

SCARS OF YOUTH

Shane Morales

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*For Y.
The light in my dark.*

PART 1

JUNE 10, 1993

Jessica

They say that time heals all wounds, but that's not how it worked out for me. The scars of my youth that I'd carved into my heart still ached, even after all this time. Most days the regret caressed me with a faint touch, but some days, like today, it burned.

"Okay, okay! Geez! Give me a second."

My two cats, Lynch and Rhoads, all but attacked me when I stepped into my townhome from the garage. They meowed like crazy, rubbed on my legs, and then ran up the stairs. I followed behind them to the kitchen and put my purse and keys on the counter while they continued to make a racket, demanding food like they hadn't eaten for a hundred years. I poured some fresh cat food into their bowls, and instantly I ceased to exist, as far as they were concerned. At least until they wanted cuddles later (and they always did).

After feeding the Exalted Masters, I grabbed a Killian's Irish Red from the fridge, walked over to the living room, and flopped down on the sofa just as the phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and answered. It was Becky.

"Hey," I said. "Still up, huh?"

"Yes," she said. "I've been studying all day." Becky was in her second year of law school, and everything in her life revolved around her studies. "How was the gig?"

"Kind of boring, actually." It had been a while since playing at shows had been much fun. Lately it felt more like work than anything else. I knew the other girls in the band were starting to pick up on my boredom, but so far, they hadn't said anything. I didn't want to have to tell them that I was thinking of quitting the band. That wouldn't go

down well, especially not with Samantha; the two of us started our band together. It was ours. If I quit, I knew she'd see that as a betrayal, and one thing I didn't want to have to deal with was an angry Samantha. "I just got back."

"Have you wished him a happy birthday yet?"

"Not yet," I replied. "I was just about to."

"Are you going to keep doing this forever?"

"Becky, you ask me that every year."

She sighed. "Are we still on for tomorrow night?"

"Of course. You know I wouldn't miss a date with you."

"Good. I'm going to bed. I'm exhausted. See you tomorrow."

"Okay. Talk to you later."

I hung up the phone and leaned back on the sofa, relaxing and sipping my beer until it was gone.

It was time.

I stood up and walked over to the opposite wall, where all my guitars were hanging. I took down my red Kramer, carefully and gently, feeling the smoothness of the maple neck. I'd had that guitar since high school, and it still reminded me of my days with him. I didn't play it anymore except for once a year, on today's date: his birthday. It was my special ritual. After I got everything set up, I plugged the guitar into my practice amp, turned it on, and waited for the tubes to warm up. When I was satisfied, I began to play the song I'd written for him shortly after we'd first met. It was his song. It always had been.

I played with all my soul and heart, like I always did when I played his song, remembering everything about him that I had loved so much. I thought about how he had changed my life, how I'd found true love with him, and how he'd forgiven me when I couldn't forgive myself. As I played, I concentrated on the memory of him, how his beautiful smile would make my heart flutter, how his dark eyes would captivate me, and how, when I was with him, my life was full of color and endless possibility. The few months I spent with him were the best

days of my life. I'd never found a love like I had with him, and I wondered if I ever would again.

When I was done and had put everything away, I took a silent moment for myself and smiled a bittersweet smile.

"Happy birthday, Kyle. I miss you."

I went upstairs and got ready for bed. It was late, and I had to be up early for work.

Kyle

The pay phone was on Fourth and Central, just outside a 7-Eleven. The city streets were wet and reflected the headlights and taillights of cars that made *shhhh* sounds with their tires as they passed by. It had been raining on and off throughout the day, but it had finally let up around dusk. Not really ideal circumstances to be traveling cross-country on a motorcycle.

I picked up the receiver, slid some coins into the slot, and dialed.

She picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Katie," I said. "It's me."

"Kyle! You were supposed to call hours ago. I was so worried!"

"Well, I can't very well let my favorite lesbian best-friend roommate get all worried." I wasn't sure what it was about myself that all the best friends I'd ever had were all girls.

"Kyle, I'm your only lesbian best-friend roommate, unless you've been cheating on me. And we're not roommates anymore. You abandoned me by running off to another state for a new job. Traitor."

"I just got in about two hours ago," I explained. "It's been raining. I had to wait under bridges for hours. It's not easy riding a motorcycle in the rain on the interstate, you know."

"Well, it sucks that you had to spend your birthday in the rain. But you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little tired. Hey, I have my new number, but the phone's not hooked up yet." I took my wallet out of my leather

jacket pocket and pulled out the folded slip of paper with the number.
“Ready for it?”

There was a bit of a pause. “Yeah, go ahead.”

Once she got it down and repeated it, I said, “I have to go, Katie. I’ll call you again in a couple of days after I get settled in. Love you.”

She made a kissing sound. “Love you too. Happy birthday. Bye.”

After hanging up, I walked back toward my bike and stopped in front of a music store that had a few guitars displayed in the window. One of them was red. Instantly I was reminded of her, my first love. I stared at it, my mind flooding with memories of her. Her amazing smile, her dorkiness, the way she was so easily embarrassed, the gentle love in her eyes when she looked at me ... **there were so many things about her that I loved.** She’d filled my life with happiness and taught me what it was to love, what it meant to lose yourself completely in another person. **She’d been my everything.** There’d never been another girl like her in my life, and I doubted there ever would be again.

Sighing, I left the music store behind me, but not my thoughts of her. Once I was back on my bike and on the street, I wondered, like always, where she might be, if she was happy, and if she remembered me the same way I remembered her. Probably not. She was the one that had left, not me. But even though she broke my heart twice, I never forgot her, and I don’t think I ever stopped loving her. She would always be in my heart, even if it hurt me to keep her there. Because it wasn’t just that I missed her; she still haunted me, the memory of her always reminding me that no other girl could ever make me feel like she had.

And I guess I was still hurt that she’d left me. I’d had a dream, just one hope, that somehow things could have worked out between us, that we could have been together and happy, but she took that away, and now, where that dream had been, there were only scars.

I didn’t even make it past the second light. It was far too late to do anything about it when I first saw the car coming fast in my direction. I really only saw headlights just before it plowed into me. I smashed into

the windshield and was launched into the air, all sense of up and down vanishing as lights swirled around me in every direction. And then it all shockingly stopped, and I lay still on the wet pavement, my head feeling like it was stuffed full of gravel and nails.

The last thing I remembered thinking of before blacking out was Jessica's face and her beautiful, amazing smile that I had fallen in love with the first moment I saw her.

LEYSIN, SWITZERLAND

AUGUST 30, 1985

Kyle

The classroom door opened, and she stepped in, smiling an amazing smile that was sly and bashfully apologetic at the same time. “Hey, Mr. Weaver!” she said in a bright, raspy voice that instantly caught my attention. “Sorry I’m late. My locker wouldn’t open, so I had to go to the office and get a combo for a new one.” She eyed the rest of the class. “Hi, everyone.”

There was an almost palpable aura of fun and excitement that surrounded her, and it fascinated me. She was pretty, but in a girl-next-door sort of way. Her eyes were like smooth caramel, and her choppy, dark-blond hair hung straight to her shoulders and partially covered her face in long bangs. Her smile was spectacular, but the rest of her was unassuming. She wore jeans and a white button-down shirt, untucked. It was a simple look that seemed to fit her entirely. She looked natural and playful. I really liked it.

Mr. Weaver, sitting on the corner of his desk, looked at her and returned the smile. How could he not? “Jessica. You’re making a habit of being late on the first day of class.”

She grinned. It was infectious. “Last year wasn’t my fault either.”

Mr. Weaver chuckled. “It’s all right. We were just starting.”

I was still staring, and I suppose she could sense it because she looked over at me with curiosity. The classroom wasn’t big, just four desks wide and five deep, with room for the teacher’s desk up front, so even though we were on opposite sides of the room, I could still see every detail of her face. Our eyes locked, and something intangible and unknown passed between us. My first instinct was to quickly look

away, hoping she wouldn't think I was being rude for staring, but something kept me from pulling my gaze away. It was exciting and alluring, and I knew she felt some of that just by the look on her face and the way her eyes widened slightly. It was like we both had taken a step out of time to share that one single moment. Her face flushed, and she looked away, the moment passing, leaving me with a nervous, hollow feeling in my chest and a thumping heart. I had no idea what had just happened, but it left me feeling excited in a way I'd never felt before.

Mr. Weaver spoke to the class. He was a big, tall man with a barrel-like chest and huge arms. It was only fitting that he was the PE teacher (and the dean of students, apparently). He looked the part. "We're going to do introductions. I want to know your first and last names, any nicknames you may have, your year, and something about you that we wouldn't know just by looking at you. Jessica, you go first."

