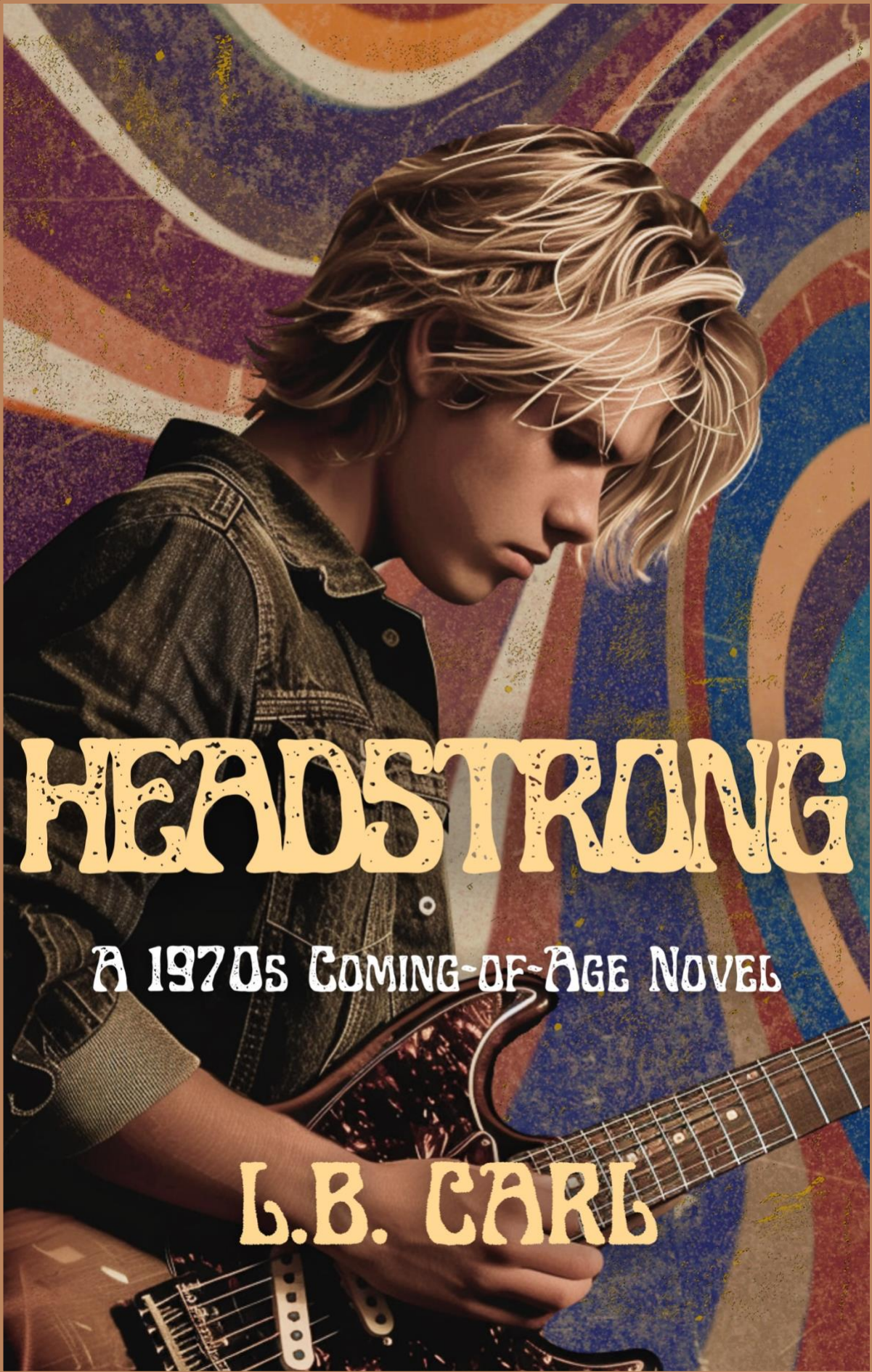




HEADSTRONG

A 1970s COMING-OF-AGE NOVEL

L.B. CARL

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By

L.B. Carl

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A troubled boy. A mean girl.
Their dreams.
Their struggles.
Their hate-love-hate-love story.

In the nostalgic backdrop of the 1970s, 15-year-old outsider Matt Jerue yearns for two things: to play guitar in a band and to win the heart of his longtime crush, Taryn McIntyre. But Matt smokes, he's unpopular, and he gets into fights. He's everything Taryn wants to avoid and everything her popular friends despise.

When their best friends start dating, Matt and Taryn are thrown together on a rollercoaster of emotions that challenges their beliefs and slowly draws them closer.

Young love and the enduring power of friendship take center stage as Matt contends with bullies, parental neglect, and his own insecurities. Yet, he clings to his dreams, even as his world falls apart.

Join Matt and Taryn in this poignant drama of growth, self-discovery, and the pursuit of one's dreams.



ONE

He leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, and clasped and unclasped his hands, giving them something to do so he wouldn't reach into his pocket and pull out a cigarette. All around him, students wearing orange and blue packed the stands with energy and anticipation. They stomped their feet as trumpets blared and pompoms shook in a din of crackling plastic that vibrated through the stands and underscored the marching band's lively beat.

Matt Jerue ran his hand through his bangs, pushing them out of his face. If given his choice, he'd be smoking a cigarette, anywhere but here. But instead of leaving and lighting up, he sat in the bleachers as the raucous wall of team spirit closed in. His legs twitched with the urge to get up and leave, and he rubbed his palms across his jeans to make his legs stop.

So...if he really wanted to be anywhere else, why was he here?

Because in that split second between the question, "Wanna go to the game tonight?" and opening his mouth to answer, he stupidly forgot he hated football. All through junior high, he didn't see a single game, and the only time he paid attention to sports at all was when he had to sit through a mandatory assembly where the coach raved about their team and everyone cheered (well, not everyone).

He thought coming to high school wouldn't change his long-held dogma. But here he was, sitting in the crowded stands beneath bright stadium lights as two teams congregated on the sidelines and chants of "We're number one!" rang out. And it was only the first week of his sophomore year.

"Why do you think they call them stands?" the boy on one side of Matt asked. "They're for sitting in, right?" When Matt looked at him, Chris Chambers shrugged.

Matt met Chris two years ago in eighth-grade PE, when they were on the same scrimmage football team and intentionally forgot key signals. Now—early September 1975—their friendship had evolved from a mutual lack of athletic ability and a deep dislike of jocks into a single desire to play music.

"What's the score?" Chris asked.

Rahn Simon sat on Matt's other side and tossed Chris a sideways glance. "The game hasn't even started."

Chris slumped. "This is gonna be a very long night."

Or not long enough, Matt thought. His eyes went to the row of cheerleaders on the track

below, landing on the reason he was here, the reason he broke his three-year vow never to attend an athletic event, and the reason he pretended he didn't need a cigarette.

Taryn McIntyre.

Her dark hair fell around her cheerleader sweater to the large "W" on her chest. She held one pompon on her hip and the other above her head; her green eyes sparkled, her pink lips glistened, and the hint of a summer tan lingered on her skin. Her sweater hugged her curves while her short skirt tapped her bare thighs.

"Relax, Chambers," Rahn said. "Enjoy the view." He was leaning forward, his eyes on the cheerleaders. His reddish hair reached past the collar of his bomber jacket, and his sideburns were neatly trimmed down his square jaw.

