the kitchen with my mom when someone knocked on the door to tell her that a wrestler called Riotcall Jim Wright had died. Riotcall had looked like a giant version of Walt Disney, and I'd liked talking with him whenever he came to our house.

My mom was upset by the news and, while I tried to comfort her, she explained what death was. She told me Riotcall had gone up to heaven and would never be back again, and that sooner or later everyone dies, including her and even me. God decides when your time is up. Good people go to a good place called heaven, and bad people go to a bad place called hell. She said nobody was really sure that heaven or hell existed. Maybe when you died, it was just plain over. She said she believed in heaven, but that I could believe whatever I wanted.

My parents were free thinkers; they never tried to force religion on us kids. Once, when we were given some hand-me-down dress clothes, my parents rounded us up and herded us off to church on Sunday morning wearing suit jackets and ties. It was a parents' night-mare: kids teasing, fighting and crying throughout the service. They never tried it again. I've had little or nothing to do with organized religion, although I've always felt God's presence.

Hart house was a cross between a big hotel where the housekeepers had quit, a cat and dog refuge and an orphanage for troubled children. My five older brothers spent a lot of time toughening me up for my life ahead. Bruce guided me along, but the biggest influence in my life was the runt of the litter, Dean, who was three years older than I was. We nicknamed him Bizz because he was always up to some sort of business. He was as mischievous as he was dishonest, but I loved him; he was my hero. He taught me to stand up for myself and, above all, to remember that I was one of the Hart boys. All my brothers were handsome, but Dean was the best looking, with a big white smile and dark brown eyes. I was proud to be his sidekick, especially in the never-ending guerrilla war with the two sisters who were right between us in the sequence of Hart kids.

Ellie, the first-born daughter, was the apple of my father's eye. She was small, like Dean, with the same dark hair and eyes, and she had a ferocious temper. Georgia bore a striking resemblance to my

dad, with blond hair, blue eyes and strong chin. Georgia took up for Ellie the way I took up for Dean.

~~You might figure that, with so many unruly brothers, the girls would have had a tough go of things, but my dad thundered to their rescue like an angry bear at the slightest sound of a wail. I spent a great deal of my young life sticking up for Dean, standing my ground against Ellie and Georgia and answering to my dad for it.~~

My dad was a shooter, or submission wrestler, and he loved to stretch anyone who dared to show up at his door. I remember him stretching the daylights out of Father Roberts, the Catholic priest who baptized all the Hart kids. Father Roberts got closer to God in my father's basement dungeon than he felt comfortable with. But Stu was nondenominational; he stretched a rabbi once too.

The dungeon was a cramped room with sweat-and blood-soaked canvas mats covering a thinly padded floor. There were big holes in the low ceiling made by the heads and feet of wrestlers. Stu trained and broke in his wrestlers down there, hooking on like an octopus, squeezing hard enough that the screams of his victims would echo eerily through the rest of the house. I used to wander outside on Saturday mornings with Dean and peer into the window to watch a dozen or so big-necked Goliaths sweating and groaning while they lifted weights and fooled around on the mat, testing each other, until my dad finally came down and pulled on his black trunks. Soon enough they'd be gawking in amazement as he stretched them, one after another. When they were done, they'd shower and drink bottles of the homemade beer Stu stored in the fridge next to the basement shower. He rarely drank himself but made beer for his wrestlers.

My mom was tiny, just five-foot-two, but she was the only one who could make Stu run for cover. She took out her frustrations on him constantly. Sometimes when they'd argue she'd break down in tears and threaten to leave him and go back to New York. This, of course, meant that she was leaving all of us. She'd pack her suitcase while my dad repeated submissively, over and over, "Please, dear, please." I'd go to bed crying, afraid that she'd be gone forever. My older brothers, long used to these fights, would tell me not to worry, it was just a big act. By the following morning my parents would be drinking coffee in the kitchen and laughing like nothing had happened. This scene played out so many times that I sometimes found it hard to forgive my mom for making such threats when she didn't mean them. At least my dad never talked of quitting on us kids.