She was just about to sit, but she shifted her stance a bit and remained standing. "Okay. I'm Jessica Fowler. Everyone calls me Jess. I'm a senior, and ..." She paused, drawing in her lips and half closing an eye as she thought. "My roommate's a black-belt."

"That's not really about you, though, is it?" Mr. Weaver crossed his arms.

"Yeah, but she's *my* roommate." That mischievous grin again. I couldn't get enough of it.

Mr. Weaver chuckled and shook his head slightly. He then looked at the girl sitting in front of Jessica. "You're next."

She stood up. She had short, spikey hair, an almost white blonde that stuck up at all angles. She smiled shyly. "My name's Elizabeth Green, but I've gone by Liz since I was little. I'm a sophomore, and I'm into punk music." She sat back down, her gaze fixed on her desk, the red on her cheeks contrasting against her pale skin. A shy punk? That was kind of funny.

My eyes were drawn back to her ... Jessica. That was a great name. I'd never known a Jessica before, so I didn't have any preconceived

notions of what a Jessica should look like, but it was a perfect name for her. She sat there, happy, as if sitting in homeroom was the greatest thing in the world. As the other kids made their introductions, I tuned out a bit, only noting their names and years, thinking about that moment that had passed between us. This was not how I expected the first class of the first day of my boarding school experience to begin, but I didn't mind at all.

When the girl in front of me stood to speak, I straightened in my seat and got ready for my turn. She had long, straight brown hair and bangs cut just above her eyebrows. "My name is Elizabeth too ... um, Elizabeth Madden." She laughed a little when Liz smiled at her. "I guess I go by Beth sometimes. I'm a sophomore, and I want to be a writer."

All eyes were on Beth since she was talking, but when I glanced toward Jessica, I was surprised to see that she was looking directly at me. Our eyes met for a moment, and then she looked back at Beth, her face coloring, looking like she'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Mr. Weaver looked at me and raised an expectant eyebrow. My turn. I stood, feeling a bit nervous, not because of the introduction—I knew exactly what I was going to say—but because Jessica was now openly looking at me. "I'm Kyle Andersen. People call me Kyle. I'm a sophomore too. I was almost eaten by a shark when I was nine." There was some laughter, like I had told a joke. "Seriously," I added for good measure.

I didn't even pay attention to the guy behind me, the last one to do the introduction. I sat sideways in my chair and sneaked a few glances at Jessica, which was a little bit risky since I didn't have any reason to be looking in her direction. When her eyes would shift to me, I'd look away, and when I'd glance back at her again, she'd be looking at me but would then look down at her desk.

When the introductions were done, Mr. Weaver spoke. "Okay, folks. This is your homeroom. You should all know that you're in the

Weaver family group. We meet here every morning to go over school announcements and family group plans, and if nothing else is going on, you can study as long as you do it quietly. Questions?”

The kid next to me raised his hand.

“What is it, Calvin?”

“Is this everyone? There are only ten of us.”

“All present and accounted for,” Mr. Weaver said. “It’s a small school.”

I laughed inwardly. This wasn’t a small school. It might only have about 130 students, but compared to my school back home, it was huge. There’d been 26 students in our junior high and only 11 in my ninth-grade class. I had heard high schools in the States had 1,000 or more students, which, to me, was inconceivable. There weren’t even that many people living in our whole compound back home in Saudi. Nowhere close.

Calvin considered this, apparently unsatisfied, but he didn’t pursue further questioning. I guess maybe he’d come from a high school in the States.

Mr. Weaver grabbed a pile of papers from his desk and handed them to Liz, who took one and passed the stack back to Jessica. “This handout lists all the after-school clubs you can choose from. Pick one. Clubs meet Monday through Thursday, except for sports clubs, which meet Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. These are due on Thursday. Clubs start next week.” He clapped his hands once. “Okay, we’re done for the day. Take the rest of the time to get ready for your next class.”

It was silent at first, but a few of the students began to talk among themselves. Beth walked up to Liz, and they shared a smile and started talking. Some of the older students knew each other—you could tell by their familiarity—Jessica included, who was talking to a junior named Billie sitting nearby as she rummaged through her backpack.

She glanced up and caught me looking at her. Again. We both looked away at the same time, and I felt more than a little bit stupid. I wasn’t sure what to make of her or what had just happened between

us, but I figured it was probably best just to forget about it, so I did my best not to look back at her and just concentrated on going over my class schedule.

When the bell rang, I grabbed my bag and made my way to the door, careful not to get caught looking at her again.

Jessica

Oh my god, he's beautiful!

I stayed in my seat, pretending to take my time so that he would have to walk by me to get to the door. I tried not to look too obvious. As he passed by the front of the class, Liz, with her wild hair and huge boobs (seriously, they were ridiculously big), stood up in front of him and grabbed her books while he waited for her. I looked up at him, trying to appear casual, but really I just wanted to look at his dark eyes again.

Oh my god, those eyelashes!

It's so not fair. Why do some guys have such beautiful and long eyelashes that I would kill for?

Liz said, "Excuse me," and he gave her a cute smile.

Oh my god, dimples!

I readied my best smile and put on my flirty eyes, but he didn't even look at me when he passed by. With a sigh, I stood and followed him out into the hall, where students were already coming in and out of classrooms. He went left, and I went right, but I waited a little while and turned around to watch him as he walked away. He wasn't tall or short, big or skinny, but by the way he carried himself, I could tell he was athletic and fit. His hair was dark and thick, and he had a cute butt too. *Of course he does.* As if all my other cute-boy alarms weren't already going off. But it wasn't so much that he was crazy good looking that drew my attention to him. There was just *something* about him.

But, man, he was really young. If he was a sophomore, that meant he was probably fifteen, two years younger than me. Maybe even

fourteen. Way too young. *Move on, Jess, just move on.* I kept my eyes on him, unable to look away.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I jumped like I'd been zapped in the lady parts.

"Shit!" It was Becky. "Christ in a handbasket, Becky! You scared the crap out of me!" Becky just looked at me with her passive, ice-cool gaze and then glanced down the hall to Kyle as he walked into a classroom and then back at me. I waited.

How to explain the enigma that was Becky Wallace? You really had to know her pretty well to understand the duality of her personality. People's first reaction to her was to be intimidated because Becky had a scary presence. She didn't emote very much, her face usually an expressionless mask, and she had dark, penetrating eyes that bore right into you. Most people found it crazy unnerving.

But Becky really wasn't scary. Once you got past her hard exterior, you'd see that she was kind, protective, and loving; she just had her own way of expressing herself. She was also loyal to a fault. If she accepted you as a friend, she had your back, no questions asked, and if you messed with her friends, you'd likely regret it.

She'd been my best friend since second grade, and we were close like sisters. That meant that over the years, I'd learned to read her. The corners of her mouth would rise or fall slightly, her eyes narrowing a tiny bit when she was less than pleased or brightening almost imperceptibly when she was happy. Most people wouldn't notice these things, but I did. And right then, I could tell she was amused that she'd just caught me staring at a boy.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Who's who?" I wasn't going to admit anything.

A ghost of a smile played on her lips as her eyes regarded me beneath her straight, narrow bangs. The rest of her brown hair was really long, reaching halfway down her back, but her bangs were cut just wide enough to show her eyes, and it really added to her scary vibe.

"That boy that you were just watching. The one you were staring at so intently you didn't hear me call your name. The one who's making you blush like a seventh grader at her first dance. Should I go on?" She was daring me to deny it.

"I wasn't staring."

"Okay. Lusting after, then." There was her wit too, which she doled out in small, sharp bits.

"I wasn't lusting. Geez!" Okay, maybe I was a little bit. "He's just ..." Why was I even discussing this? He was way too young. "He's just cute, okay?"

Becky wasn't going to let me off so easy. "He seems young," she said. "Do you know him?"

"No. I mean, he's in my family group. His name's Kyle. I haven't even talked to him."

"Yet."

I rolled my eyes and was about to say something when *she* walked by, the Beautiful Girl. I'd heard of her, sure. I mean, everyone had, but I'd only seen her from a distance. But now as she walked right by us, I got the full effect. She was ridiculously beautiful. I'd never seen a face as perfect as hers, not even in a magazine or on TV. She might have passed for a supermodel if it weren't for her womanly curves. She was dressed fairly conservatively, nothing too tight, nothing too revealing, but even so, she screamed *sex goddess*. She might only be a sophomore, but she made me feel like a plain little girl, frumpy and unattractive.

Becky watched her, unaffected. "She's very pretty."