When Matt met Rahn four days ago in front of their locker, he thought Rahn was a senior, given his size and sideburns. It turned out Rahn was supposed to be a junior, but he was held back last year, so he was, once again, a sophomore. Although Matt hadn't known him long, he knew Rahn disliked sports just as much as Matt did. Which made him wonder why Rahn wanted to come tonight and invited Matt and Chris to tag along.

Matt followed Rahn's gaze to one of the cheerleaders, who seemed to be looking back. She smiled and glanced away; her eyes swept over the crowd, then flickered to Rahn again. Her smile grew, and she dipped her chin as her blonde ponytail swished around her head.

Not that Matt was an expert on flirting—or cheerleaders...or girls, for that matter—but that looked a lot like flirting.

Which, on one hand, made sense. Rahn dressed like the popular kids—better, actually—and he was the only person Matt knew who sauntered through the halls without wearing a letterman jacket. He also drove the coolest car in the school parking lot—a brand-new Pontiac Trans Am, white with a blue Firebird on the hood.

But Rahn didn't hang out with the popular kids; in fact, he hung out with Matt and Chris.

Matt took a deep breath and wondered again why he didn't get up and leave. *Hawaii Five-O* was on; if nothing else, he could be home watching TV. But when the invitation came up, Matt's only moronic thought was that he could stare at Taryn for two hours, and, after all, how bad could that be? But as both teams took the field and applause erupted in the stands, punctuated by high-pitched screams and a massive vibration of pompons, he realized just how seriously he underestimated the whole team-sport mentality.

"Hey," Chris said, "isn't that Taryn McIntyre?"

Matt tensed and skipped a breath or two. He fidgeted and tried to get comfortable on the hard and uncomfortable bleachers.

"Yeah," Rahn said. "You know her?"

"Yeah. She went to Mann."

Rahn looked back at the field. "Then you know what a bitch she is."

Matt and Chris exchanged confused looks, then Chris said, “She wasn’t a bitch in junior high.”

“Hard to believe,” Rahn mumbled. “But whatever. She is now.”

Matt wasn’t sure if Rahn was joking, and before he knew his lips were moving, he said, “I don’t believe that.”

“Believe whatever you wanna believe. But Taryn won’t talk to anyone who isn’t a cheerleader or a jock.”

Matt really hoped that wasn’t true. Sure, it was possible Rahn knew her better, since they were both sophomores last year, but Matt still wasn’t ready to concede the point.

He thought back to eighth grade, when Taryn clustered with her ninth-grade friends in the lunchroom or sometimes breezed by him in the halls. She was friends with all the exclusive girls, but she wasn’t a cheerleader, and she was even sort of friendly. Not to *him*, of course, but sometimes she said hi to Chris and other people Matt knew. “Maybe,” he finally said with a shrug. “Or maybe she just doesn’t like you.”

Rahn breathed out a quick laugh. “Yeah, I know she doesn’t like me.” Then he looked at Matt and asked, “But then, has she ever talked to you?”

Matt swallowed and licked his dry lips. Yeah, once, he wanted to say. He stood in the crowded hallway of their junior high on his first day there—lost, confused, and hoping if he stared at his schedule long enough, everything would suddenly make sense. Taryn had walked up to him with bouncy lightness that swirled around her as she smiled and flipped back her long hair. She took his schedule and spoke cheerful and bubbly words that sounded like English, but he wasn’t sure because he couldn’t understand why a girl would talk to him. Especially *this* girl—a girl who was older and beautiful and *perfect*. He had squinted through his bangs and hoped whatever she said might become clearer if he just kept staring. After another flip of her hair, she handed back his schedule and bounced back to her friends. They had erupted in laughter, and it didn’t take a genius to know he’d been officially dismissed.

Rahn slowly grinned. “Don’t tell me. You’ve been pathetically in love with Taryn McIntyre since seventh grade.”

Eighth, Matt almost said, but he looked back at the field and tried to ignore the amusement permeating from Rahn. He also tried focusing on the first play of the game, but Taryn continually stole his attention, making time both stand still and fly by, making him forget all the reasons he shouldn’t be here, making him even forget he needed a cigarette. Until the referees’ shrill whistles signaled the end of the game and jarred Matt back to the present. He wasn’t sure of the score or even how long he’d been sitting there, but he had every inch of Taryn memorized.



“Wanna go to McDonald’s?” Rahn asked as the boys made their way from the stands to the parking lot after the game.

A throng of loud and spirited Woodbrook fans reveling in their team’s win filed out around them.

“What for?” Chris asked.

“Because everyone goes to McDonald’s after the game.” Rahn pulled out a cigarette and a lighter from his jacket pocket. “Besides, Kellye’s gonna be there, and I’m gonna ask her out.”

“Who’s Kellye?”

Rahn lit up, shoved the Bic into his pocket, and blew out a puff of smoke with the words, “Just the hottest cheerleader at Woodbrook.”

Matt picked up his pace to match Rahn’s long strides. “You’re gonna ask her out?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

Because she’s a cheerleader seemed like a pretty obvious answer, but the simplicity of it made Matt say, “I thought you don’t like cheerleaders.”

“No,” Rahn said as they reached his car. “I just don’t like Taryn.” He opened the driver’s side door and flipped the seat forward.

Chris climbed into the back, and Matt got in the front passenger seat as Rahn started the Firebird. Rahn turned on the radio, then tapped the steering wheel with his thumb while navigating the cars in the lot, inhaling drags, and randomly singing along with Bad Company. When they reached the street, he hit the gas. The tires kicked up gravel, whirring and squealing on the pavement.

They drove past the local strip mall, their cross-town rival high school—Henley Park—and not a lot else along the way. Parkwood was a decent-sized suburb of Tacoma; however, when it came to attractions for high schoolers, apparently football and the one McDonald’s were as exciting as it got on a Friday night.

Matt lit up, then inhaled and exhaled, trying to regain some normalcy in the comforting routine. He had lost himself in that stadium, where obsessed fans and smiling cheerleaders consumed him. But here, with his friends and the familiar taste and smell of cigarettes, the real him gradually returned.

Inside the hazy smoke, one thing crystalized: he’d have to abandon his crush. It didn’t matter if Rahn was right or wrong about Taryn; the fact that she was now a cheerleader made their worlds too far apart. In junior high, even though she was popular, she wasn’t a *cheerleader*. Which, at the time, was compatible with his anti-popular creed—at least, that’s what he told himself. But that wasn’t the case anymore.

And he almost convinced himself to end his crush, until his thoughts drifted to Kellye...

It was obvious Kellye could get any jock she wanted, so why would she flirt with someone like Rahn? Not that Rahn didn’t look like a jock, because he did. But his choice in

friends and the fact that he smoked were probably enough to ostracize him from the popular crowd. Yet, Kellye had definitely sent looks Rahn's way. If a cheerleader was interested in him, maybe even open to going out with him, then maybe their worlds weren't that far apart after all.

Or maybe he was an idiot for even thinking that.

He took a drag and let his breath out as if he could blow away his thoughts. But all it did was make room for one fact: continuing this insanity by going to McDonald's was just plain stupid. He should ask Rahn to drive him home, but the words got stuck somewhere between his brain and his mouth.

He tossed his cigarette out the window and leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes. The cool, Pacific Northwest air ruffled his bangs, and the darkness behind his eyelids lulled him to a safe place without thoughts. It was comforting in its nothingness. For just a moment, he felt normal.

But then a nudge on his arm dragged him back, and he opened his eyes and looked behind him.

Chris was sitting forward between the front seats with a pointed look that simmered with excitement. He nodded toward Rahn, and...slowly...the sound of Rahn's voice rose above the music.