By the time I came along, my mom had given up on housework. There were always mounds of clothes, broken toys and old sports equipment scattered everywhere, and the kitchen was always stacked with dirty cups and dishes. She was pretty reclusive, I realize now. You could usually find her in one of three places: her bedroom, the kitchen or the office, where she worked all week preparing ads, doing the payroll and answering the never-ending ring of the two black phones on her desk.

Stu was almost always out of town on the wrestling circuit, gone every night of the week to Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Red Deer and into Montana. Friday night was the Calgary stop, and Saturday morning was my parents' one day to sleep in. When my dad did work at home, he was usually leaning back in his leather office chair with his big forearm across his forehead, talking to some promoter or wrestler on the phone while my mom toiled away at her typewriter.

Stu did all the shopping, a little cleaning, most of the cooking, and all of the driving. When my mom was pregnant with Bruce, my parents were in a car accident in Montana that made her afraid to learn to drive. An escapee from an asylum was driving down the wrong side of the high-way and crashed into my parents' car. My mom went teeth-first into the dashboard and head-first into the

windshield, shattering her Rita Hayworth looks. It took some time before she recovered, and she was so afraid she'd lose her baby that when Bruce was born, safe and sound, she forever had a soft spot for him. Stu survived because of his big, thick chest.

Our backyard was an obstacle course littered with old cars, ancient farm equipment, wrestling rings and junk. Wandering around in the midst of it all were Daphne the cow, two goats, hundreds of hens and Mighty the rooster, named for the Mexican wrestler Mighty Ursus.

Crew cuts, brown shorts and T-shirts were standard summer issue for all the boys. I wore a straw cowboy hat that I rarely took off. Most of us went barefoot, at least until school started. We were always cutting our feet on broken glass, and we were lucky if we were able to scrounge up a bandage; such things were considered extravagant at Hart house. And we rarely had luxuries such as toothbrushes, unless you count the two crusty ones in the boys' bathroom cabinet, along with the tin of tooth powder that'd been around longer than I had. I brushed my teeth with my finger.

On school days my dad made a big pot of oatmeal for everyone. On weekends it was up to us to feed ourselves. I learned early on to stand on a chair, light the stove with a match, boil eggs, make toast and cut cheese and fruit with a ridiculously large butcher knife; it was that or go hungry.

As far back as I can remember I was called on to defend the family honor. At three or four years old, I was coached by my brothers in what must have been my first match. I took on one of the Tag Team Champion Scott brothers' kids, who happened to be the same age as I was. Down by the pasture gate where Daphne grazed we rolled around on top of prickles and cow pies. I lost a close one.

Dean and I collected glossy photos of all the top wrestlers of the time. I was fascinated by the toothless behemoth Antonio the Great, with his long, mangy hair and scraggly beard. But I really loved the masked wrestlers, Dr. Death, Mr. X, The Destroyer and my favorite, The Zebra Kid, with his black and white striped mask. My dad's championship belts were made of gold and silver, with real gemstones on them; my brothers and I made our own belts of gold and silver Christmas wrapping paper, with pieces of broken bottle glass as gems.

One day Dean and I were playing in the barn behind the house. He was pulling me up to the roof of a bale of hay attached to a pulley. As I neared the roof, the rope broke and I came crashing down, whacking my head on the brick floor. I lay there groaning and dazed as a huge bump began to grow on my forehead. A tearful Dean promised to give me a picture of Antonio the Great if I promised not to tell, so we made up a story about how I'd tripped and hit my head on a rock. Dean was good at making up stories. My parents were worried when they saw the purple-blue goose egg, and they fussed over me for several days, but they didn't take me to the doctor. My reward for silence was the prized photo of Antonio the Great pulling a big bus on a chain.

A lot of the time it was like a scene from *Lord of the Flies* around my house, and we were left to our own devices. We were so unruly that the neighbors—and at that time there were only two families living close to us in Patterson Heights—rarely allowed their kids to play with us. One of the good things about being from a big family was that there were always enough players for baseball and football games. Now and then my dad would come out and punt a football over the trees and into the neighbor's yard.

