

JD GLASS

punk
like
me



REVISED EDITION

CHAPTER 1

START IT UP!

YEAH, OKAY, I COME OFF as tough, and I like that. I'm only about five foot seven inches, but I know how to handle myself in just about any situation, and if not, I know where to find backup.

I'm Nina, and I write the lyrics and guitar for Adam's Rib, even though Stephe, my bud, does most of the lead vocals. 'Sokay with me, I don't worry much about it.

Like I told you before, I'm not too tall and I'm not too short. I like to keep in shape, so I dance and do martial arts and stuff—healthy in wind and limb, just like they say about horses.

My hair's black—well, okay, it's really red brown, but I make it shiny raven black, and I've got a blood-red streak running down the center length of it.

I'm not just any old punk; I've got to be myself. My hair is long, and I mean really long, down the back and top. I've got the sides shaved (to the skin, yeah!) to the top of my ears. Then it's a straight-up tight buzz for about another two inches before we hit the top where it runs down my back. I love the smooth skin, I love the fuzz, and I love the don't-fuck-with-me attitude I give with this mop.

I might sound like an egomaniac, and that's okay—I'm not one really. It's just that I really, really like my hair—and I'm not the first to ever feel like that.

My eyes are blue, though they can look a little gray sometimes, and my mom used to tell me that I have a nice smile, but moms are supposed to say things like that as well as other things such as, "When are you going to

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settle down?” or “That’s not a real job,” and “I could introduce you to this nice young man...” Okay, there, time to tune that one out.

Yeah, let me get this over with right now. I’m gay. Not confused, not experimenting, not bi (although there are a couple of musicians and movie guys I think are really great), and not a phase.

Gay.

G. A. Y.

If that’s a problem, get out now, ’cuz I don’t deal with ’phobes too well.

In case you were wondering, I don’t have a “type.” What attracts me to someone is a very individual thing, so I might date a short brunette or a tall blonde or whatever. It’s really about personality for me, the tilt of the head, tone of voice, you know, stuff like that. But—and this is a secret between you and me—green eyes kill me.

So help me, I’m fascinated; I just can’t help it. Present me with someone with green eyes—and I mean deep, dark forest green, not light new grass—and I can get lost looking at them, looking into them, trying to find—well, I don’t know. But it’s my fatal flaw.

Good thing they’re sort of rare, right?

So here we are, the four of us, hanging out and getting ready to play our first real gig. Stephie looks like she’s ready to puke, and I have to stop the Jerkster, also known as Jeremy, also our bassist, from sucking down any more beers before he actually pukes on the stage.

Not that it would hurt the stage, though. There are burn spots, holes, and dried splotches of what could be anything from booze to blood on the nasty green carpet that covers the back half of the stage.

My brother and some of our friends are taking bets as to whether or not the wood is stained with blood or dirt, although a faction is guessing roach carcasses.

There’s something about being at CBGB’s that makes you want to shake your head in wonder—and the rest of you in fear.

Now, if you’ve never heard of CBGB’s, which is located at 315 Bowery Place right on the edge of the East Village (and that’s New York City, y’all), then you’ve never heard of rock ’n’ roll, at least not here in the good ole US of A.

From Blondie, to Talking Heads, Joan Jett in her Runaways daze, and the Police, John Mellencamp when he used to be John Cougar, Tom

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Petty, and the Indigo Girls, everyone has played there, stomped, sweated, dreamed, and poured it all out on that stage.

The scrawl of graffiti's everywhere—on the walls of the stage, the base of it, all along the stairwell, and, of course, every inch of the bathroom that isn't painted black, the rock 'n' roll version of hand- and footprints in cement—everyone leaving their mark.

You might have guessed by now (if you didn't know already) that CBGB's is sort of an icon in and of itself on the rock 'n' roll landscape, and it honestly never occurred to us that it's one hell of an arrogant thing to make this the site for the first infliction of our material on the public.

Tucked up against a wall off to the side of the stage, I finally get a chance to sit back and wait for a while with my friend, Trace—short for Tracy, of course—who's coming on to me. This is a little unusual—not that she's coming on to someone, she's come on to lots and lots of people—it's just that she's coming on to me. Not that I really mind, of course—I know she's just showing off, and I'm okay with that.

