

A HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENT'S NIGHTMARE

# Dating Violence

It was love at first sight for Sarah Van Zanten when she met 'Joe' her sophomore year. She never dreamed she'd become a statistic—one of thousands of teen girls caught in an abusive relationship.



"I was crazy about him," says Sarah (with Joe).

**S**arah Van Zanten, 15, was lying on the floor, an ice pack on her aching ribs. For a moment, she had no idea where she was; then her boyfriend's face came into focus. They were at a party, and Joe (not his real name), the cute football player she'd been dating, had kicked her, hard, propelling her into a wall, where she had hit her head and blacked out. "I woke up and he was hovering over me," Sarah, now 18, recalls. "I just wanted to get away."

Just four months earlier, Sarah thought she'd found the perfect boyfriend, ready with corsages, compliments and movie dates. Quickly, though, sweet talk gave way to insults and demands and, finally, physical abuse. Within days of the Feb. 12, 2005, kicking incident, Sarah, a willowy strawberry blonde with a spray of freckles across her cheeks, stood in line at the family division of the Santa Clara County, Calif.,

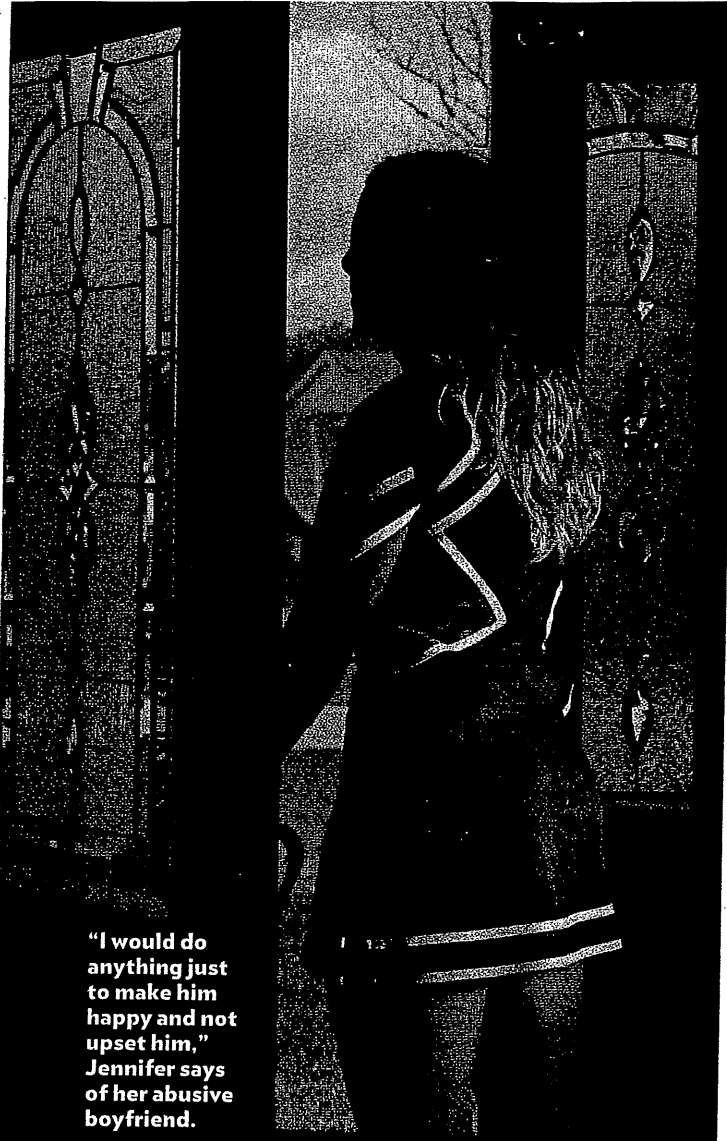
BY NINA BURLEIGH | PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMY ARBUS

"You think you'd never put up with someone hurting you," says Sarah (in Palo Alto, Calif.). "I felt ashamed of letting him do that to me."

COURTESY VAN ZANTEN FAMILY

## LASTING DAMAGE

A CHEERLEADER SITS OUT HER SENIOR YEAR



**"I would do anything just to make him happy and not upset him," Jennifer says of her abusive boyfriend.**

Even for girls who escape abusive relationships, the trauma sometimes lingers. "The residual effects can last long after the actual incident," says Katie Buckland, executive director of the California Women's Law Center. When Jennifer started seeing Tim (not their real names) during her junior year of high school in '05, she was an A student and cheerleading captain. Tim, a junior at a nearby school in their Midwestern suburb, showed a puppyish devotion that quickly morphed into something darker. "He'd say, 'Don't dress like that—it's stupid,'" Jennifer recalls. "One day, in my bedroom, he slapped my arm. I was in shock." Over the next seven months she endured near-daily beatings. She hid her bruises under sleeves. "I honestly thought he loved me and that he couldn't help it," she says. "I felt like I could help him." After a vicious incident in which

Tim stomped on her throat with steel-toed boots, Jennifer told her coach. Tim was arrested and charged with assault, according to police records.