Smith and Bruce were like pint-sized mobsters, usually up to no good. They seemed to have it in for Keith and Wayne. Stocky Keith had no problem standing up for himself, but Wayne, who was small, was usually made into the fall guy.

We all wrestled one another often, and I can remember times when Smith or Bruce inadvertently knocked the wind out of me. Stu would storm in demanding to know, "Who did it?" but I never wanted to see Stu get mad at anyone. I'd be bawling my eyes out while trying very hard not to. Then I'd

hesitate to answer out of pure fear, and he'd get angrier. Smith would position himself directly behind Stu, glaring at me while hoisting up a closed fist. He'd point across the room at Wayne, mouthing, "Say Wayne did it." Wayne would be playing with his Dinky toys, minding his own business. Caught between Dad and Smith, I had no choice but to finger Wayne, who'd look up just in time to see Stu stomping over to throttle him. Smith and often Bruce would both promise me total protection from a seething Wayne. Sooner rather than later Wayne would beat me up, and as punishment they'd beat up Wayne. This was routine life at Hart house.

If Wayne was overlooked, he wasn't the only one. Alison, who was the easiest of the Hart kids to get along with, never got anywhere near the love heaped on her two older sisters. Like me, she just seemed to operate better by herself.

I recall one time being cuffed by Stu and then being yelled at by both him and my mom for something I hadn't done. I decided to punish them by running away. I planned everything out. I lopped off a piece of cheddar cheese, gathered up some apples in a bag and left home around noon, heading west past CFCN hill, hiking all the way up to Mr. Ferguson's house. He was the school-bus driver, and his big yellow buses reminded me of my block of yellow cheese, so I stopped there, stretching out on the dry grass, taking in blue skies and white clouds. I daydreamed, picturing my mom crying and asking my dad, "What have we done?" I imagined my dad, with a grim expression, talking to two policemen, one of them scribbling on a pad while the other talked about using dogs to pick up my scent.

I wanted them to suffer for being so tough on me, but then I had a change of heart. I thought about Stu's annoyed expression in the daydream, and I knew I was in heaps of trouble. On top of everything else, cheese and apples weren't enough to sustain me. It was a long way back, but I double-timed it, only slowing down when I drew close enough to see that there weren't any police cars or bloodhounds waiting for me.

I braced myself as I entered the kitchen. My mom and dad were reading the paper, and the TV was on with the sound low. The table was the usual mess of dirty dishes, except for one giant plate of spaghetti. My mom said, "Hello, dawling"—her New York accent was distinct—but Stu didn't look up. Nobody had even noticed that I was gone. I sat down and ate my cold spaghetti and never thought about running away again.

I always looked forward to Sundays. That's when my parents cooked the biggest dinner of the week. After dinner my dad would take us boys down to the basement and let us wrestle one another, teaching us the basics. Then he would get us to run around in a circle on the mat and, in a strange version of dodge ball, try to knock our feet out from under us using one of his heavy leather medicine balls. I used to love this game and was often the last one standing.

Then it was time to hit the shower. Dean and I usually ended up crying because Smith and Bruce would pee in our mouths or blast us right in the eyes, which burned. The best we could manage was peeing on their legs. There was no point telling on them because in the Hart house you were only guilty of something if you got caught.

Afterwards, we'd all put on our pajamas and watch *Bonanza*, which came on at nine o'clock. I liked to imagine we Harts were like the Cartwrights.

I was four years old when my brothers succeeded in talking my mom into letting me go with them to the Calgary matches, reassuring her that they'd all watch over me. Only the boys were allowed to go.