Pretty? If pretty were a firecracker then Beautiful Girl was like a nuclear bomb. Pretty didn't even begin to describe her.

"Yeah. She is," I said. "Let's get to class, okay?"

We walked up the stairs to the next floor, moving through the crowd. I wasn't especially happy about having to take calculus and even less so that it was the first class of the day. Whoever thought of that needed to be slapped a few times.

When we walked into the classroom, Z and Sarah stood from their chairs.

“Z!” I ran up to him and gave him a good, tight hug. “Where have you been?”

Almost all the students had arrived late last week or over the weekend. When he wasn’t at dinner last night, I’d started to get worried that he wasn’t coming back. Z, a senior like I was, was one of my best friends. I’d known him since tenth grade when we’d both started boarding school. He was a sweet guy, always cheerful in his quiet way. No matter what happened, you could always count on Z to be there. And he wasn’t bad to look at either. I could never figure out why he’d only had one girlfriend in all the time I’d known him. I knew there were a lot of girls that wanted him.

“Hey, Jess,” he said, resting his chin on my head. Z was tall. “I got stuck in Paris yesterday. The plane broke.” He let me go and nodded to Becky. “Hi, Becky. Kill anyone this summer?”

She looked at him, looking unamused, but I could tell she’d thought that was funny. She almost smiled. “Not that I remember,” she said.

Z laughed and stepped in closer, but he didn’t draw her in for a hug like he had with me. Becky just leaned in and gave him a one-armed hug. She didn’t really like public displays of affection.

Sarah pointed at the two desks in front of them. “We saved you seats.”

Sarah was also a good friend, though I’d only known her for a year. Unlike Becky, Sarah was very expressive, always smiling and laughing. She didn’t take herself seriously at all and would often make fun of herself, like commenting on her big hair and all the hair spray she had to buy, or lamenting the sad state of her imaginary love affair with Billy Idol, who was the only musician that we both liked. I was in it more for Steve Stevens, the guitarist. He had a pretty cool style.

“Okay, kids.” Mr. Harris walked into the class, and we reluctantly took our seats. At least I did.

Mr. Harris was a mousy, condescending man with a bad attitude who gave teachers everywhere a bad name. He didn't like us and we didn't like him. It was a simple relationship.

"Get out your books," he said impatiently.

God, this was going to be a long year. I got my book out and stared at it like it might bite me. Somehow, it felt like if I opened it, which I hadn't done yet, it would release a Pandora's box of math-related pain that would consume me like a horde of numeric locusts. Why? Why did I have to take this stupid class? I mean, who used calculus? NASA engineers, maybe, but I really doubted I'd be doing anything that required knowing whatever crap we were going to be subjected to in this class. *God, I hate math.* I dropped my head to my desk with a loud bang.

"Is there a problem, Ms. Fowler?" Mr. Harris's tone made it clear that he didn't really care what my answer would be.

"I hate math," I mumbled.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

It took like a hundred years to get through calculus, and I barely made it without slitting my wrists. It was horrible. I didn't know how I was going to make it through the school year. I was so happy to get out of there I was practically bouncing. And then I thought of Kyle, and my heart started bouncing too. Geez, why did he have this effect on me? I didn't even know him.

At lunch, when I was sitting in our corner in the dining hall with Becky and my friends, I saw Kyle come in with his girlfriend, the Beautiful Girl. I felt a stab of jealousy that I didn't particularly know what to do with. Of course this had to happen. I feel a little bit attracted to a guy, and he just happened to be with the most beautiful girl in the history of beautiful girls. If he had her, he'd never even notice me. I sighed. This was stupid. He was way too young, and it wasn't like I had any real interest in him, anyway. He was just cute. With awesome eyes. And a smile that made my heart flutter. And I

wanted to do naughty things with him. And ... I sighed again. I watched Kyle move down the line. He put his hand on her shoulder as he said something to her, and they both laughed. I decided I wasn't going to like Beautiful Girl very much.

"Is she his girlfriend?" Becky asked me.

Shit. She caught me staring again. I was surprised she didn't know about Beautiful Girl and Kyle. Everyone was talking about them. It irritated me.

"I don't care," I said, forcing my eyes away and concentrating on my food. When I glanced back up, Becky was still looking at me, her eyes penetrating. "What? Do I have a booger?"

She just looked at me a bit more and then back to Kyle, who was at the soda station filling a glass, and then back to me. This was one of those times I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I did my best not to squirm, but she just said, "No. You're good."

The rest of the day was intense enough that I forgot to be irritated, but that changed when I was at my locker and realized I'd need all my books for homework. I almost left my calculus book behind. It was only the first day, and already I was confused. *God, I hate math.*

Kyle

Since I already had the books I needed, I headed to the math room right across the hall from homeroom, ready to face geometry. There were only three other students in the classroom when I arrived. I took a seat to the side and got out my text book, which I had already looked through because I liked math and was curious.

People started filing in to class. When Jenn came in, she smiled and made her way over to sit next to me. Like so many times before, I couldn't help but take in her beauty. She was drop-dead stunning. Everything about her was beautiful. Her long, platinum-blond hair; her perfect face; her staggering green eyes; the full, pouty lips; and a body that was abundantly curved in all the right places. She was so

beautiful it was almost painful to look at her. The kids at school had taken to calling her Beautiful Girl. She hated it.

The great thing about Jenn was that she didn't flaunt her beauty. Not on purpose, anyway. She wasn't stuck up about it. She didn't act entitled just because she was beautiful. She was actually kind of shy, not sure of herself. If anything, she wasn't all that comfortable with her beauty, especially since she had to endure looks and whispers pretty much anywhere she went. Even now, the three guys sitting across the room were staring, their mouths partially opened.

"Marco," she said to me cheerfully.

"Polo," I answered back, smiling.

It was a thing we did. Jenn was my best friend, even though she was a girl. I'd known her since eighth grade when she moved to our compound back in Saudi. We'd always been friendly, but in ninth grade, we started hanging out together a lot. I spent less and less time with my guy friends and more time with her, just the two of us. For a while, at least, we could talk about anything. I told her about my sister, and she let me cry while she held me. And she once told me about how her father's friend had once molested her when she was younger, and she made me swear I would never tell anyone ever. Her parents didn't even know. I was closer to Jenn than with anyone else, and I knew I was the best friend she'd ever had. I'd never had a relationship like the one I had with her. I loved her.

"How was homeroom?" I asked her.

"Good," she said, sitting down and getting her book and notebook out. "This is going to be fun."

"Fun? You do realize this is school, right?" I looked at my schedule. "I mean, Music Appreciation? That's going to suck. I don't want to learn about old, pasty white guys in wigs playing pianos."

"Yes, okay, that might not be so much fun, but I don't think it's going to be as bad as you think. You're exaggerating. We've only been waiting to go to boarding school for two years, Kyle. Things are going

to be different here. We can start over and make new lives for ourselves. Don't tell me you're not excited."

She was right. We *had* been looking forward to boarding school for a long time. One of the perks of living in Saudi was that the companies our dads worked for paid for most of the tuition for boarding school. It was part of the contract and one of the main reasons people live and work there. Boarding schools in Europe are expensive, and there was no way our families, who were mostly lower-middle to middle class, could ever afford to send their kids there. You'd expect that there would be a lot of rich kids at our boarding school, but that wasn't the case at all. Nearly all the kids at our school had been living in Saudi Arabia—cities like Jeddah, Taif, Riyadh, Yanbu, Dhahran, and Medina—or other countries in the area like Bahrain. Westerners all lived in these cities, and their kids went to American schools, but the American school system there only went up through ninth grade. After that, you either moved back to the United States with your families or you went to boarding school. As we grew up, we saw wave after wave of ninth graders go off to boarding school, and when they came back during breaks, they were noticeably changed. It was easy to see that they had grown up and appeared to us younger kids to be *so* cool. They were like rock stars to us. So, unsurprisingly, we all looked forward to the day when we would get our chance to follow in their path.

"Sure," I said to Jenn. I *was* excited, but it wasn't the boarding school experience I was thinking about. Jessica's awesome smile was still fresh in my mind.

Just then, Mal stepped into the room and came over to sit behind me. "I've already been asked three times if you two are together."

Jenn made a small, amused smile. She'd heard this before. We both had. But we weren't together, not like that. Everyone just assumed we were because we were close.

Mal saw the look that passed between us but didn't say anything.

Mal was my roommate. He had come to boarding school with Jenn and me. I'd known him since fifth grade, longer than anyone else I

knew. He was slightly shorter, heavier, and, according to all the girls back home, better looking than me. I guess they liked his sandy hair and hazel eyes. Mal was a good guy, despite his habit of telling you things you didn't especially want to hear.