Trace is absolutely beautiful, tall and slender, almost elfin (but incredibly strong), with long wavy black hair and eyes the color of steel, a shade of gray like I've never seen before or since. I love her as a friend, and I think maybe a little something more, too. She has this incredible appeal for me, but Trace is scary, too, in a lot of ways, to a lot of people. Ask anyone.

When you're with her, Trace leaves you with the feeling that if she were a flame, you'd be a suicidal moth, and pretty darn happy to burn, too.

Tonight, during my little break from Jerks—um, Jeremy—Trace is seducing me into one of those moments of torture and righteousness where you kick yourself later, sometimes years later, for being so good and darned noble. She knows, because she's been checking up on me for the last several hours, I've been a little achy and feverish all day (hey—the flu does not stop for gigs, and gigs do not stop for the flu. Them's the rules, and that's the way I play), and she's damned and determined to make me feel better—any way she can. Darn that chivalrous stuff anyway!

I suppose I forgot to mention: Trace and I live together. No, not in that eternally bonded way, or even as roomies. I live in a three-floor brownstone apartment building, one apartment per floor. Two friends and I share the top floor, Trace lives on the second, and the mom of one of my roomies (a nice guy we call Cap, short for Captain, 'cuz he can be a little bossy, ya know?) lives on the first floor.

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Since we're all pretty tight with one another, we have an open-door policy between the second and third floors (Cap's mom can't climb stairs very well—lucky for us), and it really is anyone's guess as to who'll stay where—third or second floor—on any given night. Okay, well, maybe that part only applies to me, but you get the idea. We're one big fucked-up family.

So, like I told you before, I'm sitting there, finally able to take a bit of a break before we go on stage for the first time, and Trace has decided to be Florence Nightingale and the Rock of Gibraltar simultaneously, with a very healthy—and I mean *very* healthy—Mae West and Tallulah Bankhead thrown in.

Somehow, she has her arms around my shoulders, her legs wrapped over and around mine, and when I lean my head back against her shoulder because she's petting it, she strokes my neck oh so very lightly with her fingertips. "You okay, baby?" she's whispering into my ear, her voice a honeyed whiskey. Then she nuzzles baby-soft lips into my neck. That feels so amazingly good, I just groan in reply.

Suddenly, she grabs my hips with surprising strength of purpose and pulls me tightly against her just as she starts to nip, nibble, and lick the sensitive skin of my neck. I open my eyes in surprise. I'm tired and nervous and feverish, and I know my temperature's running high, because wherever Trace's body meets mine I burn, and everything else is lonely cold.

I close my eyes again. "Oh, what the hell," I think as I stretch my legs out farther along the bench, "might as well enjoy this while it lasts," and I settle my back into her warmth while I enjoy the patterns her lips have begun to leave on my throat.

Trace starts to massage my hip with one hand while the other dangles between my thighs, sometimes resting on one, perilously close and not close enough to the restless situation she's creating in my already unstable body.

"Damn!" I hear Jerkster say to no one in particular. "We're not even on yet, and she's already got chicks all over her. How the hell does she do it?"

Nicky—I mean Nico (we'd all started calling him that in the last year), my younger and only brother, answers, "She's got some mojo. I don't even have to introduce my girlfriends to her—they all go for her right away."

Trace has got her tongue in my ear so it's kinda hard to think, but I just realized—this is definitely a far ways away from my last visit to CBGB's.

CHAPTER 2

YOU SAY IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY

SO THE REAL STORY STARTS back when my best friend Kerry and I and a whole slew of our friends had gone to the Carter boys' annual Everyone's Birthday in July party right off the boardwalk in a place called South Beach, a popular destination for New York City dwellers in the forties and fifties, but now a semi-abandoned beach (except for the occasional National Parks people, or whoever they are, who inspected it whenever a bonfire got too out of hand).

Now, at this point in life, I wasn't too tall, being just about five foot three inches as a junior in high school (yep, it's true, I was one of those late bloomers), and Kerry, with her dirty-blonde hair and cat-green eyes, was even shorter as a sophomore. In grammar school, she'd been Nicky's classmate, and of course I knew who she was and all that, but we weren't what you could call close.