On Friday nights we'd zoom down to what was then called the Victoria Pavilion with my dad in his long black Chrysler transport limo, which had four rows of seats, four doors on each side and a big luggage rack on top. He'd give us the wrestling programs wrapped in brown paper, and in the limo we'd all clamber to tear the bundle open. I still recall the smell of fresh ink and the feel of the smooth paper. The older boys would sell the programs, but my first job was pulling lucky numbers out of a big steel box during intermission. That job was short-lived; soon, I was replaced by cute, curly-haired Inky. After that I earned a few bucks a week selling programs. That's how I learned how to count, but more importantly that's how I learned that if I really hustled, I could earn enough money to buy toy soldiers or cowboys and Indians.

During the winter it was tough work standing in the bitter cold. And as soon as Ross grew old enough to start selling programs, he cut into my market because the fans liked to buy from the smallest Hart kid.

I met all kinds of crazy characters: real cowboys and real Indians; big, fat, friendly older women; and a few younger ones who smoked cigarettes and were dolled up in red lipstick, cheap perfume and high hairdos, squeezed into short dresses and fishnet stockings like cut-rate versions of Marilyn Monroe. Then there were even younger ones who my dad referred to contemptuously as arena rats, but I kept my thoughts to myself, remembering a saying Bruce taught me: "All the world loves a lover and that's why the world loves me." I thought, Yeah, that'll be me some day!

During the matches, Dean and Ross and I would sit at the timekeeper's table at ringside. Sometimes my dad had really interesting attractions. I recall Cowboy Carlson climbing up and down a ladder with a horse slung over his shoulder. At least once a year, Terrible Ted The Wrestling Bear came to town for a couple of months. Terrible Ted lived in a mesh cage under our back porch. Dean, Ellie, Georgia and I would dangle our bare feet through the slats in the porch steps and drip Fudgesicles on our toes for Ted to lick.

Once I was invited to a neighboring kid's birthday party. His parents took us just up the hill to the CFCN TV studio to attend a live kids' program called *The Head-hunter Show*. Out came Ted, playful and wrestling with Gene Dubois, his handler, to help publicize that week's wrestling show. After Ted had been led away, Headhunter came around asking all the kids questions. Strangely enough, he asked me whether I wished I had a bear like that in my backyard. Of course he had a great laugh when I insisted that, in fact, I did have exactly that bear living under my back porch. He kept winking at the camera until I actually got annoyed with him. My mom gave me the biggest, sweetest hug when I got home. She'd seen the whole thing. "You were so right, dawling. At least you tried, and you never backed down."

When Dean and I got bored at the matches, we'd go out to the front of the pavilion, where there were always lots of kids from the nearby neighborhood of Victoria Park. The kids were as poor as we were, so we blended right in. We'd wrestle them on a small patch of grass, and Dean was always quick to boast that we were Stu Hart's kids, but no one would believe him. We'd take our shirts off and an hour or so later we'd be drenched in sweat, having taken on all comers, one after another. I never lost one of those matches, and neither did Dean. It's as beautiful a memory as wrestling ever gave me.

When the show was over, my dad would bring the car around front and honk the horn, and we would scramble to get in. The Victoria Park kids would look on in wonder. "Wow, they really are Stu Hart's kids." On the drive home I looked forward to the Jell-O or chocolate pudding that my mom, Ellie and Georgia always had waiting for us. Sometimes on the way home, my dad would slow down and point at a giant chandelier hanging in the window of a lighting store on Eleventh Avenue, saying how he wanted to buy it. I think everyone in the car was dreaming about what they wanted in life. I

was happy on these drives simply because my dad was happy.

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Being a middle kid was like being stuck in nowhere land. Smith was a bully who didn't want to grow up—much as my parents tried to mold him into being our leader. I could never figure Smith out, and only in the last couple of years did one of my mother's sisters fill me in on what had happened to Smith before my parents moved to Calgary. When Stu and my mom had that near-fatal car accident, Gah-Gah took Smith so that my mom would have time to recuperate. But then she wouldn't give him back; she and Mom's four sisters doted on him and spoiled him until he was four years old.