Mrs. Weaver stepped into class, and we stopped talking as she addressed us and class started. She began explaining in a very businesslike manner what we could expect in her class and what we'd be covering for the first few weeks. I took notes. I was already starting to like this class. Math could be so cool sometimes.

When class was over, Jenn got up to leave. "Love you," she said to me, and she gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Love you too," I answered as she walked off to her next class. We wouldn't see her again until third period.

Mal stood by me, his hands in his pockets. "You know, you really need to figure out if you're into her or not. It's getting out of hand."

And there it was—Mal telling me something I didn't especially want to hear. He just didn't understand what Jenn and I had. I chose not to answer him.

The other classes before lunch passed much like geometry: introductions, a talk about what we were going to cover, questions, and then a ton of homework. A number of times, in the halls or in class, I heard kids whispering things like "That's her boyfriend," or "She's with him?" or "I heard they've been going out forever." If Jenn heard, she gave no indication, and I just let it lie, but I kept wondering why people just couldn't accept that she was just my best friend. It wasn't that weird, right?

At lunch, Mal, Jenn, and I met at our corner table, which we had claimed over the first weekend before school had started. The dining hall was the biggest room in the entire school building. It didn't really look much like a cafeteria; it was a large room with two-story vaulted ceilings. The south wall was made almost entirely of large windows, and the view outside was amazing, with faraway clouds and mountaintops shimmering in the distance. Since it was located at the

end of the school building, there were smaller windows on the east side, but there wasn't much of a view that way. The north side was partially taken up by the serving area where you walked by with your tray to get your food and drinks. Hanging from the ceiling were big chandeliers that looked like they might have come from a medieval museum. Arched walls partitioned the hall into three distinct areas. Our table was in the smallest of these sections, in the far corner.

We talked excitedly about our classes, our homework, and the teachers. I was in the moment, laughing and joking with Mal and Jenn, but when I saw Jessica walking toward the dining hall doors, my heart skipped a beat. I stared at her, remembering quietly how she had looked at me in homeroom, as she disappeared into the hallway beyond.

After lunch, we went to our last set of classes, which passed much like the previous ones had, just with a bit less apprehension. By the time the last bell rang right after PE with Mr. Weaver, I was exhausted. At my locker, I wasn't pleased to find out I would need all my textbooks for homework that night, especially since I had to lug them up five flights of stairs to my dorm floor.

Jessica

Dinner was the same boring crap I'd become used to over the years. Some of the meals were good, sure, especially the spaghetti, but most of it just plain sucked. Sometimes it was barely edible. The worst were these giant sausage things that were boiled in water. Gross.

I missed Kyle coming in for dinner, and I couldn't see him from where I was sitting by the big windows. His table was in the opposite corner of the dining hall. I'd been thinking of him all day, wondering why he was having such an effect on me. Okay, sure, I was oddly attracted to him, but I'd been attracted to guys before, and I could just write them off. I couldn't get Kyle out of my head, though, which was

ridiculous. I didn't even know him. Hell, I hadn't even talked to him. And he had a gorgeous girlfriend. Plus there was the age thing.

Geez! Why was I even thinking about this? I did *not* have an interest in him. None. Maybe I'd talk to him, which was likely since we were in the same family group. Maybe we'd even be friendly. But that was it. No further. Even if I did want something more, which I didn't, there were just too many reasons to not even go there. Not. Interested.

I looked across the hall to see if I could get a glimpse of him. *Oh god, I have it so bad.* How could this possibly have happened? It hadn't even been twelve hours since I'd first seen him. This was ridiculous. Nothing like this had ever happened to me. I hadn't even said a single word to him, and already I was miserable.

"Are you okay?" Z asked. "You're kind of spaced out."

"What?" I asked dumbly.

Everyone at our table was looking at me. Becky had that look on her face that meant she knew exactly why I hadn't been paying attention.

"I asked if you had any new songs for the formal. You know, for Lollipop?"

Lollipop was my band. Well, it wasn't really a band—not a real one, anyway. The only two regular members were Ms. Evans and me. Sometimes we got someone to sing, but we'd never had a bassist.

"No. Just the same stuff. Van Halen and ZZ Top. That's the only kind of thing anyone wants to hear that I'll play. I sure as hell am not going to learn any pop songs."

"Do you know when the formal is?" Sarah asked.

"End of the month sometime, I guess. I haven't talked to Weaver about it yet."

We usually had a formal dinner every other month where we sat with our family groups and had to dress up and eat either really bad shrimp or, if you can believe it, ostrich. Seriously. The first time I had it, I thought it was some sort of rubbery beef. It wasn't terrible, but you'd think any bird, even a huge one, would taste more like chicken.

"I wish I could just play metal. With a real band."

“Not everyone’s a metalhead, Jess,” Z said. “And you get to do your solo.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t really mind. I’m just being crabby. I like the songs I play. They’re fun.” I had a love-hate thing going on with playing in front of people. It was fun to play in a band, and it was empowering knowing that the crowd wanted something from you and you were the one who was going to give it to them, but I always felt embarrassed afterward, and it sort of annoyed me that I couldn’t play the songs I really wanted to play. I had to pick songs I thought most people would know and like, so I tried to compromise and went with Van Halen and ZZ Top. I mean, just about anyone could appreciate Van Halen and ZZ Top. Even my seven-year-old sister knew who Van Halen was.

I thought I saw Kyle out of the corner of my eye, and I spent a few seconds trying to see if I could spot him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Becky asked me.

“Yeah. Fine.” I finally saw Kyle refilling his glass at the soda machine.

“You don’t look fine.” Becky swiveled around to see what I had been looking at.

Oh, great. Here it comes.

Becky didn’t say anything for a while, but she couldn’t keep the amusement from showing in her eyes. “You look sick.”

“I’m not sick.”

“Lovesick, maybe.”

“What’s this?” Sarah asked. Of course she would zero in on that.

Becky pointed at me with her fork. “Jess is in love.”

“I am not!”

“Who?” Sarah had a crazy grin on her face.

Becky went on as I felt a blush creeping up my neck. “His name’s Kyle. He’s fifteen.”

“How do you know that?” I demanded. “Did you talk to him?”

“No. I talked to his friend.”

“What? Why did you do that?”

“I was curious. Didn’t you want to know?”

Ugh. She could be so infuriating sometimes. “Did I ask you to find out?”

“You didn’t have to.”

I sighed. “Please just drop it. I am not in love.”

“If you say so.”

God! Sometimes I wanted to strangle her. Not that I could. She would kick my ass in a heartbeat.

After dinner, Becky and I went back to our dorm and got ready for study hall. I was going to study like crazy so I could keep Kyle out of my head. I saved calculus for last, though. If I was going to study myself into a coma, I figured I should leave it till the end. Hopefully Becky would wake me up so I could go back to school for social hour and maybe see Kyle.

Kyle

When I came down to dinner, Mal was already at our table.

He addressed me between bites when I sat down. “Have you seen that blonde girl? The one with the punkish hair? She’s got really huge boobs. They’re like the size of her head. Do you think she can even lie down on her stomach?”

There could only be one punkish girl with huge boobs. “Her name’s Liz,” I said. “She seems pretty cool. She’s in my family group.”

“Man, you’re lucky. You get to see those every day.”

I *did* feel lucky, but not because of Liz and her boobs. I was thinking of someone else.

Jenn approached our table with her tray and sat down across from me. “Marco,” she said, smiling.

“Polo,” I said back.

“What are you guys talking about?” she asked, looking back and forth between us.

“Boobs,” I said, pointing to Mal with my fork to let her know it hadn’t been my idea.

Jenn shot him a disapproving look. Mal put his hands up.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“Is that all you guys think about?” she asked.

Mal looked at her. “Yes. That’s all we think about. We’re teenage boys. Just because you have a pair of your own that you can have fun touching anytime you want doesn’t mean *we*”—he waved his hand between us—“can’t have our fantasies about them. We. Like. Boobs.”

I wished he’d leave me out of this. Yeah, I liked boobs, but I didn’t go on and on about them the way Mal did. Boobs were an obsession for him. Big, small, medium ... he didn’t care.

“I don’t have fun touching them, Mal.”

“What did I say about our fantasies? You’re ruining everything!”

She rolled her eyes and began eating. Apparently the discussion about boobs was now over.

“I’m so tired,” Jenn said. “And I have *so* much homework. Do you guys?”

“Yep,” Mal and I said at almost the same time.