Somewhere, though, between junior high and high school, we'd just started to click, and by freshman year we were an inseparable duo, despite the fact that she went to Tottenville, the local public high school, and I went to a place nicknamed The Hill: an all-girls' prep school run by nuns. It was seriously great academically but completely sucked socially. Freshmen had to take Latin and self-defense/judo, for real.

Hmm...maybe the judo was because of the uniform? I dunno. Besides, I'd figured out a loophole in the student handbook (yeah, we had one of those—and we had a test in it every year, too, just in case we forgot something or the nuns added something new). Anyway, I changed into jeans or army pants and my favorite pair of boots before I left school every day, so it wasn't really an issue for me anymore.

But still, the fact that I did better in judo than in Latin—not to mention my ability to find loopholes in that dumb rule book—might have been a good indication as to why I was always in trouble—so often, in fact, that I'd met my other best friend, Samantha, on one of the many afternoons when I was on detention that first year of high school. A year ahead of me, she became, among other things, my detention partner.

But I digress. Back to the party in South Beach—which, by the way, if you had good eyes, good binoculars, and an even better imagination, you could see Coney Island from. This party was for the forty-some-odd percent of our friends who had July birth dates—it allowed us to have one massive gathering instead of having to coordinate and reschedule fifteen conflicting ones. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, brought something from dips to drinks, and we had plenty of everything. We also experimented making our own drink concoctions. At the annual Halloween party in the fall (and the first one I'd ever been to—Carter boys' party, that is), we'd made something we named the Thing That Came and Stayed because, no matter how much of that Hi-C orange-colored stuff we drank, spilled, and were afraid to offer to the sea because of toxicity, it never disappeared. We finally used it to put out the bonfire in the backyard.

The beach party was no different. The fire was lit, the Son of Thing That Came and Stayed was born (purple Hi-C this time), and we were dancing and laughing 'round the fire to "Planet Claire" and "Rock Lobster" by the B-52s.

Now you might be surprised, all those kids and alcohol (what a shock!), but ya know, none of us did drugs then (me and Nicky never will, knock wood), and there was only one guy who took it too far. Even though his name was Rob, we called him Chuck or Yack, not only to prevent confusion with Robbie from the comic book store Universe where we all hung out (and they were cousins, by the by) but because it was also the level he drank to. But we were too young to know he had a problem, and our ride home was dryer than twelve days in the Sahara and keeping it that way so he could shove sixteen of us—no joke—into a '76 Dodge Dart.

The weather was warm, the sky was clear, and our blood was filled with wild, wild joy.

I had invited Samantha to the party, along with Nicky, Kerry, and me—people were always inviting fresh faces to the group, which gave it its wildly eclectic nature—and she and I hadn't really seen each other

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since school had ended for the summer. Samantha had been having a really rough year—her father had passed away that spring—and I guess she wasn't feeling very social.

Not that I blamed her, though. It's just that she was so withdrawn, and after almost a month of space, I thought that maybe she could have a little fun, hang out a little, get out into the world a bit, and I wanted her to meet my bro and my buds. Besides, she had a July birthday too, and I had bought her a little present.

Nicky and I had been there a little while, mixing and mingling about, chatting with friends, dancing, drinking a little, and the sun hadn't truly gone down yet. It lay about a third of the way above the horizon, casting gorgeous shadows and reliefs everywhere it chose to, and every now and again, I'd glance back across the beach to the parking lot to see who else was joining our party.

At some point, having taken my socks and shoes off awhile before, I walked over to the water's edge, just to breathe it all in and enjoy the sun, the sand, and the surf all together and washing over me.

Feet sunk into the sand and water bathing my calves, I was peacefully blank, lost in nonthought.

"Knew you'd be near the water, Nina," a low female voice I knew spoke over the crash of the waves. And slightly startled, I turned from my place in the sand with a smile to see Samantha—dark hair loose about her shoulders over a hooded sweatshirt with cutoff sleeves that had our school logo on it, a knee-length pair of surf shorts, and bare feet.