When it hit Matt's consciousness, so did Chris' excitement. Matt reached over, flipped off the radio, and said, "You didn't tell us you could sing."

Rahn's eyebrows tugged together. "You didn't ask. And don't touch my radio."

"Do you play an instrument?"

Rahn shot him a sideways glance muddled in confusion. "Why?"

"Because we want to start a band." And then, for some reason, the words sounded strange, as if the following silence made the sentence grow in volume and size. The truth, spoken for the first time to someone other than Chris' parents, sounded less like a childish wish in a letter to Santa and more like a frightening reality.

Rahn turned down a side road, pulled the car to a stop, and switched off the ignition. The quiet evening air swallowed the hum of the engine. He looked at Matt and Chris with narrowed eyes. "You want to start a band," he repeated. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

Because it didn't seem real before. But Matt asked again, "Do you play an instrument?"

Rahn studied them a moment more. Finally, the tug between his eyebrows loosened, and he shrugged. "Yeah. I play the piano and Hammond B3."

Questions rifled through Matt's head as he stared at Rahn in silence.

"What's a Hammond B3?" Chris asked.

"An organ. Like you'd hear in church. Or on a Deep Purple album."

"Are you any good?" Chris asked.

"Of course, I'm good. I've been taking lessons since I was six."

“Ever thought of joining a band?”

Rahn let out a humorless laugh. “Not too many bands need a pianist.”

Quiet filled the car. Although Matt and Chris had only talked about adding a bass guitarist, the potential of the sound Rahn described was intriguing. “Well, if you’re any good,” Matt said, “maybe you can join us.”

Rahn’s lips twisted in a smirk. “Yeah, okay,” he said with amusement. “I’ll audition for your little band.” He started the engine and pulled the Firebird onto the street. “But then, you have to audition for me.” He turned the radio back on and mumbled, “I’m not just gonna take your word for it that you’re any good.”

TWO

When they reached McDonald's, the three boys climbed out of the Firebird and walked through the lot filled with loitering teens. Matt's worn canvas high tops didn't touch the ground; he walked on air. He had a grin on his face, which he noticed when he caught his reflection in the restaurant window. Excitement shone in his light-blue eyes beneath long layers of medium-blond hair. He could tell Chris was grinning, too, even without looking at him.

This was so cool. If Rahn's skill was worthy of Matt and Chris' emerging sound, and if Rahn agreed that Matt and Chris were as good as they believed, then the journey ahead wasn't just made of idle dreams; it was the beginning of a whole new era.

Jocks standing by the entrance gave them the once-over as Matt and Chris trailed after Rahn through the front door. Inside, school colors and excitement surged, and Matt instantly realized that not "everyone" goes to McDonald's after the game.

Lettermen, cheerleaders, and drill team members filled the tables and booths. Every single person—aside from those working—was in school colors. It was like being inside a miniature stadium. But here, Matt couldn't crouch in his seat and try to blend in. Here he stood out more than if he came in wearing Henley Park colors.

Standing amid the victory celebration were Taryn and several other cheerleaders. They were smiling, laughing, and seemingly just as aware of their current performance as when they bounced in front of a stadium full of fans.

Rahn motioned for Matt and Chris to follow, and he boldly walked toward the group of girls. Matt's heart beat faster as he moved closer, but his mind—which understood the stupidity of the situation—lost its ability to infuse common sense into the rest of his body. Before he knew it, they were beside the girls.

Rahn smiled with a charming glint in his eyes. "Hi, Kellye. You look really great tonight."

Pink spread across Kellye's cheeks; she giggled and dropped her eyes to her shoes. Her friends, however, reacted with shock and offense, plus a whole lot of eye-rolling.

"So, Kellye," Rahn said, "do you wanna go with us to Pizza Haven later?"

A smile brightened her face, and she replied with a quick and light, "Sure."

This, apparently, was not the correct answer, because the other cheerleaders stared at Kellye as if she purposely messed up their perfect routine. But Taryn wasn't looking at Kellye; she was glaring at Rahn so intensely, it looked like she was trying to vaporize him.

Rahn smirked, and there was something taunting in his eyes when he looked at Taryn. “You’re welcome to join us,” he said. “I’m sure my friends won’t mind.”

Taryn’s glare darkened, and Matt half-expected her to say something cutting, given the way her lips curled into a scowl. But then her eyes darted briefly toward Matt and Chris.

Recognition flitted across her face as her eyes landed on Matt. Her hostility dissolved into a plainness that made her features soften and her body relax. But then, just as quickly, discomfort followed, and she looked away.

A girl with “Holly” stitched on her sweater let out a loud and dramatic sigh. “God, Kell, why are you talking to *them*? They’re *heads*.”

Matt was still caught in the string of emotions in Taryn’s eyes, but Holly’s words filtered through. One word, in particular, reached inside his thoughts and yanked him back to reality. Stoner, druggie, *head*: interchangeable terms for the losers of Woodbrook High.

Kellye ignored her friends and gave Rahn a dazzling smile. “Do you want to find a place to sit?”

He and Kellye walked away, followed by Chris. But Matt couldn’t get his legs to work. He stood there, wondering if Taryn would look at him again, offer him a smile, say hi, maybe even sit with them. But instead, she and her friends turned their backs to him and formed a whispering huddle.

Aside from the lack of laughter, it felt exactly like the first time he met her. He slowly backed away from the awkwardness, then made his way to where Chris was ordering a Coke at the counter.

Taryn settled with her friends in a booth near the window; a few of them threw disapproving looks in Rahn’s and Matt’s directions, like the boys had defiled some sacred shrine. But Taryn ran her fingers through long strands of dark hair, then discreetly glanced Matt’s way. Her look was more curious than condemning—at least that’s what he thought...until she looked at her friends, and they finally erupted in laughter.

He took a deep breath to ease the tightening in his chest.

“Hammond B3,” Chris said. “Sounds like it could take us in a whole new direction, doesn’t it?”

Matt nodded, but it wasn’t because he heard Chris’ question. He heard the tone of his voice and the fact that the sentence went up at the end. But the words eluded him. He focused on Taryn’s profile, how her sweater hugged her body, and how her pleated skirt barely covered her upper thighs. His eyes slid down her legs to where they crossed at the ankles, and tingling spread through his groin.

“You know,” Chris said, following Matt’s gaze, “there are other girls you could go out with.”

Matt breathed in and dropped his eyes to the floor.

“What about Tina Vance?” Chris asked.

Matt turned his back to the cheerleaders. “Tina bounces up and down when she plays the flute.” With Chris’ questioning look, Matt said, “When we had those concerts at Mann, she bounced up and down in her chair each time she hit a different note. She looked like she had to pee the whole time.”

“Maybe that’s what flute players do.”

“Audrey Wilson didn’t.”

“So go out with Audrey.”

“Doesn’t she dating some college guy?”

Chris shrugged, then thought for a minute. “Okay. How about...Pam Elliot?”

“Pam laughs too much.”

Chris stared at him.

“You know,” Matt said, “when you’re talking to her—it could even be really important, like an earthquake wiped out Tacoma—and she just giggles the whole time. And you don’t know if she thinks you’re funny, or she’s thinking about something someone told her yesterday, and she’s just now getting it.”

“Maybe you make her nervous.”

“Everybody makes her nervous.”

Chris thought a minute. “What about Cindi Lawson? She doesn’t bounce or giggle.”

Matt toyed with the idea. “Yeah. Maybe. She’s okay, I guess.”

