

The Cheerleader

by Michael Downing

He sat behind her in Honors English, each day studying everything about her — how she casually flipped the hair from her face with a dip and shake of a shoulder and the way she brushed her fingers gently across her neck before raising a tentative hand with the answer to the teacher's question. The Boy lived for those moments when she would turn around and talk with him before the bell rang, quietly laughing together while he hung on her smile and the things she said; alone at night he imagined walking home with her, sliding his hand inside hers while sharing something more meaningful, aching to matter to her. He noticed how she changed when school resumed after Thanksgiving; the words between them remained the same but her eyes told a different story — one of betrayal and hurt caused by someone she might have once trusted. Though the marks on her skin faded and the waves of time washed away what had been there, her pain never lightened. The Boy longed to find a quiet moment so he could tell her to be strong — not to waste her life trying to get back what had been taken away, but he could not work up his courage. He never found the words; before The Boy could say he was sorry for what she must have lost, she left school and took the fragments of her innocence somewhere new to start again.