"Yeah, well, you know, we start out swimming and we never stop." I grinned at her, referring both to human origin and, more contemporarily, our mutual love of water and our membership on the school swim team. "Hey, by the way, I'm really glad you made it!"

Still being respectful of Samantha's need for time, I hadn't called too often, just left a message every now and then. She hadn't really called back, so I didn't know if she was going to show or not. Obviously, though, she had. Glad she got the message.

Samantha crossed the few feet from where she stood to join me in the cooling waves, and we gave each other a hug. When we released each other, she casually draped an arm over my shoulder and I put one lightly around her waist. We watched the sun drop down in companionable silence.

“Had to come,” Samantha finally said. “You asked me so nicely.” She looked at me and grinned, then tousled my hair. “But I can’t stay long,” she added, and her expression became a bit rueful. “There’s some things I have to do.”

Well, I could understand that, and I figured maybe she was feeling a little awkward. It couldn’t be very easy to just try to be normal when so much in her life wasn’t, and I said as much—at least the first part about understanding, anyway. I didn’t want to say the rest ’cuz that was sort of obvious.

I pushed the forelock the wind kept blowing forward back off my face. “And besides,” I added, “it is Everybody’s Birthday in July party, ya know, so you had to be here, even if it’s just for a little bit.” I smiled back and mock punched her shoulder, trying to keep things light. My knuckles barely grazed her shoulder.

I remembered the present I’d brought for her, and suddenly, I felt a little shy. I could actually feel my face start to flush. The sun was just about to dip below the horizon, so I hoped Samantha wouldn’t notice in the lengthening shadows.

“I, uh, I got you something, nothing big, ya know, just, cool,” I managed to say without stammering too much. I don’t know why I felt so strange. I mean, we’d spent almost every day of nine months hanging out during the school year for the past two-going-on-three years. Maybe it was because this was the first time we’d actually hooked up outside of the semester? That sure enough sounds right, anyway.

My words seemed to blow away in the light breeze that played off the water as Samantha jammed her hands into the single pocket of her sweatshirt, and she just watched me briefly, an expression in her eyes I didn’t understand and a tiny little smile playing on the corner of her mouth.

Finally, she pulled a hand out of her pocket and very gently brushed the hair the wind had blown onto my face behind my ear and lightly cupped my cheek. “You shouldn’t have, you know.” Her voice was so soft as she spoke. “It’s not necessary.”

Her fingertips were cool and soft against my heated cheek, and I felt a weird new little pressure build in my throat. I must have had more purple Hi-C than I’d realized, I thought to myself when I felt that same pressure build in my face, even though Samantha removed her hand.

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“Sure I should, sure it was,” I struggled to answer, only the words came out in a whisper, and I jammed my hand into the pocket of my shorts, scrabbling with my fingertips to find the little wrapped bit that I’d gotten. Finding it, I jerked it out, practically shoving my hand in her face. “Here, for you,” I stated firmly. “Happy birthday,” and I opened my fingers to let her see the little blue package.

The sun had sunk even lower, and now the water was grayish blue, the way it looks before a storm.

Samantha simply stared at me, and I was struck by her eyes. They were the same color as the ocean. Very slowly, very carefully, she reached for my hand, and with a touch so gentle that I could barely feel it, she withdrew the tiny little package.

I held my breath as she opened it and simply stared at her gift, and I shifted my weight slightly from one foot to another. I found a balance that suited and dug my toes into the wet sand while I waited and watched for—well, I don’t know...

Something.

“Oh wow...” She breathed out quietly.

“Do you, um, do you like it?”

Samantha finally lifted her eyes to mine, her eyes wide and a soft smile across her lips. “Like it? I love it, Nina.” She grinned at me, slid the little bit of wrapping paper into her front pocket, then held the gift out before her. “Help me put it on?”

It was a very simple gift, a perfectly reproduced miniature sword—a claymore—two inches long on a silver rope chain. I had picked that for her because of her nickname, but more on that later, ’kay?