“You guys are lucky you don’t have Music Appreciation,” I said. “It sucks.” Jenn and Mal were in Visual Arts, so they were spared the horror. “Mr. Lambert is such a prick.”

“That bad, huh?” Mal asked.

“He’s all high and mighty, talking down to us in his English accent, telling us how he’s going to deign to fill our ignorant minds with a fine appreciation of classical music, which, apparently, is far superior to the ‘awful rubbish’ we kids listen to these days. What a dick.”

“Mrs. Lambert isn’t that bad,” Jenn said. Mrs. Lambert taught Visual Arts, which I would be taking next semester. Visual Arts and Music Appreciation were part of the Fine Arts curriculum. You took one for a semester and the other for the next. “But you can tell she’ll be nasty if you get on her bad side.”

"They both seem pretty uptight," Mal said. "English Lit is going to be bad too. Mrs. Davis is as old as dirt."

Jenn nodded her agreement while I took a sip of my drink. "I bet she read *Pride and Prejudice* when it first came out," she said, and we all chuckled. "Can you believe she assigned *four* books to read right away? I already looked at *Great Expectations*, and I'm not really sure I'll be able to read it all. It's so dull."

I wasn't surprised that she'd already taken a look at the books. She liked to read. I did too, but I was into fantasy books, not old English stuff. I hadn't even looked at the titles of the books Mrs. Davis had handed out. In my fantasy world, I pretended I'd never have to read them.

"Hey, PE is going to be fun, though, right?" Mal said, perking up. "I can't wait to play warball on Friday. That sounds so kick-ass. What are the girls doing in PE, Jenn?"

"Volleyball. I hate it." Jenn wasn't very athletic, but she liked to swim, which I liked to watch because she looked spectacular in a bathing suit. "What are you guys doing?"

"Workouts," Mal answered her.

"Yeah, like calisthenics and stuff," I said. "For the entire week. Then it's basketball. I guess Mr. Weaver wants to get us in shape first."

I wasn't worried, and I doubt Mal was either. We were both in pretty good shape, thanks to spending our entire ninth-grade year running. Mal and I had played volleyball, basketball, and softball. Our one single coach didn't know much about any of the sports he coached and so wasn't much for actual drills and developing skills. Instead, we ran a lot. All the time. Before practice, after practice, sometimes for the entire practice. We were so fit that we'd won the basketball championship that year even though we weren't very good because we had been able to keep running after the other teams got tired. We simply outran them in the second half of the games and caught up. Coach Reynolds was ecstatic when we won the tournament, as if the strategy had been his to begin with.

“There was a volleyball game going on in the gym yesterday,” Jenn said. “I only went to watch Trish play.” Trish was Jenn’s roommate. “There was a senior girl there who was amazing. She spiked the ball so hard it scared everyone on the other team. No one could return her spikes. Between the games, these two guys were trying to get her to do some trick. It was amazing. They threw the volleyball up in the air, and she jumped up really high and kicked it in midair. It was really impressive.”

Mal perked up. “Soccer player?”

“She could be.”

Mal grinned. “Nice.”

I could tell he wasn’t thinking about soccer. He had a thing for athletic girls.

“Are you coming down for social hour, Jenn?” I asked. Social hour was right after study hall when you could hang out in the rec room, which was actually four rooms on the same floor as our lockers. The snack bar was opened, so you could get sandwiches and sodas, and there were a few pinball and video games too.

“Yes. I’ll see you there, right?”

“Yep,” I said. “We’ll both be there.”

“Okay,” she said. “See you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you too, Jenn.”

After Jenn left, Mal and I headed up to our room to get ready for study hall.

Jessica

I got back into the swing of things as the week passed. Except for calculus. By Friday, I had no idea what the hell was going on. The best part of the day, of course, was homeroom because I got to see Kyle. I did my very best not to look at him too much, but every once in a while I did. Sometimes he’d catch me looking, but I’d look away, feeling embarrassed. I saw him at lunch and dinner too, when he was

with his girlfriend whose name, I found out, was Jenna, but she went by Jenn. As if lopping off one letter really made it worthwhile to shorten a name. I walked right by her in the dorm once, and I smiled at her, but she walked past me, talking to her friend without noticing me. Bitch. What did Kyle see in her? I mean, except for her being so hot she all but left a trail of fire behind her when she walked. She was annoyingly beautiful, and I didn't like the way she made me feel.

On Thursday, I went to see Mr. Weaver in his office after school about playing after the formal dinner.

"Jessica," he said, leaning back in his chair. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to ask about playing after the formal this month."

"Of course. I just assumed you would be, so I've already made the arrangements. You're good to go. Do you have any new songs to play?"

"No. Same songs as last time."

I hadn't played with a drummer all summer, and it was hard to work new songs out without one.

"Well," he said, smiling, "we're all looking forward to it."

"Okay. Thanks."

I also saw Ms. Evans and asked her if she would be ready to play with me at the formal.

"Yes, Jessica," she said. "It's only been a few months. I haven't forgotten the songs. We'll be ready."

Ms. Evans was young, twenty-six, maybe, and really cool. She taught sophomore biology and junior chemistry, so I didn't have her for any classes this year, but she was a dorm monitor, so I knew her pretty well.

I started working on my campaign to find a singer. I already knew who I wanted, but Becky said no just like she had all the times before when I'd brought it up. I begged and pleaded, but she wouldn't budge. I played the "if you love me" card, but she gave me such a stern look that I dropped it. I wasn't going to give up, though. Becky had a great voice, and she had a lot of power, and I knew she would make the songs on the set list sound awesome. Just in case she really would

refuse, though, I asked around about the new students. Beth's name came up, and there was also word about a new junior who had sung in a choir back in the States. His name was Jared. He had a deep voice, which I figured would be good for the songs on the set list, especially the ZZ Top songs. I kept the two of them in mind.

During social hour, I watched for Kyle. He was always with Jenn, and it irritated me enough that Becky felt the need to comment on it. Of course.

"You really like him," she said to me one evening.

"Who?"

She ignored my attempt to be casual. "You can't keep your eyes off him."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me, I think," she said. "Have you talked to him yet?"

I almost had in homeroom, but I always stopped myself. I mean, what was the point? He had a girlfriend that he would be insane to leave, and even though I was annoyingly attracted to him, I really didn't want to pursue anything with him. He was just too young, and we probably didn't have anything in common. What I felt for him was just a girlish crush, the kind of thing I should have outgrown already. I was *not* in love with him. From then on, I did my best to ignore him, and I was actually able to manage it. With some practice, I could just forget all about him.

Kyle

The rest of the week passed by. I looked forward to homeroom every day so I could see Jessica. She sat at the desk that she'd picked out on the first day of school, and I sat in my usual spot on the other side of the classroom by the windows. I tried to do homework, prepare for the day's lessons, even read, but my thoughts kept drifting back to her. I was always aware that she was sitting just a few feet away. Throughout the day, I found myself thinking about her, and images of her awesome

smile would flit through my head all the time. The more I watched her, the more fascinated I became. I knew it was sort of pointless because there really wasn't any reason why we would ever talk, much less get to know each other. She was a lot older than I was, and we didn't have any classes together except for homeroom, and she ran with her own group of older kids who had been at the school a long time. I tried to think of things that I might casually talk to her about, maybe ask her questions about living at a boarding school or what type of shops you could find in the lower village, but I was too shy to even try it.

I'd see her in the rec room during social hour too. She'd walk in with her friends, all smiles and eyes flashing. I did my best not to stare, but it was hard not to. She was just so exciting to watch.

"That's her," Jenn said to me one night while I was watching Jessica. "The soccer girl."

I followed Jenn's gaze and was surprised to see that the girl Jenn was talking about was standing right next to Jessica. She was taller than Jessica and carried herself with an easy confidence. She had long brown hair and dark, smoldering eyes. She was pretty in an exotic sort of way, like she was something beyond normal, and comfortable, experience. I noted a casual familiarity between her and Jessica, and I wondered if she was Jessica's roommate, the black-belt girl. She noticed me looking, and when our eyes met, I suddenly felt like a rabbit facing a wolf. *Holy crap*. I quickly looked away.

As for the heaps of homework, I was managing fine. We had study hall every night right after dinner, from seven to nine, in our dorm rooms. Two hours turned out to be just enough time for me to get through all my work, even though thoughts of Jessica kept distracting me. I wasn't exactly a stellar student, but I found the homework manageable.

I fell into a routine with my classes. I felt pretty comfortable, like I was settling in, finding my place. I got to know the teachers and our dorm monitors a little bit too. I learned that the married teachers and single male teachers lived in the main school building with the boys,

some on the dorm floors and some in apartments on the lower floors. The single female teachers all lived in the girls' dorm, which was a separate building up the road toward the upper village.