When they were about to move to Calgary, Stu decided that enough was enough and demanded that Gah-Gah give Smith back, but she still refused. Stu had to drive all the way to New York to get him. That would have been an abrupt change in Smith's life, going from being doted on by five loving women to living in Stu's world of discipline, with two little brothers and another sibling on the way. When we were kids, all we knew was that for some reason, we weren't likely to see Gah-Gah or our aunts. Our only contact with them was the family Christmas card, including a photo, that my mom sent back east each year.

Bruce, on the other hand, was sometimes too clever for his own good. He was a tremendous influence on me, teaching me all about sports, Mickey Mantle, Babe Ruth, Johnny Unitas and Gordie Howe. He also taught me the Lord's Prayer and added to my sense of what God was—and then balanced it out by also teaching me all about girls. At night I'd go through his yearbook with him and pick out the prettiest ones. I wasn't fussy. I loved blondes, brunettes and redheads too.

Dean had a vivid imagination and was fascinated by cars and by characters from the Old West, especially Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, General Custer and Wild Bill Hickock. He encouraged me to be charming to girls and taught me to kiss, using our pillows as imaginary girlfriends. One day he was playing up on the abandoned, closed-off top floor of the house with a toy campfire set he'd been given for his birthday. It came with plastic frying pans, plastic logs and a fake fire. Around three in the morning, my mom woke us up one by one and calmly told us not to panic and to follow her outside because the house was on fire.

We walked behind her in a line, with blankets wrapped around us. Looking up I could see a smoldering red square on the ceiling. Dean had started a real fire up there and, unable to put it out, he'd pushed a big old mattress over it thinking that would smother it. In the frigid January night, we all stood huddled with my mom, watching the growling red fire trucks and the firemen hosing down the roof. Stu was out of town but due back in the morning, and every one of us knew there was going to be hell to pay.

As soon as he walked through the front door, Stu ordered everyone upstairs to the attic and angrily told us the dangers of what might have happened. Then he grabbed Dean by the hair and hurled him head-first down the stairs. I was terrified. Then, because he'd caught Bruce and Wayne playing with matches only days before, he snatched both of them and threw them down the stairs for good measure. As they tumbled, I prayed I wouldn't be next.

Eventually Smith, Bruce, Keith and Wayne were all moved out of the boys' room and up to the attic after it had been repaired, to prevent them from poisoning the minds of their little brothers, but by then it was already too late.

Every year back then my dad would close down the wrestling circuit for the summer in mid-July. At the time, the annual Calgary Stampede was called the Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth, and each July people from all over the world flocked to the fairgrounds. There were cowboy hats everywhere, Ferris wheels and roller coasters, the smell of cotton candy mixed with the stink of manure. While the rodeo kicked off next door, my dad ran his biggest show of the year, a supercard on par with the biggest midway attractions. In 1964, he brought in the newly crowned World Wide Wrestling Federation World Champion Bruno Sammartino, who'd only just defeated the great Nature Boy Buddy Rogers, rated by many as the best wrestler of all time. Stu also brought in the undefeated boxing champion Rocky Marciano to be the special guest referee for the main event. After the Stampede parade, all of us Hart kids were posing alongside the big, long transport limo with Marciano when a tiff broke out between Dean and Ellie. Stu cracked Dean hard on the ear just seconds before the photo was taken, yet we all look happy in that picture, even Dean.

I'd learn years later that Marciano was a horrible cheapskate; when he left town he intentionally misled Stu into writing him two checks, each for the whole fee. Even knowing how badly my dad needed the money, he cashed them both. Despite my dad's attempts to get him to send the money back, he never did. About a year later, Marciano died in a plane crash. My mom didn't shed any tears.

That year my dad gambled whatever savings he'd scrimped together to purchase a hundred-and-sixty-acre man-made sandbar called Clearwater Beach, seven miles outside of the city. The idea was that it would help him make ends meet in the summers, when he shut down his wrestling territory. Clearwater Beach consisted of two man-made lakes, picnic tables, barbecue pits, a canopied dance floor and one concession building. The idea was that the Hart kids would work out there in the summer, and then a new and better batch of wrestlers would arrive to turn things around when my dad's circuit started up again in September.

