

# One

I looked over my shoulder as I ran across the football field, rain blurring my vision. I stumbled forward, tripping over my own two feet, but caught myself before falling to the ground. Up ahead I saw the bleachers. The same bleachers I had sat on since attending high school at Craven Falls High. It was also my only place to hide from the person chasing me.

The metal seats sparkled from the rainwater that fell from the dark storm clouds. I ran in that direction just as a lightning bolt shot down from the sky, lighting my way. The second I thought I was ahead of the person chasing me, I was hit on the back of the head, sending shock waves of pain through my skull. I squeezed my eyes shut, an immediate reaction to the pain coursing through my cranium. The automatic reflex of my hand went to my head. I felt something warm and wet. I was sure it was blood and not the rain. I didn't have time to look at my hand to confirm. I had to run. I had to get away from my attacker.

By the time I made it to the bleachers, hoping to find shelter, I was hit once again; this time on the back of my leg. My high heel shoes and clutch purse flew out of my hand as I dropped to the ground like a hundred and twelve-pound bag of potatoes. I grabbed my right leg as the pain shot through my body. I wanted to scream, but nothing came out. The sound was trapped inside my throat. This had to be a nightmare. A bad dream. I couldn't be living this, but I was, and it was real.

I began to crawl, dragging my right leg across the wet, freshly cut grass. Undoubtedly, my leg, maybe my calf, was broken. Shattered in several places. I gritted my teeth as I slinked along, clawing at the grass and dirt. The pain was more than I could handle, but I had to find safety. I

knew the bleachers wouldn't save me, only camouflage the person trying to kill me behind the monstrous metal seats.

Once under the bleachers, I collapsed onto my side. I couldn't go any further; not only from the pain, but because I was losing a lot of blood from the gash on my head. My Homecoming dress was ruined, but that was the least of my problems. The person doing this was not only trying to hurt me but kill me for messing up their life.

I blinked as water slid between the metal slots of the bleachers and fell onto my face. The rain changed from a light drizzle to pouring down in an instant, dropping onto my bloody split-open head. My vision was hazy as I looked out the corner of my eye, blinking away the water. My head pulsed from the blow I'd received just minutes ago; a headache wasn't surfacing; it was already here, shouting out obscenities. My reflexes took over when I saw a movement to my left. I curled myself into a fetal position to shield myself from what looked like a wooden bat about to strike my body.

I screamed out in pain as the bat came down, shattering the bones of my ribs, "Please, stop!" I cried out as sharp excruciating pain coursed through me. I not only felt the bones break, but I heard them. It became harder to breathe, but I took in an agonizing breath and cried out again. "I'm begging you. Please stop!"

The blows came down hard one after another, hitting every part of my body. I could feel the anger in each hit. Then they stopped, and I laid motionless on the ground. The rain continued to drip onto my head and run down my face, which was staring off into the night. You wouldn't have known I was crying from all the rain running down my face as the rain and salty tears mixed together. In a flash, I saw one and then a second shadow standing over me.

I sucked in a haggard breath as the attacker, my killer, knelt in front of me. I held the breath I had just taken. My lungs were screaming for me to exhale as piercing pain sliced through my chest, my legs, and my head. I couldn't believe with my own eyes who was kneeling in front of me!

"I'm sorry, but this needed to be done," the person said.

"Yeah, you should've known better than to fuck with us, bitch!" the other person said, the one who had beaten me to a pulp, leaving me broken and bleeding. The one person I truly hated with everything I had inside of me.

I blinked several more times, unsure of what I saw. My vision was distorted by the rain and the darkness surrounding me. Maybe I had imagined it all, but I knew that I hadn't. I could hear through the pelting raindrops hitting the bleachers the faint sounds of laughter filling the rainy night air.

Another drop fell from the black sky above and landed on my body, soaking my already wet clothes. I felt the pain surging through me, like a burning fury of fire, and I couldn't move. I was afraid to move. My body was shattered. Broken into pieces, I was left to die here under the bleachers.

No one would come looking for me, not on a night like tonight. Not in the pouring rain. I blinked as I sucked in one last and final breath, staring out at the football field; my eyes were wide open as life left my body for the very last time.

# Two

## One Month Earlier

Laura

I closed the door to my locker and turned just as Rachel Sawyer and Scarlet Fitzgerald, the *Queen Bees* of Craven Falls High, came strutting through the entrance doors of the school. They were both laughing as they paraded down the hall just like they did every day that school was in session.