“Yeah, sure, no problem.” I smiled back and stepped closer, taking the chain from Samantha’s hand. I reached up around her neck, closing the ends of the chain under her hair, brushing it out to make sure it wasn’t caught. “There,” I said finally as I released the chain. “You’re done.” I stepped back to critique my handiwork. “It looks great on you,” I told her in honest admiration, and watched her fiddle with it.

“It’s very cool, Nina,” she told me, that same little smile playing about the corner of her lips. “Thank you.” Her eyes caught mine, and she stepped closer to me.

“This is it,” a part of my brain thought. “This is what?” asked another. Suddenly I could feel that pressure again in my face and throat—I could

feel my pulse jump in my neck—and it seemed to me that we almost swayed into one another. Her face came closer to mine, and all I could see were her eyes, and then her lips. The pressure was so great my cheeks tingled with it, and I closed my eyes against it as all the sound disappeared except for the waves, which seemed to dominate everything.

“Thank you,” whispered Samantha warmly against my face, and the lightest feather of cool heat touched the corner of my lips. It might have only been a moment, but it seemed to last forever. The touch disappeared. “I have to go,” she whispered, and I felt her warmth leave.

I’ve no idea how long I stood there like that, with my eyes closed and the wind off the water making colder the space Samantha had left, but when I finally opened my eyes, she was long gone.

I shook my head to clear it from the strange pressure without and the fuzziness within. Enough of that. I wasn’t drinking anymore Son of Thing, and I had to make my way back to the bonfire—there was a party going on, and I was there to party, dammit!

It was funny though, I thought as I made my way across the sand to the fire where Nicky and our friends were—I could even just make out Kerry coming across the sand to the fire; she must have just gotten there—I had been absolutely, positively sure that Samantha had been going to kiss me.

I shoved that crazy idea firmly out of my head and chalked it up to the effects of too many clear liquors mixed with purple Hi-C. I put a big smile on my face as I rejoined the party.

“Heya, Hopey,” Kerry called, meaning me. We’d taken to calling each other the names of our two favorite characters from the comic book *Love and Rockets*—Hopey and Maggie. Nobody knew for sure whether they were or weren’t—lovers, that is—but everyone knew they were close, just like me and Kerry, and somehow we thought it was appropriate. Don’t ask me why. I didn’t ever really bother to analyze it at the time.

“Wassup, Maggie?” I danced my way a bit closer to her, and she grabbed my hand.

“Hey, don’t look now, girl, but I think you’ve got a fan club—no, don’t look now.” She grabbed my other hand as I turned toward the area she’d pointed out and steered me away from the fire. “Just keep dancing.”

I kept bopping about to “Ballroom Blitz” and tried to casually glance over to where Kerry had indicated. Sure enough, across the fire, two guys

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who were new to our group were standing around, each with a plastic cup in his hand, trying to seem casual. Then the taller of the two, a six-foot blond, caught me watching him watch me.

His face registered surprise, then he turned to his companion and gestured with him to make like they were in the process of discussing the sand, or the fire, or something really close by to where Kerry and I were, but not us.

Yeah. Right.

Well, whatever. They seemed like nice enough guys, average everyday sorts, with plain white T-shirts over jeans and bare feet in the sand. I had no idea who they knew in our bunch, and I thought I was pretty much familiar with everyone.

“You know ’em, Kerry?” I asked her, pointing with my now-warm Coke. I’d had enough of Thing That Came and Stayed at the Halloween party and after my adventure earlier. Now I was keeping an occasional eye on Nicky to make sure this new generation of drink concoction didn’t become the reason my parents grounded me forever because I didn’t bodily restrain my younger brother from getting drunk on it.

“Nah,” she said, glancing over her shoulder to give them a fuller look-see. “Where’s Nicky?”

I scanned around and felt panic squeeze my heart when I couldn’t see him on our side of the flames. I craned my neck a bit, and finally, about twenty feet beyond the fire, I saw someone bending over a dark form by the bushes where the sand met the boardwalk. When the figure straightened up, I could see the light glance off something around their neck. I knew it was the lion-head medallion Nicky always wore. “Over there!” I pointed for Kerry and reached for her hand. Together, we walked over to Nicky.

“Nicky, what happened?” I called out as we approached.