The beach became a horrible place for me. Far too often, it was my responsibility to man the dreaded toll booth, no wider than a telephone booth. I'd sit out there for countless hours, barefoot, in cut-offs, swatting horseflies and collecting five bucks a car. I often had three or four hundred bucks crammed into my pockets, and it's no small miracle that I wasn't robbed, out there all alone. Sometimes it was just too much for me to take, sitting all day in the heat with no bathroom, water or food. It was about a five-minute walk to the concession building and the lakes, where I'd find most of my older brothers swimming and splashing around pretending to be lifeguards, flirting with girls, never once giving any thought to their promise not to leave me out at the booth.

One morning Stu loaded us all up in his latest acquisition, a beautiful round-curved purple 1959 Hudson, and drove us out to the beach, and I complained all the way there that I didn't want to go back to the booth. Of course, when we got there, Wayne immediately ordered me back to the booth. When I angrily refused, Stu grabbed me by the hair and flung me into the backseat of the car, busting my forehead open just above my right eyebrow. On the drive back home, I pressed my T-shirt to my eye to stop the blood from dripping all over his new car. He asked me to please not say anything to my mom, and, feeling sorry for him, I promised I wouldn't say a word. He asked me what he could get for me to make up for splitting my head open. I told him a bike; I was the only brother who didn't have one yet. As soon as we got home, he told my mom exactly what had happened anyway. As always, there wasn't a bandage to be found, so my dad used Scotch tape to hold the two-inch gash on my forehead together. Then we left to go to the doctor.

On the way, Stu stopped at the house where the producer of his TV show lived and said he had to go in to talk to him. So I sat in the hot car, hanging my head out the open window. Three hours later Stu came out and took me for my stitches. As for the promised bike, he bought it for me—seven years

later. Tough times were ahead, and after his meeting that day, I was the least of his problems.

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Life at school was an entirely different, drearier kind of hell. Hart house was a terrible environment for studying. Because Smith was so much older, my mom would volunteer him to help me with my homework. He was no scholar, so his method consisted of him knuckling me hard on the head when I didn't know the right answer, which was more often than not. In time, I realized it was smarter to follow Dean's approach and lie to my mom about even having homework. In fact, I learned to just lie whenever it made things easier. At Hart house, a lie was only a lie if you got caught.

My dad was generally late for everything, and he passed that trait down to us kids. When we missed the school bus, which was most of the time, he would load us up in the transport limo and race us off to school, skidding to a halt on the gravel parking lot of Wildwood Elementary. All the doors would fly open and a handful of Hart kids would pile out just as the bell was sounding. Then the car would take off again, throwing more gravel on the way to the next school, and the next.

My Grade 2 teacher, Miss Mitchaluk, reminded me of those pretty ladies at the wrestling matches. She wore nylons and dresses, and even at that age I felt an uncontrollable urge to look up her skirt. One day she announced to the class that there was going to be a school play and we would dress up as elves. She told us to bring green leotards to school. Now I had a kind of phobia not only of leotards, but of bras, panties and stockings. Whenever my pants were intertwined with Ellie's or Georgia's leotards in the big clothes dryer at home, I cringed at the thought of even touching them. I was sick at the notion of pulling those horrible things on.

Every day Miss Mitchaluk reminded me to bring my green leotards, and every day I purposefully forgot. Finally, she ordered me not to dare show up without them. The next morning when my dad herded us into the limo, I lagged behind, pretending to be sick. Stu demanded to know what the hell my problem was. I broke down in tears. "I don't want to wear leotards!" I pleaded my case on the way to school with little hope, but after we pulled up, my dad climbed out and came with me to see Miss Mitchaluk. When he told her how strongly I felt about wearing leotards, she said, "You'll regret this, Bret. You'll have to sit out the entire play." I was happy my dad stuck up for me. Little did I know that someday I'd make my living wearing leotards—pink ones at that!