“There you go. Now you have someone else to think about.”

Someone else to think about. Matt hadn’t thought about another girl since eighth grade. He gave one last glance toward Taryn’s table, then followed Chris to where Rahn and Kellye sat together. He scooted beside Chris into the booth opposite them.

Kellye smiled as if she were genuinely happy to meet them. It was such a departure from what Matt expected of a cheerleader that he had a hard time believing she wasn’t just being nice because she liked Rahn.

Her eyes twinkled as she looked at Matt. “Rahn said you know Taryn from junior high.” And then she waited, like she expected him to answer.

But he didn’t know what to say. He slowly nodded instead.

She gave him a playful wink. “I wonder if she remembers you. I’ll be right back.” She slipped out of the booth and hurried to the cheerleader table, leaving a wave of shock rippling through him.

He watched Kellye scrunch beside Taryn. As they talked, Taryn glanced his way with a simple look—not even a little dark or vaporizing.

Then Kellye flitted back and sat beside Rahn with a bright smile for Matt. “She definitely remembers you from junior high. She even said she thought you were cute in eighth grade.”

Matt stared at her with confusion evolving quickly into disbelief. He felt Rahn's amusement and Chris' shock, but he couldn't bring himself to look at either of them.

"I swear," Kellye assured him with that same bright smile, oblivious to the fact that she had said anything extraordinary.

"So go talk to her," Rahn said. "See if she wants to go with us to Pizza Haven."

Matt shook his head. "I can't ask her that."

"Sure, you can." And then Rahn added with a grin, "After all, she thinks you're cute, Matty."

Matt glanced at Chris for a dose of courage, wondered what in the world he was doing, swallowed hard, then slowly stood up.

His worn jeans jacket was suddenly too tight and the air too thick, but he sucked in a deep breath and willed his feet to move. He stared at the fraying hem of his wide-leg jeans, sensing the distance between him and Taryn condensing. His heart pounded, and his palms sweated—and not once did his brain consider this a good idea. He felt like he was nearing his own execution, with only Kellye's words giving him the strength to go on. As the girls at Taryn's table looked up and their eyes filled with annoyance, he knew this was the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

"Uh...hi, Taryn," he heard himself say. Belittling giggles bubbled around the table. But Taryn had an uncomplicated expression, and it was enough for him to continue. He shoved his hand through his bangs and pushed them out of his face. "I...I was just wondering..." Wondering if he could string words together to make a complete sentence. He cleared his throat and forced himself to get it out: "If you'd like to go with us to Pizza Haven."

Her expression stayed simple, and Matt thought he saw something close to a smile on her lips.

"Oh my God," Holly groaned. "Don't you get it? You're a *head*. Cheerleaders do *not* go out with heads."

Matt opened his mouth to defend himself, to tell Taryn he wasn't really a head. He didn't do drugs and never drank—well, except once when he snuck a beer from his parent's supply in response to Chris' prodding. But his mom regularly took inventory—a possibility he never really thought about—and she hated coming up short. She threatened him with physical mutilation if he ever took her beer again. But to Matt, it really didn't matter; drinking didn't appeal to him anyway. He wasn't sure if it was because he lived with two alcoholics and figured someone had to stay sober or because he was a wuss. Either way, it didn't matter right now, and even though he decided against a verbal defense, it still left one small problem with Holly's logic. And he had to point it out: "But Kellye's going out with Rahn."

Immediately Taryn's expression changed, and her smile—if that's what it was—vanished. "They're *not* going out."

Her declaration and the way she was so sure of it made him ask, “Then what are they doing?”

She shook her head, like she wished she knew.

“You know,” Holly said with fake sweetness, “just because Kellye’s talking to Rahn doesn’t mean the rest of us want to talk to *you*. Would you please leave?”

Her words caused an uneasy churning in his stomach, but he did his best to ignore it. He looked down at Taryn’s lowered head. “Taryn, I just wanna ask you something.” Holly rolled her eyes and opened her mouth, but before she threw another insult, he asked, “Why don’t you like Rahn?”

Taryn’s eyes came up with a look he didn’t expect: a glare with a whole lot of disdain. “Rahn made a pass at me when he was on a date with another girl. I don’t like him, and I certainly don’t feel like eating pizza at the same table with him.”

He nodded, not sure of the implications of that statement yet understanding her dislike—if it were true. He didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable by sharing a pizza with Rahn, but he still wanted her to come. “Well,” he said with a little smile, “you don’t have to sit at the same table with him.”

As Holly and the others groaned, Taryn’s expression softened, like she was unexpectedly affected by his smile.

“Could you be any more nauseating?” Holly asked. “Taryn doesn’t want to go anywhere with you. Are you too stupid to understand?”

Taryn pressed her lips together and looked away, letting Holly’s words hang in the air like a wall between them. The uneasiness in his stomach merged with his humiliation and formed something hard in his chest. He realized he had misread the look in Taryn’s eyes; he really was an idiot if he thought anything about him would affect her.

Suddenly two boys sandwiched Matt between their letterman jackets, and the magnitude of their presence encased him. He quickly realized who they were, their reputations big enough to trickle into the sophomore class. Warren Daniels—senior class president, star wrestler, and all-around perfect guy—and his friend and teammate, Anthony Eldridge. They usually sauntered through the halls of Woodbrook, glaring at every boy they passed as if they were facing their next victim on the wrestling mat. “What’s going on?” Warren asked.

Matt swallowed hard, and his heartbeat intensified as he looked up at Warren’s huge neck and extra-large letterman jacket.

“He won’t leave us alone,” Holly whined.

“Okay, kid, it’s time for you to leave.” Warren grabbed Matt’s arm with a grip that squeezed through Matt’s thin jacket. The suddenness made Matt try to pull away, but Warren’s grip tightened, and a grin curved the corners of his mouth. “Do you have a problem?”

Embarrassment and anger raced through Matt's muscles, but he stayed calm enough to shake his head.

Warren declared his minor victory with a grin, and he loosened his hold. Without thinking, Matt twisted his arm away and slammed his palms against Warren's chest. Warren barely budged, but his grin dropped, and his eyebrows closed between his eyes. His glare made all of Matt's thoughts come roaring back, along with logic and self-preservation, telling him to get away *now*.

But anger and obstinance came back, too, wrapping around Matt's feet like ivy and planting him in place. His jaw clenched as he glared up at Warren.

Neither boy moved; nobody moved. The entire fast-food restaurant seemed to hold its breath.

And then a bulky hand clamped Matt's shoulder. Anthony spun him around and shoved him away. Matt slammed onto a table on his stomach; paper cups flew in the air, plastic trays slid off the table, and chairs scraped across the floor as people jumped out of the way.

Matt sprawled across the tabletop with fries smashed beneath him and cold liquid seeping through his shirt. High-pitched laughter rang in his ears.

Be smart, he heard in his head. *Stay here like a wounded animal, let Warren win, get out of here alive.*

But anger and embarrassment took over. He pushed himself off the table, got to his feet, and ignored every warning bell in his head. He crashed his fist into Anthony's jaw; the sting radiated from Matt's knuckles, up his arm, and into his shoulder. Anthony stumbled back, and Matt turned in time to see a flash of orange and blue as Warren slammed him backward. The blow sucked the air from Matt's lungs and almost knocked his chest into his spine.

They tumbled as one over the table and rolled onto the floor. Matt's head hit the linoleum just inches from a metal chair. He tried to block the blows, but Warren held him down; Warren's fist smashed into Matt's ear, jaw, and forearms as Matt struggled beneath Warren's thick legs. Pain shot through Matt's skull and consumed his head.