Of all the teachers, I liked Mr. Weaver and Ms. Evans the most. Mr. Weaver was pretty funny, if a little bit intimidating, and Ms. Evans, apart from being pretty and young, was just awesome. The other teachers ranged from so-so to downright awful. I was right about Music Appreciation; Mr. Lambert was quickly becoming the bane of my existence. He seemed to zero in on me. Whenever he asked the class something and no one raised their hands, which was understandable because he always nitpicked anything you said, he would always single me out. He seriously had it out for me. Prick.

On Wednesday after school, I was coming out of the bathroom on my dorm floor when I saw a guy walking down the hall toward me. He had short, dark hair and he wore a goofy smile as if he were thinking of something funny that had just happened. I immediately noticed that he was carrying the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*. I wasn't a geek or a nerd, but I loved D&D. I'd been playing it since I was twelve.

"Hey," I said, and he stopped. "You play D&D?" Dumb question, but it was a good icebreaker.

"Yeah," he said. "Do you?" He was enthusiastic.

"Yeah. I have all the books. At home, anyway. I'm Kyle."

"I'm Haden. Wanna come look at my D&D stuff?"

"You brought it all with you?" My mom hadn't let me bring all my gaming books to boarding school. She said my collection would take up too much space and be too heavy to carry. That and she didn't want it to get in the way of my schoolwork. "Yeah, let's check it out."

Haden took me to his room, which was a lot bigger than mine, but he had two roommates, whereas I only had one. His roommates weren't in. He went over to his desk and pointed to the shelf. *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Monster Manual*, *Monster Manual II*, *Deities &*

Demigods and the *Fiend Folio*. Yep, all the books. He even had the Basic sets.

“How’d you get all this stuff here?” I asked.

“I shipped it,” he explained, shrugging.

Why hadn’t I thought of that? “That’s an alarmingly good idea.”

I spent the rest of the time before dinner talking to Haden about role-playing games, checking out his collection, and asking which adventure modules he’d played or run. We were pretty comfortable with each other and were soon talking excitedly about trying to get some people together so we could play. I could tell we were going to be friends.

At dinner, Haden joined us at our table. The look on his face when Jenn sat with us was hilarious.

“This is Haden.” I introduced him to Mal and Jenn.

“Hey,” Mal said, already eating, not seeming to care at all that I’d brought someone new to our table.

“Nice to meet you, Haden,” Jenn said.

“Uh ... hi,” he managed. To me, he said, “You’re the guy going out with Beautiful Girl?”

Mal rolled his eyes.

“We’re not together,” Jenn said. “We’re just friends. And please don’t call me that.”

Haden looked a little bit uncomfortable after that, but once Jenn started asking questions about him—where he had lived before coming to boarding school (Bahrain), what his dad did (science teacher), if he had any brothers or sisters (three older sisters—ouch!), stuff like that—he started acting more natural. Jenn managed to put him at ease with her casual talk, and I guess he began to see that she was just a normal girl, after all.

By the end of the week, Haden was a permanent fixture at our table.

Jessica

When Friday rolled around, I was so ready to go out and drink beer. I'd hardly drunk at all over the summer back in the States, what with being mostly alone and underage—which was so frustrating seeing as I'd been drinking legally in Switzerland for a year—so I was almost desperate to have a cold, smooth beer at Feydey's, one of my most favorite places ever. It was a small bar and restaurant up in the upper village, by the train station. The floor plan was like a skinny rectangle. On one end were the door, the bar, and the bathrooms. At the other, two rows of tables, each big enough to sit four (six if you squeezed the chairs really close), ran down the room with a single aisle between them.

When Sarah, Z and I got there, I looked around to see if I could spot Kyle, but I didn't see him. That disappointed me and made me feel relieved at the same time. I wanted to see him, but if he wasn't there, I wouldn't have to worry about acting like a dork in front of him. We claimed a table after ordering large, half-liter mugs of beer—the standard in Europe—and not much later, we were talking and laughing, telling each other stories about our summers. Thoughts of Kyle were pushed to the back of my mind.

It was a surprise, then, when after about an hour, I noticed Kyle and a goofy-looking friend of his walking down the aisle. He was wearing jeans and a black AC/DC *For Those About to Rock* T-shirt. He looked really good in it, and I was happy to see that he was into one of my favorite bands.

It was probably the beer doing its magic, but before I could stop myself, I was calling out his name.

“Kyle!”

He stopped suddenly, and his friend walked right into his back, making them both stumble. It was cute. He looked over at me, and his eyebrows shot up a little bit. He seemed pleased to see me. That lent me more courage, and I started to slip into flirting mode. I knew I

shouldn't. He had a girlfriend, after all, but I couldn't help it. Now that I'd actually said something to him, words were spilling out of my mouth.

"Hey!" I called out again. "Come sit with us."

I was sitting sideways on one side of our table, with my legs stretched out on the two empty seats next to me. Z and Sarah sat on the other side of the table, giving me curious looks. I swung my legs over and back under the table so I was sitting normally and motioned to the two empty seats next to me.

"Here, sit," I encouraged.

He hesitated a bit, looking at us, but then he made his way over to sit next to me while his friend sat on his other side. They both looked a little nervous. Now that I had him sitting next to me, I couldn't think of anything to say. I was starting to feel really awkward because no one at the table was saying anything, but then I remembered what Kyle had said in homeroom on the first day of school.

I smiled as brightly as I could. "Tell us about the shark!"

"Shark?"

"Yeah, you said in homeroom you almost got eaten by a shark. What happened?" I'd told all my friends what Kyle had said, so now Z and Sarah were looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to tell the story.

"Um, well, I was at the Galapagos——"

"You've been to the Galapagos? For real?" I didn't mean to interrupt. I tended to get a little bit excited when I drank. I didn't care, though. It was helping me to not feel like such a dork.

"Yeah, when I was nine," he said.

"Sorry. Go on."

He took a deep breath. "Okay. One day we went to this tiny island to spend the day on a beach in a little cove. The island was so small we were the only people there. I was snorkeling ... you know, just fins and stuff." He seemed to be getting less nervous and falling into a rhythm. He'd probably told this story a million times. "I was just swimming

around, looking down at the bottom at all the fish. After a while, I started to worry that maybe I'd swam too far out so I stopped to look around. That's when I saw the shark. I didn't even have time to think. It swam up to me and started pushing me around with its nose, like it was seeing if I was good to eat. I didn't know what to do so I tried to go as limp as possible without sinking to the bottom. The shark swam away, and I thought I was going to be okay, but it came right back and grabbed my leg and pulled me down to the bottom."

We were all staring at him with wide eyes and opened mouths.

"I don't really remember what happened next because it was all a big, confusing blur, but after a little while the shark swam away and I did my best to swim back up to the surface. My leg was bleeding like crazy, but it didn't really hurt. I'm not sure how I managed it, but I made it back to shore before collapsing from shock. They had to send a helicopter to get me. I woke up in the hospital at Isabela island—that's the main island. I had to get 126 stitches. They told me I almost bled to death."

"Oh my god," I breathed. "You were *so* lucky." And he was obviously okay. I didn't notice a limp or anything when he walked.

"That's crazy, man," Z said, leaning back in his chair, and Sarah nodded. Kyle's friend was looking at him with wide eyes.

"Yeah, well, it made an impression, that's for sure," Kyle said.

I think that after hearing that none of us really knew what to say. A silence settled over us, but then Sarah leaned forward.

"So you're Kyle," she said to him with a smirk and that reminded me I hadn't introduced anyone.

"Oh! Shit, I forgot," I blurted out. "Guys, this is Kyle. Kyle, this is Z and Sarah."

Sarah waved to him, and Z shook his hand. I didn't want to be rude, so I asked Kyle's friend who he was.

"Uh ... Haden," he said.

He seemed like a sweet kid. Z and Sarah gave him the same welcoming treatment.

“That’s a cool name,” Z told Haden, which I thought was a bit funny since Z had his rock-star one-letter name that everyone, especially girls, thought was so cool. It was a nickname, sure, but still. Funny. It was short for Zachary, which Z hated for some reason. I thought Zachary, or even Zach, was cool, but Z insisted on his drastically shortened version.

I was so relieved Kyle’s girlfriend wasn’t with him, and that made me feel a little bit guilty. But then I thought that if she wanted to be with him then she would be instead of wherever she was without him, and it wasn’t a crime to sit and talk to a boy who had a stupendously hot girlfriend.

