



# DEDICATION

Many thanks to my brother, Andrew—had it not been for exposing me to Oi, punk, and other hardcore music in the 1980s, driving me around to record stores, and letting me borrow your records, I might never have discovered the music that is at the heart of this story.

Thanks are also due to all the punks, skins, and hardcores I've had the pleasure of meeting and befriending in my life. I got into this music when I was sixteen, and the connection I feel to it has never waned.

Thank you to all the students who continue to inspire me. No matter who you are, what you are, or what you choose to be, you remind me constantly that the journey is the reward.

And lastly, thank you to Shawn. There is no better friend, nobody who makes me want to be better than I am, than you.

## Chapter 1

# DRAGGING

The sun was too bright. The weather too hot. Tyler Ruiz wanted to be doing anything other than going to sixth period PE.

*But I have to,* he told himself.

Tyler was a sophomore at Banks High School. He hadn't been there very long, so blowing off PE wasn't an option. He had made the football team, and he wanted to stick with it.

Tyler had been kicked out of a few schools. It was always for fighting. He was a decent student until everything changed in middle school.

Tyler's mom died of cancer when he was twelve. He stayed with his grandmother until his dad returned from Afghanistan. His father was discharged with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Tyler would have gone back to live with his grandma. That's what he wanted to do. She was nice to him, unlike his father.

But his grandmother died when Tyler started ninth grade.

By the end of that spring, Tyler had almost made it through his freshman year at Miller High School. Then his teacher Mr. Green made fun of him. He called Tyler out about his clothes. He said they looked like "something you'd find at Goodwill."

Tyler lost it.

He attacked Mr. Green and found himself expelled. His dad really let him have it. He even kicked him out of the apartment for a week.

Tyler was tired. He was tired of school. Tired of his dad. Tired of his life.

But this wasn't why he felt off today. It had to do with the night before. What happened gave Tyler a completely new set of problems.

"And I didn't think my life could suck any more than it already does," he said aloud to no one in particular.

## Chapter 2

# LATE-NIGHT LOSER

Adam Fields, the quarterback for the school football team, threw a party the night before. It was a team-only blowout.

Tyler got along well with everybody. So far. He hadn't made any lifelong friends, but everybody seemed to like him okay.

Adam lived in a big house. It was in Jake Gardens, which was the wealthiest section of town. It was also where Banks High School was located.

Tyler lived in the Via Joaquin apartments. They seemed like a million miles away from Banks. The Via Joaquin was low-income housing. Tyler shared a one-bedroom with his dad. He slept on the couch.

Compared to Jake Gardens, Via Joaquin was a slum.

The cheerleaders were also at Adam's party. Every one of them was perfect and gorgeous.

Tyler wasn't there five minutes when he started talking to Cassie Ramirez, Adam's girlfriend. She was tall, with dark skin and long black hair. She laughed at everything Tyler said.

"Want me to show you around?" she asked. "I'll get you a beer."

"Sure." Tyler smiled. He'd been told by many girls that he had a nice smile.

Cassie knew how to act at parties. Tyler figured she'd been to a lot. Cassie was a senior, after all.

"This house is huge." Tyler couldn't believe anybody could live in such a big home. That anybody could have this much space.

They continued walking, talking, and laughing.

Before Tyler knew what was happening, they were making out. He didn't mind. He was an attractive guy. Girls always threw themselves at him. Maybe not in a big house. Maybe not with a rich girl like Cassie, but Tyler was no stranger to hot girls.

She took his hand, and they walked around some more. Cassie even showed him Adam's bedroom. It was as big as the apartment Tyler shared with his dad.

"Hi, Rachel," Cassie said to a girl who appeared in the bedroom doorway.

Tyler looked at Rachel. She was tall, with thick red hair that looked great with the tight green dress she wore. Maybe he could hook up with her later on that night.

“Cassie.” Rachel had a serious look on her face. “Adam’s looking for you guys.”

Rachel took Cassie by the arm. In seconds, they were gone. Cassie giggled as they left Tyler alone in Adam’s big bedroom.