"Stop it!" someone screamed, but the sound was swallowed by the pounding in Matt's head.

The blows finally stopped, and Matt opened his eyes, blinking at the bright lights above him. A scowling face came into view.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear." Warren gripped a fistful of Matt's collar and squeezed tight. "I said," he gritted out, "it's time for you to leave."

Matt swallowed the blood in his mouth as he squinted through the pain. He didn't want to be here...didn't want to be beaten into unconsciousness in front of Taryn. He searched his fuzzy brain for a way out, praying he had the guts to do the first thing that came to mind.

He reached above his head and grabbed the cold metal legs of the chair, then he jerked

the chair forward and slammed the hard edge of the seat against Warren's face. The impact of metal hitting bone resonated in his hands, and the sound echoed in the silence. The chair slipped out of his hands and fell to the floor in successive, deafening clunks.

Warren's head went back...then slowly forward...as his eyes clouded over. His chin dropped toward his chest, his shoulders sagged, and his body swayed unsteadily. In that moment of dazed nonresistance, Matt shoved Warren's leg away, pushed him over, and rolled on top. Crushing pain consumed Matt's head, and he blinked hard to clear his vision; faces whirled in circles below him. He aimed his fist at one of the faces and felt his knuckles smash into skin and bone. Then again. And again. Blood dripped from Matt's nose and mouth, and little splatters went spinning with the faces on the floor.

Suddenly, two sets of hands pulled him to his feet and dragged him backward.

"Shit, Jerue," he heard someone say. "We leave you alone for three minutes, and you start a fight with the whole wrestling team."

In a haze of dwindling awareness, somewhere amid the fragments of orange and blue, he thought he saw Taryn looking at him, worry on her face. But the vision—it could only be a vision—dissolved into the throbbing in his head.

Cold night air rushed over him as he was practically carried to the parking lot and poured into the back seat of the Firebird. He leaned back and wiped his arm across his face. Blood stained his jacket sleeve. The sound of spinning tires squealed through the closed windows, and his stomach stayed somewhere in the McDonald's parking lot. Vomit reached his throat.

"Where are we going?" he heard Chris ask.

"I don't know. Should we take him home?"

"I think his parents are gone."

"Perfect."

"No way," Chris said. "What if he has a concussion or something? He could lose consciousness, and no one would be there to help."

"Yeah, okay.... What about your place?"

"My dad would throw a fit."

"I could take him to my house," Rahn said. "My parents won't care. He can sleep in the game room."

"What's a game room?"

"You know, where we keep the games: pool table, pinball machine, foosball table."

"Oh. Yeah. That's a good idea."

In the silence, Matt drifted away from the back seat. He heard the muffled sounds of passing cars and felt the stops and starts of every turn and traffic light. Yet, he felt so far away... Maybe he was sleeping, dreaming, or simply watching himself from afar, like some out-of-body experience.

“I wonder what the fight was about,” Chris said.

“I’ll give you three guesses.”

“But why would he start a fight with two seniors?”

“Because he’s infatuated. Guys do stupid things when they’re trying to impress a girl.”

Matt heard their conversation so clearly, yet the meaning eluded him...it was there, but not...like trying to catch a snowflake. A light breeze ruffled his hair and soothed his aching head. And then there was nothing. The welcome silence covered him like a soft, warm blanket.

THREE

Matt opened his eyes and blinked at the faint objects surrounding him. None of the shapes looked familiar; nothing was shaped like his dresser or the battered desk in his room. This place looked more like...waking up at Zeke's. He tried to sit up, but a shooting pain exploded behind his eyes. He dropped his head on the pillow.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty."

He took a few deep breaths and opened his eyes again. A large recliner came into view; eventually, he focused on the person sitting in it. "Hey," he managed to say.

"It's about time you woke up," Rahn said. "I was starting to worry about you."

"Where am I?"

"My house. I brought you here last night. Don't you remember?"

The memory trickled through the pain. "Oh, yeah."

"It worked out really good too," Rahn said. "I went back to McDonald's and picked up Kellye, and we came back here—you know, just to keep an eye on you—and we ended up making out in my room most of the night."

"What about your parents?"

"They just thought we were up here playing Scrabble and babysitting you."

Matt let out a sigh—even the act of breathing hurt—and he wondered why things were going so great for Rahn but couldn't possibly get any worse for him.

"Your mom called," Rahn said. "I guess Mrs. Chambers told her what happened. Anyway, your mom said she was going to Yakima, so if you need her, you can call her at some Larry-guy's house. She said you knew the number."

Matt tried to nod, but mini explosions filled his head.

"So," Rahn said, "you wanna eat? My mom said she'd make pancakes. And," he said as he rose from the chair, "if you knew my mom, you'd realize how amazing that is."

Matt carefully stood up, slowly allowing time to adjust to each increment in elevation. The fuzziness in his head, blur in his eyes, and nausea in his stomach gradually diminished, but the pounding intensified.

He shuffled into the hallway, where framed pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Simon and their only son hung on the wallpapered walls. His feet sank into something cushiony, and he looked down at the thick, white carpet. He'd never felt anything so soothing or seen anything so spotless beneath his thin socks.

He slid his hand along the smooth polish of the oak banister as he followed Rahn down the open, curving staircase. The expansive entryway spread below him; it was bathed in sunlight, with antique side tables displaying vases of fresh flowers. He walked with Rahn into the dining room, where sunbeams streamed through the bay window and warmed the air. He settled into a dining room chair and glanced out the window at the sparkling waters of Willow Lake lapping the edge of the Simon's backyard.

Mrs. Simon came up to him like a game show model dressed in a pastel jumpsuit. She brushed back Matt's bangs with her fingertips and looked closer at his pummeled face. A gentle scent enveloped him. "I don't think you'll need stitches," she said, "but you should have your family doctor look at those cuts." Her highlighted hair framed her blue eyes, pink lips, and tanned skin. "Do you have a family doctor?"

"Yeah," he lied.

"Should I call your mom and see if she can make an appointment?"

"No, that's okay. I'll call her."

Mrs. Simon nodded, then went back to the stove. "So, Matt, would you like three pancakes or four?"

Rahn's dad walked into the room like a special guest star on *The Tonight Show*. Gold shone wherever there was skin: around the V-neck of his cashmere sweater, around his wrists, and on his fingers. Even his wire-rimmed glasses were trimmed in gold. His slightly graying hair was slicked back, and the scent of aftershave followed him around the room. "Did you think you were Mohammed Ali, little buddy?" He patted Matt on the back. "Rahn says you took on two guys twice your size. You got spunk, kid." He hugged his wife and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "How are you, darlin'?"

"Dad," Rahn said, "is it okay if Matt's friend comes over?"

"Sure," Mr. Simon said. "You'll have the house to yourself. Your mom and I are going shopping for a new dining room table."

Matt wondered what was wrong with the table he was sitting at; it looked newer than the six-pack of beer in his refrigerator. Just then, Mrs. Simon placed four unusually dark pancakes in front of him. He studied them for a moment before finally picking up his fork.

"Are you ready, darlin'?" Mr. Simon asked. "Let's go spend some of my hard-earned money."

Matt felt better once he'd eaten breakfast and downed several Excedrin. The pain in his shoulders subsided, the explosions in his temples diminished to small throbs, and the swelling around his left eye was already going down. He splashed warm water on the dried blood around his mouth and nose. In the bright light of the guest bathroom, he looked a little sickly, with a yellow hue around the bruises. But when he caught his reflection in the hallway mirror, he thought the bruises made him look tough.