“Where’s your girlfriend?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he said.

What? Hell yes! “Really? You guys are always together. Everyone thinks you two are going out.”

He shifted in his seat. “No, we’re just friends. She’s kind of my best friend, even though she’s a girl. I’m not sure where she is. She went out with her roommate.”

Oh my god, this was the best news I’d heard all week! *Thank you, Oh Great Demon Lord!* Now I didn’t feel so bad about having a crush on him.

“So you guys want to sit with us? We’ll get you beer,” I said.

Kyle nodded. “Sure. I mean, yeah, that would be nice.”

Haden shrugged and nodded. I liked that Kyle seemed eager to be with us.

“Okay, hold on,” I said. “First one’s on me.” I stood and started squeezing past them.

“I’ll join you,” Sarah said, and we walked up to the bar. “I’ll get one for Haden.”

Sarah was nice to think of Haden. I’d heard from kids who had been in high schools in the States how there were complicated social levels that determined who was popular and who wasn’t and how upperclassmen never hung out with underclassmen. There seemed to

be all sorts of social cliques and groups too. But it wasn't like that in our school. There weren't any social distinctions or levels of popularity, only groups of friends. For the most part, everyone was friendly with everyone else. As for the new kids, we took care of our own. It was sort of an unspoken tradition to help the new students find their feet.

We went down to the bar and ordered two half-liter mugs of beer. After I paid and turned around to head back to the table, Becky came in through the front door.

"I thought you were going to stay in," I said to her.

"I got bored."

"Cool. Get a beer. I'll wait for you."

When she got her beer, we all went back to the table. I suddenly realized there was nowhere for Becky to sit. There weren't any free chairs to bring over to Sarah and Z's side of the table either. I squeezed past Haden and Kyle again.

"Hey, you guys move down a seat so Becky can sit down."

They moved over one seat so Kyle was sitting in my chair and Haden was in the seat Kyle had just been sitting in. Becky remained standing, looking at me like I was dumber than a wheel of cheese.

Kyle looked at me, confused. "But where will you sit?"

Then I realized what I'd done. There was nowhere for me to sit. *Great. Could I possibly look any dumber in front of Kyle?* But I had an idea, and I liked it so much I almost giggled. I knew I probably shouldn't, but just then it seemed like an excellent idea.

"I'll sit on your lap."

Kyle

Holy shit.

Before I could even begin to comprehend what was happening, she sat down on my lap, placed her beer on the table, and then put her arm around my neck to steady herself. She was *so* close. And she smelled *so*

good, like peaches and a trace of honeysuckle. I reflexively inhaled deeply to savor her scent. I noticed several scars on her left arm that ran down the length of her forearm. I wondered about that for a second, but the feel of her on me, her bare arm on my neck, her fingers grazing my shoulder, brought my attention back to the fact that Jessica Fowler, beautiful and alluring senior, was sitting on my lap. I didn't know what to do.

She pointed to the scary girl who had sat down next to Haden. "That's Becky. My roommate and best friend." Becky was looking back at Jessica with a raised eyebrow. "This is Haden and Kyle, Beck."

Becky nodded at me and Haden. "Hi," she said. "A pleasure."

I wasn't sure if she meant it or was just being polite. She still seemed scary to me, and poor Haden looked like he would rather be anywhere else than sitting next to her.

"Okay, anyway," Jessica began, shifting in my lap. "We're going to share this beer. That way, if a teacher comes in, it won't look like you're drinking."

That was good, because you could get in a lot of trouble if you got caught drinking. You had to be a junior or a senior *and* have drinking permission from your parents to be able to drink, even though the drinking age in Switzerland was sixteen. I'd been told, though, that you could get served if you were twelve and looked fourteen.

I nodded. "Okay, sounds good." This was just getting better and better.

Sarah pushed the beer she'd brought toward Haden. "This is for you," she said to him. "I don't drink, so you can have it. Just keep it in the middle of the table. If a teacher comes in, I'll grab it. You pay for the next one. Deal?"

"Sure," Haden said, looking a bit unsure. "Thanks." He took a sip of the beer and coughed, his face scrunched up.

"Easy there," Becky said, slapping him on the back. "This your first time?"

Haden nodded. "Yeah. First time."

“Take it easy, then,” she replied. “If you throw up on me, I’ll kill you very slowly.”

I might have thought that funny if I’d been certain she was kidding. Jessica squeezed my shoulder. “Here, have some.” She handed me the beer.

I wasn’t used to beer. It was good; it’s just that I was used to drinking truly disgusting alcohol. Alcohol was illegal in Saudi Arabia, so westerners made their own. It was pretty common. The thing about living in a small, secluded compound in Saudi Arabia in the middle of nowhere was that there wasn’t very much for kids to do, so in the time-honored tradition of bored kids everywhere, we came up with our own fun. And for us, that was stealing alcohol from the adults. There were basically two options: distilled *sadiki*, a type of moonshine, which was the harshest thing I’d ever put into my body, or really bad wine that was made in a record-breaking two weeks. Sometimes the wine had this terrifyingly horrible sludge at the bottom of the bottle that you had to be careful not to drink or else you’d puke harder than anyone ever had a right to. The beer, in comparison, was delicious, if unfamiliar. *So* much better.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Feldschlösschen. We call it *Feldy*. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good. Is this what you usually drink?”

“Yep,” she said, and she brought the mug to her mouth to take a drink. I watched, fascinated, when she licked her lips. “It’s my favorite. I like your shirt.” She poked me in the chest with a finger, and her touch made my chest spasm. “I like AC/DC a lot.”

Wow. I’d never expected to hear that from a girl. All the girls back home hated AC/DC. Granted, there weren’t very many girls back home, but they’d all made it clear that AC/DC was stupid boys’ noise. They were all into radio pop and pansy bands like that.

“But I like Judas Priest better,” she went on. “Do you like Priest?” That surprised me even more. AC/DC was one thing; AC/DC was just

hard rock, and I could see a girl liking hard rock, but Judas Priest was real metal, and girls just didn't listen to real metal in my experience.

"Uh ... you don't look like a heavy-metal chick." I'd never met a heavy-metal chick. I'd only seen them in videos and magazines. Jessica didn't fit the mold.

"What, just 'cause I don't wear crappy makeup and slutty clothes I can't like heavy-metal?"

"I guess not. I've never met a girl who was into metal before." *I've never met any girl like you.*

"Well, you have now. So do you like Priest?" She drank some more and then handed me the mug.

"Yeah, yeah, I do. *Screaming for Vengeance* is awesome."

"I know! I like some of the old stuff better, though. 'Victim of Changes' is *so* cool. Did you know they're coming out with a new album this year?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Hopefully it won't suck," she laughed. "What about Iron Maiden? Like them?"

"Yeah, I do." I loved Iron Maiden. They were one of the few bands whose albums I knew from first to last.

"What's your favorite album?" she asked me excitedly.

That was easy. "*Powerslave*."

"Me too! 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is epic!"

She was *so* cool. "I think so too." I took a long pull of the beer.

This was great! I couldn't believe I was sitting here with Jessica—well, her sitting on me, which was great just by itself—drinking beer together and talking about metal bands. Maybe it was the beer helping out, but I wasn't nearly as nervous as I would have expected to be given the situation I found myself in. In fact, once I thought about it, I realized I wasn't nervous at all. Excited, yes. Kind of turned on, sure, but that could be excused given the fact that a beautiful, older girl was sitting on my lap. But not nervous. This just felt comfortable. I never

would have guessed that she'd be so easy to talk to. It was like our age difference hardly mattered at all.

I was so into our conversation that I hadn't noticed what Haden was up to, even though he was sitting right next to me. I felt a little bit guilty for abandoning him. When I checked on him, listening to what he was saying, I saw that he was talking animatedly to Z and Sarah.

"Which is why the game uses a twenty sided die," he explained. He'd already finished off that first beer by himself, and his cheeks were rosy.

Becky sat silently, observing, a cool look on her face, like nothing in the world could possibly faze her.

Jessica and I continued to talk about metal bands. She'd mention a band, and I'd answer if I'd heard of them or not and what I thought about them. We talked about songs and videos we liked, and we both wondered how some songs could be so kick-ass and their videos be so horrible. It was an enigma. I was surprised by how many bands she knew. She brought up a bunch that I'd never heard of before, and she'd tease me about being so ignorant.

"You've never heard of Dokken?" she asked, dismayed.

"Uh, no."

"Oh my god, that's criminal! George Lynch is my favorite guitar player. I want to play just like him."

I almost coughed out my beer. "You play guitar?"