Ashamed and depressed, Jennifer spent a month in daily therapy and took antidepressants for four months. Even then she found it impossible to pick up with her old life, once even running out of a school dance. "After we broke up," she says, "I didn't know how to act or what to do. He had been controlling me for so long." She dropped out of school and avoided friends. In her bedroom her parents installed a "panic button," wired through the home alarm system, so she could call police. Getting individual tutoring, she managed to graduate with her class last spring, and just started college. "I'm trying to focus on myself right now," she says. "Because before, I was lost."

court clerk's office, waiting to pick up a copy of a restraining order. "I never would have thought," Sarah says now, "something like this would happen to me."

Once a hidden problem, teen dating violence is getting some serious attention. A 2005 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that of 6,888 high school girls surveyed nationally, 1 in 11 had been hit, slapped or punched by an intimate partner. According to a Harvard study of 4,163 public high school girls in 2001, nearly 1 in 5 reported physical or sexual abuse in a relationship. "This is a major adolescent health issue," says Jay Silverman, associate professor of society, human development and health, who directed the Harvard study. "It

affects [girls'] academic lives, lowers their standards for relationships and puts them at great risk for unintended pregnancy and STDs." No one knows what causes such behavior—theories range from violence in the home to alcohol and drug abuse; others suggest violence in movies and the Internet may play a role. What is clear: Boy abusers and girl victims, without help, are likely to repeat those roles as adults.

Getting hurt was the furthest thing from Sarah's mind when she met Joe at a back-to-school dance in September 2004, the start of her sophomore year. "He was really cute," Sarah recalls, grinning. Within weeks she was in love. Every afternoon she would sit on the front lawn of her house in a suburb of Palo Alto, Calif.,

hoping to catch a moment with Joe as he walked home from practice. "I was crazy about him and about being in a new fun relationship," she says. Soon the two were inseparable. Joe, knowing Sarah left before dawn for crew practice—she eventually became team captain—began sending her text messages at 4 a.m. "They would say things like, 'I know you are at practice right now, but I just wanted to be the first one to say hi,'" Sarah says.

Initially flattered, Sarah gradually grew uneasy with Joe's possessiveness. "He never really straight out said he didn't like my friends, but he made it clear I didn't need anyone else. If a friend called, he'd be like, 'Why do you want to go out with them?'" When she did find time for pals, there was hell to pay: "My phone would

ring and my friends would say, 'Why don't you ignore it?' And I would say, 'I can't ignore it—I'll get in trouble.' If I was hanging around with anyone else, he'd get mad and yell at me on the phone." Her friends knew only that something had changed. "I was seeing Sarah less and less," recalls Jeremy Carlson, 18. "It became kind of a joke—that she was too busy with school and crew."

Sarah kept her doubts to herself. "I felt ashamed of sticking with him," she says. "I think it has to do with being in one of the first relationships of your life. You don't really know where to draw the line." And then there was Joe himself, who followed up his outbursts with fervent apologies and tokens of love, usually bouquets of roses. "I got a lot of flowers," Sarah recalls. "He always delivered them to me himself. It made me feel loved."

But her parents, Kate and Mark, a



The Van Zanten family (from left): Kate, Alana, 15, Sarah and Mark (in Palo Alto).

computer software salesman, were worried. Sarah, who had maintained a B+ average, started getting C's and D's, and her friends weren't coming by anymore. "As a parent you don't know what to do," says Kate, a workspace designer. "Here was this child who had always been bright; suddenly she doesn't have the self-esteem to care about herself, her grades or her future." She tried talking to Sarah, who angrily rejected her sugges-

tion that Joe was a bad influence; she also sent Sarah to a therapist, who suggested Kate and Mark try to understand why they disapproved of their daughter's choices.

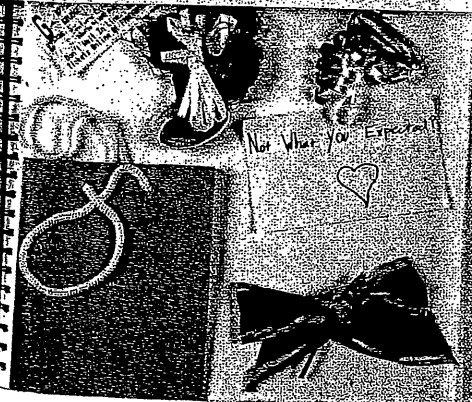
One day in January 2005, Joe arrived at school drunk and threw Sarah against a locker. "He started shaking me," she says, "yelling that I would never be able to hide from him. He told me he was going to beat the s--- out of me." Terrified and sobbing, Sarah escaped into a classroom and sought help from a teacher. Joe got a two-day suspension from school, the school confirms, for drinking. That night, Joe called to apologize; Sarah told him it was over. "I was scared," she says, and her parents forbade her from seeing him again.