“You look like shit,” Chris said when he entered Rahn’s house. “My mom’s all worried about you. She wants you to stay at our house tonight if your parents are gone. She said she’ll make pot roast and chocolate cake.”

If Matt’s mom was visiting her boyfriend in Yakima, then chances were his dad was drunk and passed out on the couch. There was no point in going home. “Yeah, thanks,” he said.

Rahn led them into the white-carpeted living room where a black grand piano stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, and muted sunlight filtered through the filmy sheers. A heavy wood organ with two rows of keys and an array of pedals sat against the wall. On either side of it were massive Leslie speakers. Rahn sat down at the piano and asked, “What do you wanna hear? A little Leonard Bernstein, Elton John, Rachmaninoff?”

Matt and Chris looked at each other. “Rachmaninoff?” Chris asked.

“A Russian composer. Ever heard of ‘Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini’?”

The two boys stared at him.

“Never mind,” Rahn muttered. He played a few classical pieces, followed by Elton John’s “The Bitch is Back.” Then he sat at the Hammond, pressing the pedals and keys and filling the air with deep, intense tones that sounded like a cross between sinister and spiritual.

Matt couldn’t believe the sounds emerging from Rahn’s fingers. When the music stopped, Matt stood with Chris, absorbing the fading vibrations, astonished that a guy like Rahn could play music so powerful, so emotional, so *good*.

And, when Matt and Chris finished showing off their musical talents in Chris’ garage, Rahn agreed they’d be stupid not to play together.

They were going to be the biggest thing to hit the Northwest since Boeing.



On Monday morning, Matt walked through the sophomore hall with his head down, hoping he could get to class without being noticed. His bangs covered the bruises on his face, but his hair wasn’t thick enough to block the whispers behind his back.

He reached his locker and opened the door, praying he didn’t find the wrestling team standing in the hall when he looked back up. When he straightened, however, he found Rahn and Kellye beside him. The sight of them together—holding each other like they were a real couple—took him by surprise. Kellye, looking cute in her cashmere sweater, wide-legged jeans, and platforms, snuggled beneath Rahn’s arm draped over her shoulder.

“Everyone’s talking about you,” Rahn said with a grin. “All the guys say it’s amazing Daniels didn’t kill you, and all the girls want your phone number.”

“It’s true.” Kellye’s blonde hair bounced around her shoulders as she nodded. “Three girls asked me this morning if I could introduce you.”

Matt stared at them. They had to be pulling his leg.

“Hey, Jerue,” a boy said. “Good job.” And he gave Matt a thumbs-up as he walked by.

Matt was confused. He thought the whole thing at McDonald’s made him look like a joke. So why was everyone treating him like he just invented two-hour school days?

As the three of them walked into the sophomore commons, students turned in their direction, and the hum of conversation diminished to only a few audible voices. Matt found a roomful of eyes on him. “Hey, Jerue,” someone called out. “Way to go!”

Someone began to clap, and a few students even got to their feet as a smattering of applause filled the room.

Rahn slapped him on the back. “It’s only the second week of school, Matty, and already you’re the class hero.”

Matt gave a hesitant grin, not sure if he was the butt of some collective joke.

“Hi, Matt,” Cindi Lawson crooned as she strolled past.

He watched as she moved down the hall, and he wondered if the whole school was going crazy or if he was having one of those dreams where he was standing naked in the hall, trying to remember his locker combination, and this was just the opening scene.



“It’s unbelievable, man,” Chris said as they settled into their chairs for first period. “Everyone’s talking about you. They can’t believe you stood up to Daniels and Eldridge, and everyone’s impressed that a varsity wrestler couldn’t keep you pinned. Oh, and Cindi told me to give you this.” He tossed a folded piece of paper on Matt’s desk.

Matt opened the paper and read the large cursive letters: *I’d love to go out sometime. Call me. 555-4730. Cindi.* She dotted her i’s with open circles like every girl does for some unknown reason, and the zero in her phone number had a smiley face in it. She had very happy writing.

The teacher barely said good morning when a voice on the intercom interrupted with instructions to send Matt to the principal’s office. Matt glanced at Chris. This couldn’t be good; he doubted the principal would call him in for a personal standing ovation.

Principal Penrod was a roundish man with flaky skin that seemed to shed, leaving white specks scattered across his desk. He had a stern look on his dried face, and he took a moment to study Matt like he was some sort of science project. “So,” Mr. Penrod finally said. “I heard you were in a fight last Friday night at McDonald’s. Is that true?”

Matt leaned forward and wiped his palms on his jeans. “I guess so.”

“Do you realize the seriousness of this matter?”

“Well, yeah. But I didn’t start it.”

“Who started it?”

Matt stared at him. There was no way he could narc on two seniors. “I don’t know their names.”

Mr. Penrod didn't appear even a little convinced. "You could've been seriously hurt."
Matt nodded.

"And did you know that McDonald's filed a complaint with the school?"

Well, that was news to him.

Mr. Penrod sighed. "You're only fifteen, Matt. Don't throw away your education and your life just because you want to prove your manhood. The next time it happens, you might not be so lucky." He studied Matt a moment more, then he took a deep breath. "I'm going to give you a warning, but only because the fight happened off school grounds. If I hear of any more fights—on or off school grounds—I'm calling your parents. I don't want to see you in my office again. Do you understand?"



Matt had never been in trouble at school before. His entire life in junior high consisted of staying out of everyone's way. Being smaller than most boys his age was good enough reason to lay low. But now everyone seemed to know him—or know *of* him. Semi-friends greeted him with a wide grin and a "way to go." Boys he never saw before stared at him as he walked down the hall, and girls smiled behind their notebooks. If he'd known he'd become an instant hero, he would've gotten in trouble a long time ago.

He sat down across from Chris at the lunch table. "Where's Simon?" he asked.

"I think he's having lunch in the junior commons with Kellye." Chris pulled a sizable meatloaf sandwich from a paper bag. "Want half my sandwich?"

On most days, Matt came to school without a lunch—it was easier than finding anything representative of the four basic food groups in his house—and he knew it was why Mrs. Chambers sent Chris to school with enough food to feed a small daycare. But once in a while, Matt had money to buy his lunch, and even when he didn't, he at least pretended like he did. "What are they serving today?"

Chris looked at a kid's tray. "Looks like brown gravy over scrambled eggs. Here." He gave Matt half his sandwich. "And my mom sent a shitload of cookies. Help yourself to chips. Want an orange?" Chris pulled everything out of a paper sack and pushed it toward Matt, then he went back to scribbling on a piece of paper.

Matt swallowed most of the sandwich and a cookie before asking, "What are you writing?"

"Lyrics," Chris said. "Listen to this: It's not that I don't love her; sometimes I think I do. But she says she wants to hear it; is that so hard to do? She says she needs more from me, like gushy shit and romance. But when it comes down to it, I just want into her pants." Chris looked up with a grin. "I call it, 'Ode to a Romantic Bonehead.'"

Matt grinned back.

Rahn straddled the bench beside Matt and grabbed a cookie from the pile. “You’re the talk of the junior commons, Matty,” he said before he shoved the cookie in his mouth. “Even the jocks say you should join the wrestling team.”

Matt shook his head and took the last bite of his sandwich.

“Hey, it’s a good way to pick up cheerleaders.” Rahn grabbed another cookie. “And...speaking of cheerleaders...” He nodded toward the entrance to the commons.