“Hey, Nee. Rob here said his stomach was bothering him and he felt sick and all, and I didn’t want to leave him alone if he was sick, so I, um—well, here I am...” and Nicky looked at me with troubled eyes.

A side note here: Nicky is definitely one of the good guys. He’s going to make someone a great catch someday, and I hope they take good care of him. Or else. Okay, to continue...

Rob was moaning and groaning on the ground, clutching his stomach. “Ah, Nicky, did you stop to ask him why he’s wearing a garbage bag as a

shirt?” I indicated the shiny brown plastic that covered Rob from shoulders to hips.

Nicky looked at me like I was losing it. “No, I just thought he was being, you know, silly and all, like everyone. Why else would he do that?”

Suddenly, Rob lurched and grunted; he brought himself onto all fours in the sand. “Oh... God...oh God, I’m dying...” he groaned.

I grabbed Nicky and Kerry by their sleeves and backed away a good three feet. I knew what was coming, and so did Kerry as she quickly shuffled behind me, but Nicky was confused.

“Whatchya go and do that for?” he asked indignantly, jerking his arm away. “He’s gonna die or something and...” He gestured toward Rob, then broke off suddenly to watch the jerky motions Rob was making with his head as he swayed on his knees and elbows.

A soft, wet sound, like a soaked paper being punched, flowed out of Rob’s mouth as a pool formed under his head.

“That’s why you guys call him Chuck!” exclaimed Nicky in sudden understanding.

A horrible gagging, choking sound followed almost immediately, and Rob raised his head like he was about to howl at the moon. Suddenly, something flew out of his mouth and landed on some poor sand rabbits or something with a nasty squelch.

“And that’s why we call him Yack,” Kerry chimed in from behind me.

I draped my arms over Nicky’s and Kerry’s shoulders. “C’mon, let’s get going,” I encouraged, now that the show was mostly over. Once Yack, well, yacked, things would be fine, especially after he did his little ritual, which I didn’t want to stick around for—I’d already seen it on Halloween. We headed back to the fire.

Nicky hung back a moment and turned around. “But what about—”

“He’ll be fine. Give him thirty seconds.” I turned and reached an arm around his waist. “C’mon, let’s—” Shit. Too late.

I’d had another reason for getting back, besides avoiding the rest of Rob’s I’m-drunk-enough-to-puke ritual. I had wanted to get us back over by the fire before anyone, especially the new guys, had noticed we’d gone off. I didn’t want to give them ideas, you know what I mean, catch each other’s eye over the fire, wander off, hook up in a dark corner, that sort of thing, since it just wasn’t a “me” thing to do, but the fire fan club had

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noticed something was up and had walked over, jostling and shoving each other on the way.

“Hi, um, we were, um—can we help?” the taller one asked me, holding his cup in one hand and rocking back and forth a bit on his heels.

“Uh, yeah, is there sort of a problem?” asked his friend.

“No, just, ah—could you guys step back about, um, three feet?” I asked them, since they were standing right in front of Rob, where he’d huddled himself on the ground again, “and maybe move over here? C’mon, hurry!” I had seen Rob’s hand move, and I knew it would be just a matter of minutes before—well, we were between him and the water, while he was between us and the fire.

The guys shuffled over to us, and with a suddenness that would have surprised anyone who had seen Rob in what had seemed to be his final agonies only twenty seconds before, he lurched up to his feet, screaming, “Puke Poncho!” He ripped his plastic shirt off and waved it around like a flag before letting it loose to fly in a graceful (if gross) arc—and it flew over the two new guys.

“Argh!” he continued to scream as he pounded his feet and ran furiously toward the surf. Faintly, we could hear him yell before he dove in, “From the sea ye come, to the sea, return!”

I looked at the guys. The blond had gotten a miserable soaking, and the shorter one had gotten stuck holding the bag, literally. It had landed on his head and slipped down his back. I felt really, really bad for them. Well, bad and revolted.

We all stood there, staring dumbly at each other.

“I’m Nina, this is Nicky, this is Kerry,” I finally said. What else was there to do?

“I’m Joey, and this is Jack,” the tall one said, and they both appeared as awkward as we felt as everyone thought about shaking hands. Thankfully, everyone settled on just waving.