"Yeah, since I was ten. I have a Kramer," she said proudly.

"Here? At school?"

"Yeah, in my room."

"Wow ... you're so ..." *Amazing? Spectacular? Awesome? All three and more?*

"What? I'm so what?"

"Um ... I've never met anyone like you. You're so cool."

She blushed. "You're not so bad yourself," she said, and her compliment made me feel like I was glowing inside.

Becky brought us another beer after we finished the first one, and when she leaned over to hand it to Jessica, a look passed between them. Becky said, "For the happy couple," before sitting at her seat, and that made me a little embarrassed.

We spent what seemed like another hour talking about guitarists, guitar riffs, favorite solos, and yet still more bands. Jessica told me all about her Kramer and the songs she knew how to play, and I listened, awed, thinking that she must be really, really good.

The large beers went a long way, and eventually I had to pee really badly. I'd been putting it off because I didn't want Jessica to move, but I couldn't wait anymore. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Oh!" She jumped up, standing out of the way. "Sorry."

"It's okay." I took two steps and suddenly realized my left leg was totally asleep from Jessica sitting on it. It collapsed under me, and I found myself sprawled out on the floor. The pins and needles were making me wish I could remove my leg. It was excruciating.

Chairs were moved, and people got out of the way to make room around me. I heard a lot of laughter as kids pointed at me, just in case anyone might have missed it. Haden was giggling like an idiot. Becky and a guy I didn't know stood over me and reached down, pulling me up.

"Are you okay?" Becky asked me while the guy steadied me.

"My leg ... asleep ..." I could barely talk. "Bathroom ..."

"Me too!" Haden said loudly. *Did he drink another beer?*

"I'm going too." Jessica stepped out into the aisle. She put her arm around me and helped me hobble to the bathrooms while Haden swayed behind us.

When I was done, the pins and needles had subsided, thank god. It was pretty obvious that Haden was drunk. I guess a liter of beer will do that to you if you've never drunk before. "I'm okay!" he kept saying. I led him to the sink and made him splash water on his face, which he tried to do, but ended up getting water all over his shirt and laughing about it. I laughed too, partially because I was a bit tipsy myself but

also because I was in a really good mood. I couldn't have imagined my evening would have turned out this way.

Jessica

I probably shouldn't have had that last beer; I got way too flirty with Kyle. I was already starting to feel embarrassed about sitting on his lap. But I was happy too. Kyle was so nice and sweet. It took him a while to get comfortable, but after we started talking about metal bands, he seemed to relax and just be himself. And I liked who he was. It was great that he was into metal so much. He was a bit uneducated, but I guess that might be expected given his age. I felt like I needed to introduce him to some older stuff that he hadn't heard of. And Dokken, of course. I couldn't believe he'd never heard of them.

I waited for Kyle and Haden by the front door. When they came out, it was pretty clear that Haden was drunk. I looked at my Swatch (black, of course). It was almost ten. Sophomores and juniors had to be back at their dorms by eleven (seniors got to stay out half an hour later). Haden would need the time until then and fresh air outside to sober up, or else he'd get busted for sure.

"Kyle, we should get him back. I think he drank too much. I'll walk back with you," I suggested.

Just walk. I wouldn't even touch him. God, I sat on his lap for like an hour and a half. It was so nice, but now I felt like a jackass. He was just so comfortable to be with. And, wow, being so close to him had made me start to get seriously distracted. Geez! How could he turn me on so much?

Okay, Jess, settle down. Show him you're not a floozy.

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Kyle said. "I think I need some fresh air too."

I walked back to our table to let everyone know we were heading out. Becky gave me one of her disapproving looks and then stood up and pulled me to the side.

"What are you doing, Jess? He has a girlfriend."

"She's not his girlfriend. They're not together. He told me."

"He's still really young. Don't play with him."

"I'm not playing with him! I just ... he's just ... he's just nice." And beautiful. I wanted to tell her to stay out of it, but I knew her too well. Becky was really protective of me and always let me know when she thought I was behaving badly.

"Okay, I'll leave you alone. Be good," she said. "No sex on the first date."

God! She could be so infuriating sometimes.

"Shut up, Becky! Geez! Like that would ever happen. I'll see you back at the dorm, *Mom*."

When Kyle, Haden, and I stepped outside, the cool night air breezed over us, and it felt great. I took in a big lungful of air and let it out, feeling refreshed.

"Look," Kyle said, pointing to the night sky. "A full moon."

I looked. The moon was almost directly over us, its pale white light shining down, and it was so clear and bright out that you could see all the way to the other side of the Rhône Valley, which was like ten miles away. It was such a nice night out.

"It's so pretty," I said.

"Pretty!" Haden shouted.

"Yeah," Kyle said. "It's really nice."

We made our way back toward school and the girls' dorm, enjoying the night air. Kyle walked next to me with Haden wobbling around on his other side. Kyle kept quiet.

"Who's your favorite singer?" I asked him, wanting to start up a conversation.

"Well, I haven't really thought about it. Um, Steven Tyler is amazing, and I like Brian Johnson, but mostly from *Back in Black*."

"I love that album!" I said. "It's crazy awesome. Who else?"

"Bruce Dickinson, for sure," he said. "But I think I'd have to go with Rob Halford."

“Oh my god, yes!” Kyle and I had some things in common. “Halford is a god. He’s the best metal singer in the history of metal singers. He does things with his voice that are beyond cool. I love him. Well, I like Judas Priest in general, but he’s the best.”

“What about you?” he asked. “Who else do you like?”

“Ever heard of Rik Emmett?”

“Nope.” He looked a bit sheepish. *God, he’s so cute.*

“He’s the singer and guitarist of Triumph,” I said. “You haven’t heard of Triumph?”

“I’ve heard the name, but I’ve never heard any of their songs.”

I just looked at him. “Wow. I’m really going to have to educate you about bands.”

His answer surprised me. “I think I’d like that,” he said, giving me a long look that made me blush.

Was he flirting with me? *Holy crap.* Should I flirt back? Is that what we’re doing? I racked my brain for something sexy to say. Okay, not too sexy. Just something flirty.

“Uh ... Well—”

Haden stopped. “I think I’m going to barf.”

Yes! I’m saved!

I stepped over to him. “Take deep breaths,” I told him. “In through your nose, out through your mouth. Sit down.” He flopped down right on the side of the road. “You’ll be okay.”

Kyle squatted down next to him and put his hand on Haden’s shoulder, comforting him. *He’s such a nice guy.* After about five minutes, Haden stood up, still swaying slightly.

“Okay,” he said. “I think I’m good now. Thanks. You guys are the best.” He went on to explain in detail how cool he thought Kyle was and how he was glad to have met him. Then he spent a good while telling me how pretty he thought I was and how he was sure Kyle and I would make a great couple. That made me embarrassed, and I clammed up. Kyle stopped talking too. We didn’t say anything to each other the rest of the way to the girls’ dorm.

When we got there, I told Haden to go sit on a bench in the flower garden across the street, which he did, all the while telling us about the X-Men.

“Rogue is so cool,” he said. He didn’t seem to realize we weren’t with him anymore.

“Stay here, okay?” I said to Kyle. “I’m going up to my room to get something.”

“Okay. I’ll wait here.”

I ran up to the third floor where my room was and grabbed a cassette tape from my collection. I hurried back down and crossed the street to where Kyle waited for me.

“Here.” I handed him the tape. “It’s Dokken. *Tooth and Nail*. It’s one of my favorites. You can consider this your first assignment.”

“Okay. Cool. Thanks.”

“Hey, Kyle?” I looked up at him. *God, his eyes are amazing*. I just wanted to stare and stare until I fell into them. They were like melted kisses.

“Yeah?”

“I had a lot of fun tonight. With you, I mean.”

“Um ... yeah, me too.”

We stood there awkwardly for a minute. It was getting a little embarrassing, so I decided to speak up.

“I’m going to go up to my room. You and Haden stay here and sober up until it’s time for you to go check in. You’ll get in a lot of trouble if you’re caught. Okay?”

“Sure. I’ll make sure Haden gets in fine. We’ll just stay right here.”

“Okay. Bye, then.”

“Yeah. Good night.”

I went up to my room and didn’t look back. I got ready for bed, feeling both excited and embarrassed at the same time. I was still groaning about sitting on his lap. What was I thinking? Sure, it had seemed like a good idea at the time—a challenge, even—but now I was

just worried he'd think I was like that with every boy I happened to meet at Feydey's. I wasn't like that.

When Becky came in later, I hid under the covers, pretending to be asleep so I wouldn't have to face her. I knew she would have plenty to say about this evening.