Standing in the entry beneath a banner that read, “Class of ’78 Rules!” was Taryn. She surveyed the commons, shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and wrapped her arms around her waist. Then her eyes met Matt’s.

It was odd to see an upperclassman in the sophomore hall, since the school’s design—Matt learned with much disappointment on his first day here—was intended to maximize educational standards by clustering students into a social and academic environment intended solely for each grade. The result was the segregation of classes into their own hallway, commons, and lunchroom. All that was academically well and good, except that Matt was relegated to the sophomore hall, virtually eliminating any chance of seeing a certain junior, except at pep rallies and varsity football games, both of which he had every intention of avoiding from now on.

But here she was, standing at the entrance to the sophomore commons and sucking all the oxygen from the room so that Matt couldn’t breathe.

She maneuvered around students, walked to Matt’s table, and sat opposite him. The faint aroma of Charlie drifted to his nose.

“Well,” Rahn said, “if it isn’t the ice goddess gracing us with her presence.” He leaned closer and whispered, “Do you realize you’re at the stoner table? This could seriously damage your reputation.”

She gave him a pointed glare. “Shut up, Rahn.”

“Oh, that’s right. We’re in the company of the queen bitch. Can’t speak unless spoken to.” He grinned and shoved another cookie in his mouth.

She acknowledged his humor with a disgusted look, then her eyes returned to Matt. Her expression softened as she looked at the bruises on his face. “I just want to tell you that I’m sorry.”

He studied her, unsure what to say, confused by both her presence and the gentleness of her words. She looked so...*sincere*. But maybe he was getting it all wrong. He didn’t want to look like an idiot in front of his friends by assuming something she had no intention of conveying.

“Let me ask you something,” Rahn said. “Are you sorry Matt got beat up, or are you sorry he survived?”

Matt's eyes dropped to her neck, to the v of her shirt, then lingered there probably too long as she took a deep breath and shifted uncomfortably. When he looked back up, her face was pink. It made him think, once again, that he had an effect on her, although he wasn't sure if that was good or bad. He glanced at Rahn, whose grin made him relax. He looked back at Taryn and watched her eyes fill with annoyance.

"*Anyway*," she said, "I'm sorry Warren started the fight. And I'm sorry you got hurt."

He nodded, still unsure of her motive. He searched beyond the irritation in her eyes for the truth in her words. "Thanks. But I guess I don't understand why you're sorry. I mean, the way your friends laughed at me, I thought you found the whole thing funny."

She pressed her lips together and lowered her eyes.

Rahn let out a laugh. "That was good, Taryn." He leaned a little closer. "The way you bit your lip like that...gives you just the right amount of sincerity."

Her jaw tightened, and her eyes narrowed. "Go to hell, Rahn." She got to her feet and glared down at them. "I just came here to apologize. But I guess I shouldn't have wasted my time."

As she stomped away, Matt's eyes dropped down the back of her jeans to her slender hips and thighs. An uncomfortable feeling squeezed his chest and throat; he swallowed hard and looked at the table.

"What a bitch," Rahn said as he grabbed the last cookie. "Just remember one thing, little buddy: don't get your hopes up. She's just messin' with you."

Matt squinted at him. "What?"

"Why else would she tell Kellye she thought you were cute in eighth grade? She knew it would encourage you to talk to her, and then she had Daniels and his pack of gorillas come rescue her. It was a setup."

"No way," Chris said. "Taryn wouldn't do that."

Matt's heart beat faster, but it was a sudden pain that made him aware of his heart.

"Look, Jerue," Rahn said. "I think it's great you like Taryn. And I, as your friend, will do whatever I can to help you out. But always remember one thing: she's a bitch." He stood up, saying, "I'll catch you later." Then he walked out of the commons.

Matt put his elbows on the table and rubbed his face with his hands. "I'm an idiot," he moaned, and the fact that Chris didn't argue gave him confirmation he preferred not to have.

But his state of self-recrimination was short-lived and quickly replaced by mounting anxiety.

Focused movement and the murmur of deep voices combined in the sophomore hall, increasing in volume and intensity. The commotion jumbled together, rapidly moving toward the commons, until the sounds of approaching bodies invaded the air around him. A large group of wrestlers appeared in the doorway.

“Hey, Jerue,” Warren bellowed. The echo of his voice evolved into ripples of silence, filling the commons like chloroform in a glass jar.

Matt’s heart raced frantically; he looked at Chris, whose panic mirrored his own. Several students scurried out of the way and left a clearing between Matt and Warren.

“You think you’re tough shit, don’t you?” Warren spat. A patch of gauze covered his forehead, and blue colored the bridge of his nose and beneath both eyes. “Well, you’re nothing more than a little prick who happened to get lucky. Meet me in the parking lot after school and we’ll settle this once and for all. I’m gonna beat the shit out of you, so I suggest you make your funeral arrangements now.” The boys beside him laughed, and a humorless smirk played on Warren’s lips.

Matt knew he had to do something...*say* something. But the pounding of his heart in his ears made clear thinking impossible. He glanced around the room at expectant faces, and his eyes landed on Chris, who looked back at him with worry muddled in resignation.

There was nothing to do but stand and face the jocks.

Matt slowly pushed away from the table and rose to his feet. “Well, Daniels.” His voice came out stronger than he expected, which gave him the courage to continue. “If you ask me, it’s already been settled. Call it luck if it makes you feel better, but you couldn’t beat the shit out of me on Friday, and I seriously doubt you could do it today.”

A murmur of “ooohs” floated through the air.

Warren’s eyes narrowed. “Why don’t you admit it, Jerue: you’re a chickenshit.”

Fear made the corners of Matt’s mouth twitch, but he tightened his muscles and forced a grin. “Strong words coming from a guy who couldn’t keep a sophomore pinned.”

“That does it,” Warren growled, and he made a move toward Matt. But his friends grabbed him by the jacket and held him back. “You’re gonna die, asshole,” Warren bellowed. His thick neck bulged, and his face reddened under the gauze. “So bring a fuckin’ body bag!”

As Warren stomped out of the commons, Matt’s legs turned to mush. He wanted to collapse on the floor, maybe lay there for a day or two. But a crowd of concerned sophomores surrounded him. Several boys offered words of encouragement, and girls told him how brave he was. He smiled as if it were no big deal. But inside, his stomach twisted in knots, and his heart did a belly flop. He wanted to run home and hide under his bed.



Throughout the rest of the day, Matt could barely concentrate on what his teachers were saying, although he had an acute sense of being stared at by students who thought he was either incredibly courageous or downright psychotic.

“You’re gonna die,” Rahn said as the three boys and Kellye waited by the Firebird.

Matt's stomach hurt, and he felt like throwing up. He lit a cigarette and took a drag, but his hands shook so much, the cigarette almost dropped down his shirt.

Students milled close by in anticipation of the upcoming beating. No one seemed eager to go home—except for Matt. The crowd's anticipation increased as a group of seniors, led by Warren and Anthony, converged in the parking lot.

Warren stopped in front of him with a menacing grin. "I'm surprised you showed. I thought you'd run home to mommy and daddy."

Matt wasn't interested in a verbal sparring match. He wanted to get this over with so he could get to the hospital and begin the recovery process. "I don't need to run home. I was the one who won on Friday. Remember?"

"Well, it's the last fight you're gonna win."

Matt didn't blink. "Don't bet on it." He held Warren's glare, even though the air was thick and hard to breathe. He prayed Warren's first punch was powerful enough to knock him out; he didn't want to pass out from fright alone.