“Uh, I’ve got a couple of towels in our bag,” I said.

“I’ve got an extra pair of shorts,” Nicky chimed in.

Kerry had been tugging on my shirt since I’d offered the towel, and I finally turned to find out what she wanted. “Dude, what?” I asked, wondering what was up.

Her hand was warm as she placed it on my forearm, and her eyes glittered as she stared at me with a strange intensity, measuring me, like

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there was something I should have known—but didn't. My own eyes revealed nothing but my own lack of knowledge.

Finally finding what she was searching for (or not, I guess), she dropped her eyes from mine to look at Joey the Vomit Shirt and Jack the Vomit Head.

“Um, well, if you don't mind bike shorts,” Kerry said in a tone that sounded very reluctant as she slipped her hand into mine, and while the Vomit Twins made their way to the ocean to wash off, Kerry and I walked over to the promised rescue clothes. On the way, she kept glancing over at me with that same expression—and dammit, I had no idea what it was I was supposed to know.

CHAPTER 3

THE THING THAT CAME AND STAYED

WE HAD A REALLY GOOD time the rest of that summer, I mean Nicky and Kerry and me. After the whole thing at the beach, when Joey and Jack bathed themselves in the dubious cleanliness of the ocean and put on borrowed shorts, Joey called me a week later. He wanted to return my towels and Nicky's shorts. Jack called Kerry, and before you knew it, I guess you could say we had dates of a sort for the rest of the warm weather.

Joey had a boat, and Nicky and I went fishing, swimming, and daydreaming with him for hours at a time off the Jersey shore. Honest and truly, there's nothing like getting out onto the water to forget about everything, even the fact that you live in a supposedly civilized world. If you're in the right place at the right time, hours can pass without the sight of buildings or people or the sounds of cars and trucks. Complete, blessed silence. I definitely recommend it to everyone.

After one of these day trips toward the end of the summer, Nicky and I took a bike ride out to the end of—well, it's our secret fishing spot, so I can't tell you exactly. There's a little beach over there, and when the tide's out, you can walk halfway to what everyone says is New Jersey (but I'm not sure about that) before swimming for another fifty or so feet. We tried it once and almost got stranded, but that's another story that resulted in two days' worth of lectures and a week of hard manual labor. Think flower beds that needed very stinky manure.

We promised to nevereverever do that again.

We still haven't.

Back to the point though, this was one of our favorite spots for fishing, crabbing, and clamming. It was mostly what's known as "catch and release."

We never kept the crabs or the clams 'cuz they were probably contaminated, but it was fun just the same. Besides, it kept our skills up in case we ever needed them.

“You know,” Nicky said, his line in the water, the setting sun glowing in his eyes and making his hair look like molten gold, “Joey thinks he’s in love with you.” Nicky didn’t look at me; he just focused on his line. “Did you know that?”

I sighed to myself. I liked Joey, a lot. I even cared for him, and we’d shared hugs and kisses like many other dating couples, but that’s where it stopped for me. In addition to all the forbidding warnings, lectures, after-school television specials, and threats from my parents about the dire consequences of premarital sex, I just didn’t feel that something special, that something that I knew would tell me this is the right place, the right time, the right one, and I told Nicky so.

Nicky smiled as he hefted his pole a bit to check the line. “That’s good,” he said, “because I don’t think he’s right for you either.” His smile turned into a bright grin.

That smile of his looked a little suspicious, and I wanted to know more. “What?” I asked him as I felt what just might have been a tug on my line. I started to take in the slack bit by bit, going very slowly.

“Got something?” Nicky asked in a hush as he came closer. He still held on to his pole and divided his attention between his line and mine.

“Yeah, I think I might,” I whispered back. “So what’s the shit-eating grin for, dude?” I asked him out of the side of my mouth. My eyes were riveted on the water where my line disappeared into it. The sun had sunk even lower, and the backlight made the water look like fire, creating black shadows on the wavelets. It was very hard to see, and I know I must have been frowning in concentration. Nicky focused with me.