Within days, Joe commenced a charm offensive. "I tried to ignore him," Sarah says, "but there he was on the phone and the Internet. He sent

received on 1/26/2005 from [REDACTED]

Page 1

[8:59:09 PM]: hey  
 [8:00:35 PM]: I never wanted to scare u i know that you know ive cared in since day 1  
 [8:01:11 PM]: so please talk to me so i can make things right  
 [8:02:42 PM]: i know your scared thats why i need to talk to you  
 [8:02:57 PM]: because i care about you so much  
 [8:05:05 PM]: please believe me that you have nothing to be scared of  
 [8:05:23 PM]: and i really want to talk to you  
 [8:07:42 PM]: will you tell me what your afraid of?  
 [8:09:42 PM]: i would never hurt you and i hope u dont honestly think i  
 [8:12:12 PM]: ive been thinking about u all day and i just want to tell  
 [8:13:50 PM]: will u talk 2 me please?



**FROM SARAH'S SCRAPBOOK**  
 A Tiffany bag that held a silver necklace from Joe; a Homecoming-dance corsage; a first-date movie ticket; an apology Joe wrote after slamming Sarah into a locker. After that incident, Joe also sent a stream of pleading instant messages.

# I Was An Abuser

WITH THERAPY, A YOUNG MAN LEARNS SELF-CONTROL

*In spring 2006, Bob (not his real name) was arrested after hitting his girlfriend; a family-court judge sentenced him to six months of counseling with San Jose, Calif., therapist Christopher Hickey. Now 18 and a community college student, Bob shares his story.*

I was stressed—we were fighting. I got really angry and started to pummel her. I was slapping her hard on her shoulders and on top of her head. I felt powerless. When it's over, you feel so bad—how can you hit a girl? [In therapy,] I started to think back on my childhood. My mother and father had such bad tempers; they were always yelling and hitting. I didn't want to be that way. I had never hit a girl before [that incident], but I had done a lot of verbal abuse; I learned that was serious. I have a girlfriend now, and when I feel myself getting mad I think about what happened—and I let it go.

As told to Maureen Harrington

## Is Your Teen Being Abused?

Teen girls often try to hide abusive relationships from their parents. Here are some warning signs.

- changes in daily routines
- retreat from school or activities
- changing clothing style to hide bruises
- isolation from friends

For more information, contact the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline at 866-331-9474. Helpful Web sites: [www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org), [www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)

me instant message after instant message." Sarah printed and kept some of the dozens which were sent minutes apart: "i never wanted to scare u," he wrote in one; another said, "i would never hurt you and i hope u dont honestly think I would." A few days later Joe surprised Sarah while she was jogging, presenting another bouquet of roses. Sarah took him back. "He was just my life," she says. "He was everything." She began seeing him on the sly, once even crawling out of her bedroom window. (PEOPLE's multiple calls to Joe and his family were not returned.)

Just before Valentine's Day, 2005, Sarah met Joe at a party. By the time she arrived with a girlfriend, she says, Joe was drunk. Something she said—to this day she doesn't know what—enraged him. "He snapped," Sarah says, still wincing at the memory. "He lifted his leg up and kicked me in the stomach. I flew across the room, hit my

head on the wall and was knocked unconscious." No one called an ambulance. A partygoer later recounted the incident to police in a statement: "He kicked her as hard as he could with his right leg/foot. She fell to the ground. She wasn't responsive. Her legs were moving up and down and her chest was shaking. He [witness] said she did this for close to three hours."

When Sarah regained consciousness, Joe was standing nearby, still drinking. Getting to her feet, she made her way to a bathroom, locked herself in and called a male crew team member. "You could tell she had been crying," recalls the friend, Brian Knott. "I came and asked [Joe] to leave; then I gave her a ride home." Even then Joe followed Sarah out, begging for forgiveness, but she ignored him. "I just knew I needed to draw the line and walk away," she says.

Back home, as dawn was breaking, Sarah tearfully confessed everything to her mother at the kitchen table. Kate called the police. An officer arrived, interviewed Sarah and two friends, and advised her to get a restraining order. Authorities later picked up Joe and briefly held him in juvenile detention on a charge of domestic battery.

At a school hearing a month after the kicking incident, school officials ordered Joe to attend a different school because "his presence was causing so much discomfort to another student," according to assistant principal Tom Jacoubowsky. And Sarah found herself something of an outcast. "Even the other girls were saying to her, How could you do this to him? He's so cute," says Jacoubowsky. One day a friend of Joe's stopped her in the cafeteria and said she and her dog were "in danger." Sarah walked out of school and never came back, enrolling in a private school from which she graduated last spring.

In the two years since, Sarah, who went through nine months of counseling, has visited 10 schools, talking to groups of girls about dating violence, work she says has helped her come to terms with what happened. She even had a new boyfriend senior year, someone, she says, who "respected the fact that I needed my space." This month she was starting college, confident she'll never be a victim again. "I learned to care about myself more and to have more respect for myself," she says. "I realize that I deserve better." ●