Normally, Tyler wouldn’t have cared if Cassie had a boyfriend. He would’ve done anything with her.

“I don’t know the guy,” he’d said in the past. “If she wants to hook up with me, we’ll hook up. If the couple has problems, that’s on them.”

Tyler knew he couldn’t be like that now. He was too new at Banks High School. He couldn’t start causing trouble. His dad would probably kill him. He said and did so many crazy things because of his PTSD.

He yelled about the war. About what happened to other guys in his unit. About men violently dying right in front of him.

He got physical with Tyler all the time.

Tyler wanted to help his dad. But it seemed like whenever he tried, this only made his father angrier.

Feeling a little out of place, Tyler left the party.

## Chapter 3

# PUNK CHICK

Tyler caught a ride to the party with one of the guys on the team. Since he left without telling anybody, he had to walk home.

Eight miles.

Tyler got home around one in the morning. Even though he was tired, he didn't go to sleep right away. It was hard to relax in his dad's apartment. He never knew when his father might go off on him. He couldn't count how many times he'd been jostled from sleep. Tyler couldn't remember the last time he'd slept through the night.

He was almost to the locker room. Banks High School was bigger than any school Tyler had ever attended. Sometimes he felt like he was being swallowed up.

Then he saw Sara Allen.

She had short black hair, bangs, and multiple piercings. Sara wore a tight T-shirt with the band Black Flag written across it. She had on brown skinny jeans and black Chuck Taylors.

Usually, Tyler wouldn't have given a girl like her a second look.

But he couldn't stop staring. He even slowed his pace. Sara had a confident walk. With her backpack worn over both shoulders, she seemed like she didn't care what anybody thought of her.

Tyler acted like that. But deep down he always felt like people were judging him. He figured that was why he got in so many fights.

"Look at me," he said to Sara under his breath. Tyler felt his heart beating faster. He desperately wanted to make eye contact with her. He wanted to have some kind of connection.

Sara kept walking. Then Tyler noticed she was smiling. She *had* noticed him.

For the rest of the day, Tyler found it almost impossible to think about anything but Sara's smile.

## Chapter 4

# STEP ONE

**B**y the way everybody was ignoring him, Tyler knew he was in the doghouse. He figured that word had spread about what had happened with Cassie. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would have to talk with Adam about it.

During summer practice Tyler hadn't been assigned a position. He was new to the team, and Coach Wagner wasn't sure where to put him.

Tyler was about five eleven with a muscular build. He kept his hair short because it was easier. He didn't have a job, so he couldn't afford things like hairspray. He figured with his size, the coach would find a spot for him eventually.

Today Coach Wagner stuck Tyler on the line. After running a play, he was tackled with a late hit by German Utria.

They landed hard, and German was quick to get off him. It didn't hurt, but it made Tyler mad.

"What the hell?" Tyler yelled.

"Just running the play, dude!" German yelled. He was about six two and even more physically imposing than Tyler.

"The play was over!" Tyler knew it was a mistake to push German after he said that. He couldn't help it.

Suddenly, Adam stepped in. He was about Tyler's size and build. Since he was the quarterback, he was the de facto team leader.

Only then did Tyler notice Cassie and the other cheerleaders practicing a cheer. They seemed to be watching the guys. Tyler figured she was smiling.

"Listen," Tyler started, "if you told him to take a late hit on me, there is no reason to do that."

"Really?" Adam smiled. He was getting the exact reaction from Tyler that he wanted.

"It's not my fault you can't handle your girl," Tyler stated. "Talk to her, not me."

"Please," Adam drawled. "Cassie would never take you seriously."

"Why not?" Tyler moved toward Adam. Again, he didn't want to, but he was so used to using his fists to solve his problems.

"Look, Tyler ..." Adam continued to have an ugly

smirk on his face. The one that told Tyler he was a loser. That Adam thought he was better than him. “It’s not your fault your parents have no money. But from what I hear it *is* your fault you got sent to a school where no one wants you. You got kicked out of the last one, right, welfare boy?”

Everything went black for Tyler Ruiz. Just like so many times before.