“School starts next week,” he told me informationally, as if I needed reminding. Of course school started next week. Otherwise why would he and I have spent the last week up late each night cramming in our summer reading instead of fishing, like we were at the moment?

“Yeah, so?” I asked a little carelessly. I was really, really focused on the line, and I had the gut feeling it was about to go. My shoulders twitched slightly with the anticipation, and I shifted my grip and my stance for better balance.

PUNK LIKE ME

“So, are you gonna break it off before school starts or after the first week or so?”

“What?” I asked him, surprised and thrown off track. I wasn’t surprised about the breaking-it-off question because I’d made it a rule since I’d started dating that dates were only on weekends and rarely more than two a month. Not because I didn’t have a social life, but because I did, with my friends, and I didn’t want to be cut off from them. Also, lots of my friends got into trouble with their studies over dating their “true loves,” and there was no way I was going to blow my plans for the future for some dumb guy or anyone else.

I was going for a scholarship, dammit. Either ROTC, which stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps, or the United States Naval Academy, otherwise known as Annapolis, and I wanted to fly jets, then become a test pilot, then an astronaut. That’s the way you get to space, and that’s where I wanted to go.

No, I wasn’t surprised by Nicky’s subject. I was surprised he asked at all.

“You could always tell him about Hopey and Maggie. He might leave you alone then.”

I stood stock-still for a few breaths, then actually took my focus off the line to stare at my brother. He had this silly little grin, and his eyes were open wide, too wide, like when you know something you’re not supposed to know or try to lie. You know, *that* look.

“Dude, Kerry’s my friend...” I began patiently, then stopped. I didn’t know where to go with this. It’s not that the idea of two girls together in that way bothered me. In fact, I thought it was pretty intriguing, except I couldn’t figure out how they’d do it, ya know? I just didn’t remember ever saying anything that specific about it to Nicky.

And I was confused, anyway, about how I felt about Kerry. Yeah, she was my friend, but it was different, too, in ways I had no words for, and I didn’t know what exactly that meant.

Oh hell, Nicky and I talked about everything all the time, even the gay thing in general; he knew I couldn’t care less which way people went.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I finally said. “I mean, Joey and Jack are best friends. Kerry might not be too thrilled with the whole thing when it gets back to her.” There, that sounded like it covered everything. I was cool and didn’t care, at least for myself. I was just considering someone else’s feelings, which in reality pretty much did sum it up.

JD GLASS

Nicky laughed. “Ya know, man, she probably wouldn’t care. It would just add to her reputation or something.”

I laughed with him in agreement, then focused back on my line. There—I thought I’d seen a slight movement. “Ya know, Nicky, that might not be a good thing to have on my background check for Annapolis,” I mentioned while I shifted my grip a little more. I could feel the play of the line along the rod, the slight pulling stress. There was something there, and that sucker was going to be mine.

“Oh shit, dude! I didn’t even think about that. You really think they’ll care?” he asked, his voice full of worry. “You think they won’t take you just for a rumor of something like that?”

Nicky was totally not fishing anymore, and he gripped my shoulder. “Dude, they can’t do that! That would be totally stupid!” he practically shouted in my ear.

I turned my head toward him and tried to give him as reassuring a smile as I could. After all, Nicky and I had the same dream: we were going to go to Annapolis together and graduate one year apart from one another. That was the plan, and that’s what it had been for a very long time, since we were small.

If you’re wondering what the heck we caught when we went fishing that time, I’ll tell you the truth. The more Nicky and I talked about Joey, the worse the fishing got. In the end, while we had gotten one or two keepers—porgies—the last thing I caught was a slimy, nasty, ugly, slightly translucent mud-green three-foot long eel. The hook had gotten caught between its teeth—the pointy sharp ones, which were an inch and a half long. All of them.

We would have tried—actually, we did try to free it, except it was snapping and spitting, and to be quite honest, neither of us wanted to get bitten by this nasty thing. In the end, we had to cut the line and let it go, hook and all, and it took the opportunity to lunge for Nicky in the waves before it finally, thankfully, disappeared. I guess I somehow took that as an omen of some sort. You’d think that I would have known that it was.

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PUNK LIKE ME

BY JD GLASS

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