It was around that time that I took up drawing cartoons, probably the only constructive thing Smith taught me. If I couldn't have the toys I wanted, I'd draw them instead. With my tongue twisting up over my top lip, I drew Frankenstein versus Werewolf, and Wolfe and Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham, but what I always drew best were the ugly faces of my favorite wrestlers. I was torn between Snoopy and the Red Baron, between *Hogan's Heroes* and Waldo Von Erich, a bald-headed wrestler who was terrorizing my dad's territory as a pretend Nazi thug. Waldo billed himself as a brother of another supposed Nazi, Fritz Von Erich. Thirty years later, Waldo laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world when he told me about a joke he'd pulled on my dad. He'd stolen Daphne the cow and sold her to a slaughterhouse. Then he generously presented Stu with a rack of beef, saying a farmer friend had given it to him. With my dad having so many kids, he said, he wanted him to have it instead. Poor old Daphne. Some joke.

In 1963, my sister Diana was born, a breech delivery that was really rough on my mom; the doctor had insisted that Diana be Helen's last child. But my mom was as stubborn a Hart as there ever was and made up her mind to have just one more, to make it an even dozen. In May 1965, my mom came home from the hospital with the last Hart baby, my youngest brother, Owen.

Ellie and Georgia raced to get home so they could see him first, but I overtook them in the final half mile, bounded up the steps and was the very first Hart kid to welcome Owen Hart into the fold. From the moment I saw him, I wanted to be the best brother to him he'd ever have.

As soon as he was out of the crib, Owen was taken in by the girls, and he lived in their room until he was three. He looked like the little bird Woodstock from the *Peanuts* cartoon, with a beaky nose, a tuft of blond hair and big blue eyes. Living with Ellie and Georgia, Owen became quite the tattletale, telling on the boys for everything.

Then one night my mom casually announced that Owen would be moving into the boys' room. Panic washed over his face, and his eyes grew wide. Dean and I glared over at him, and he knew exactly what those glares meant. A few hours after Owen's bed had been moved, a heated argument broke out between Dean and Ellie. Stu was out of town, so my mom intervened, demanding to know who started it. Little Owen stood, holding his blue furry blanket, and said matter-of-factly, "Ellie started it, Mom." It was true, but more importantly it was smart: he won over all the boys in an instant. Welcome to the club, brother. Much like Bruce had taken care of me, it became my responsibility to dress Owen, comb his hair, tie his shoes and teach him how to be a Hart.

That summer of 1965, at my dad's Stampede show, I'd watched the smooth and graceful former champion Pat O'Connor take on Gene Kiniski, a wrestler whom Stu had started out years before and who was the current National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) World Champion. Since 1948, the NWA had been an affiliation of North American wrestling promotions who voted every year to pick one wrestler as the NWA champion—a fellow who could really draw—and then let him defend the title in all the territories. I was fascinated by how real the match seemed, but at the same time I wondered how it was possible for someone to do this or that move or break that hold. Without knowing it, I was making a thorough study of pro wrestling. But I was failing at just about everything else.

Once my dad had shut down for the season, my focus became surviving another summer out at Clearwater Beach. Dean had an extra bike, obtained through questionable means, that he let me ride on my own, as far as I could go. After we got back home from the beach, or on rare weekend days at home, I'd get on that bike and take off. It was my first taste of freedom, my escape from everybody at the house. I found that I enjoyed being alone with my daydreams about cowboys, soldiers, girls and wrestling, away from the noise and fighting.

I generally did all that I could to avoid Ellie and Georgia. The biggest problem in my life at that point was how easily I was drawn into Ellie's ongoing quest to see Stu punish me for being born. Feisty and hot-tempered, Ellie regularly managed to provoke fights with me in which Stu usually intervened on her side and administered a shitkicking to me. On top of that, Georgia, her loyal supporter, couldn't resist tattling on me, which also got me into trouble with Stu.

I also tried to stay clear of Ross, who was a strange little fellow. He had problems with his ears and had to have tubes put in, which automatically excluded him from Stu's punishing left hand. He was very smart and could read the entire lineup on the back of the programs when he was still in diapers. He had a stubborn temper and hated to lose at anything, which was tough on me, because

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