But in their hesitation, someone hurried through the crowd. Students moved aside, and Taryn flew beside Warren, out of breath. Her cheeks were flushed, and her chest moved quickly up and down beneath her shirt. She met Matt's eyes with a distressed look, and in his cloudy brain, he thought that maybe she was worried about him.

She turned to Warren and put her hand on his sleeve. "What are you doing?"

Warren didn't take his eyes off Matt. "I'm gonna beat the shit out of this loser."

"Don't do this," she said, tightening her hold on his jacket. "It's not worth the risk of getting expelled. You have a scholarship to think about."

Well, that explained it. She was worried about his goddamn scholarship. Matt took a drag off his cigarette as his eyes narrowed.

"Please, Warren." She moved closer and said, "He's only a sophomore."

Anger and self-pity blasted through Matt's chest like she'd shot him with a twelve-gauge.

Warren studied Matt, probably deciding whether or not to kill him anyway, then his face relaxed as his arm slipped around Taryn. "Okay. I'll let him live, but only because you asked me to." Then he turned to Matt and growled, "But remember this, Jerue: you stay away from Taryn, or I'll kick your sorry sophomore ass from here to California. You got that?"

Matt took one last drag off his cigarette, then flicked the butt at Warren's feet. "Don't worry," he said, and his eyes went to Taryn. "Cheerleaders aren't my type."

Confusion tugged at her brow, but Warren let the comment go like it was a promise from Matt to behave. Warren pushed out his chest like he'd just won the state championship, then he strutted away, his thick arm around Taryn's small waist.

"Wow," Chris breathed. "You're so damn lucky."

But Matt didn't feel lucky. As the audience dwindled and the parking lot emptied, his emotions did the same. He felt hollow inside. He wished Warren had beaten the shit out of him; then he'd be unconscious on the ground and not have to feel this overwhelming emptiness in his chest.



Thank you for reading this excerpt of *Headstrong*. I hope you enjoyed it!

To keep reading, please find it on Amazon:



“A fantastic recent-history YA drama that captures all of the same emotional drama as a modern classic but throws us back into a time of emerging rock bands and the dreams that kids of the seventies had about making it big.” – Readers’ Favorite Five-Star Review.

Now, keep going for more bonus material...

Character Compilation

Please note...

The images in this Character Compilation were created just for fun. These AI-generated images (created in Canva's text-to-image app) sparked my creativity and allowed me to envision how my characters might look in real life. But this is just a starting point. The true essence of each character lies within their personality, background, and journey. But mostly, their essence lies within *your* imagination, however they might look.

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Coming-of-Age 1970s Style

The Characters in *Headstrong*

Background

The idea for *Headstrong* came when I was in college. The characters started to form in my imagination first, their early iterations developing before the plot took shape. As I thought about their collective story, I knew I wanted to tell it through one character's point of view. I landed on Matt, because I realized he had the most invested and the biggest struggle to overcome to reach his dreams.

Through the years, as life whisked me along on its fast pace, I worked on the story—adding to it, changing it, and mostly, letting the characters take me where they had to go. Writing their story was my form of escapism and therapy. Because I had no idea of the “right” way to write a novel, I simply enjoyed the process. What resulted was an anthology that eventually was split into two books to create the HEADSTRONG duology.

Girl in the Middle followed a few years later. I realized Taryn was a bit of an enigma, and she had her own story to tell. I was often surprised as I uncovered her many facets and reasons for being a mean girl. Although she wasn't always nice—especially to Matt—she remains one of my favorite characters, probably because she's like me in some ways (and very *not* like me in other ways) and parts of her life mimic mine, such as being on drill team, being in a sorority, and attending the University of Washington.

In fact, the very beginning of Matt and Taryn's relationship is based on my interaction with a boy I knew in junior high. As *Headstrong* readers know, the first time Matt meets Taryn is on his first day of eighth grade. Although he stares at her in awe, she interprets it as disapproval. It's this misunderstanding that creates the undercurrent of friction between them. For me, I don't remember the exact words I said to the boy in eighth grade that he interpreted as being mean or dismissive, but I do remember he was a jerk after that. So, I ignored him, banishing him in my mind to the kids who lived outside my semi-popular clique.

Then, one day, his parents sent him away—rumor has it, to military school. A few years later, I saw him again, and he asked me out. We saw a movie together, and he was sweet and nice (we both had grown up since junior high). I think he admitted then that he'd had a crush on me, and my being mean had hurt him, which is why he covered his hurt by being a jerk.

I don't remember seeing him again after that. Perhaps he returned to military school—I don't know. And I don't know what ever happened to him through the years. But it's this real-life boy who was the inspiration for Matt, and it's those snippets of fleeting memories woven into my imagination that created the basis of Matt and Taryn's hate-love-hate-love story.



Chris

Matt



Rahn



Taryn



Kevin



Kellye



Matt is plagued by self-doubt but driven by his dreams to play guitar in a band and to date the girl he's been crushing on since eighth grade. With an alcoholic father and absent mother, Matt struggles to find love and acceptance. His infatuation with mean-girl Taryn sends him on a rollercoaster journey that tests his friendships, resolve, and ultimately, his faith in his dreams.



Taryn has looks, popularity, an attitude, and no desire to associate with a boy who smokes and hangs out with losers. But as hard as she tries to stay away from him, it becomes impossible. And not just because their best friends start dating. It's more than that. Because the truth—the one she has a hard time admitting—is that maybe she doesn't *want* to stay away from him.



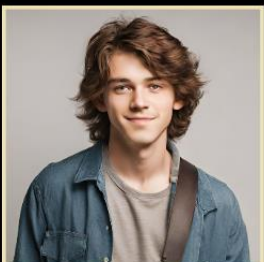
Chris is Matt's rock, the one person who always supports him but isn't afraid to tell it like it is, especially when it comes to Taryn. Chris offers Matt encouragement, tough love, and unwavering support as they work toward their dream of forming a band. But will their friendship be enough to hold them together when everything starts to fall apart?



Rahn is a cocky rich kid with the coolest car in the school parking lot. He's also a skilled pianist, but he never considered joining a rock band. Matt and Chris seem pretty serious, though, so what the hell. And now the hottest cheerleader on the squad is his girlfriend. Life's pretty good. As long as his secrets stay hidden.



Kellye is Taryn's best friend and fellow cheerleader. She's sweet and kind—she also has a crush on Rahn, who, unfortunately, Taryn and the other cheerleaders *hate*. Kellye wishes Taryn would relax and get to know Rahn and his friends. Because Kellye's *positive* Taryn would like Matt a lot if she just got to know him.



Kevin is from a different school and joins the band as their bass guitarist. He doesn't feel welcome, but that's okay, because he knows the other three have more talent than anyone he's ever played with—and probably ever will. He keeps to himself for a while, until the unity of the band breaks brings them closer together—for a while, anyway.

Supporting Characters



Hatch



Dawnette



Julia



Larry



Lacey



Parker

Thank you!

Thank you so much for your interest in *Headstrong*! And thank you for taking a backward glance at *Headstrong*'s origin and for letting me share my vision of the characters with you.

I'd love to hear from you! Tell me about yourself, what genres you like, and what you're currently reading.

Please connect with me via any of the following:



Email – lbcarl@lbcarl.com



Website – lbcarl.com



Instagram – <https://www.instagram.com/lbcarlauthor/>



Facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/people/LBCarl-Author/100090500207463/>



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THANK YOU AGAIN!

Your interest and support mean *the world* to me.

You make this journey fun!