They don't talk to me; in fact, they don't talk to any of the girls here unless they acknowledge them first.

Mostly and foremost, I'm a *nobody*.

I'm pretty, but not hot, like Rachel and Scarlet.

And I'm not popular.

Definitely not popular.

Not that I wanted to be in their circle. I don't want to be considered a slut or a stuck-up snob. I like who I am. I like being the outcast. Because then no one will bother me. I can be on the outside looking in and watching everything everyone else was doing.

No harm done.

My life wasn't perfect by any means. It was by far the worst life anyone could have. I'm not sure I have a word for what my life is like, but I could guarantee you wouldn't want it. So, let's back up to Rachel and Scarlet. It would be a lie if I said I wasn't jealous of them because I am.

They get to do whatever they want, and everyone looks up to them. They get invited to the best parties, and date the hottest guys, like Travis Evans. He's like the God of hotness. *Is that even a thing?* I would give anything to go out with him. For him to be my boyfriend. I have pictured us together more times than I could count. He'd take me to the movies and the Homecoming Dance. We'd be crowned King and Queen at our Senior Prom.

I'm knocked from my daydream when my body jerked forward and my books went flying out of my arms and onto the polished laminate floor. I could see my books in slow motion as they hovered in the air—the pages turning and flapping, and then scattered onto the floor around me. When I realized what was happening, I quickly bent down and gathered my books and papers before someone decided to start kicking them down the hall. I've seen it done too many times and was glad it wasn't me, until now. Now, I'm the idiot everyone was staring and laughing at and glad they weren't me. I looked up and over my shoulder. I saw Kyle Tanner a guy from the football team, swim team, and baseball team standing there laughing at me. He was also the biggest asshole in our senior class who got away with everything.

He looked down at me and shouted, "What the shit are you looking at? You better watch where you're going, *dweeb*," Kyle shouted then joined in with his buddies laughing at me.

I wanted to stand up, get in his face, and tell him he was an asshole who doesn't even know what the word *dweeb* means. Of course, I don't get in his face. I don't say anything to him. That would be a death warrant and the end of staying invisible for the rest of my senior year. I needed to stay hidden until I could get the hell out of this town for good.

Kyle was also one of the popular kids. You don't talk to them unless you're one of them. Or unless you are spoken to and they want you to answer them. Even if he did talk to me I'd ignore him, which I knew would make him mad. I hope he wasn't expecting me to apologize to him. He

was the one who rammed into me. You get to know the people around you when your locker is next to theirs. Things other people here don't see or know. I wanted to laugh because he thinks he's God's gift to women. Like I couldn't hear him talk to himself through the metal locker doors.

I stood after collecting my books and started making my way down the hall when I heard, "Excuse me, but what do you think you're doing?"

I stopped in my tracks. I knew the voice talking to me before I even turned around. Scarlet Fitzgerald announced in her snobbish, annoying, high-pitched voice loud enough for everyone standing around to hear. She sounded like a pig squealing when it was dinner time, the way she talked sometimes.

She had always been the attention getter. She thrived on having everything her way. God, I hated her as much as I wanted to be her. To be her friend, but that would never happen, and it was probably best that I wouldn't. Eight months was all I had, and I was out of here forever. Out of this small unpopulated town. *Good riddance Craven Falls.*

Today just wasn't my day.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Rachel and Scarlet gawking at me. I stepped aside and waited for them to pass by. Scarlet tossed her red hair over her shoulder, lifted her head high as if she were trying to sniff the air or someone's passing fart.

After they walked by, I headed to my first period class, which happened to be with Scarlet and Rachel. I wasn't sure what difference it made who got there first. *Stay invisible*, my head repeated.

Once in the classroom, I took my seat in the back of the room. It was where most of the so-called losers sat. It was also so no one could look at me or even talk to me. I'm not one to gossip or even listen to the gossip that went around the school. Again, I can't sit here and say I wouldn't want to be a part of their group because in all honesty, I wished someone would talk to me besides

the teacher. I wanted to be invited to a party and have a guy ask me out. Yes, Travis Evans. It was my senior year of high school, the only one I'd have, but I knew all too well it wouldn't happen. Not in my lifetime. Not here in Craven Falls, Ohio.

I looked up from my desk just as Rachel giggled, placing her hand over her mouth. Something she did every time she laughed since I've known her. Unlike before, she looked over her shoulder at me. Like dead square in my eyes, but that couldn't be. I looked over my shoulder thinking there must be someone behind me, but there wasn't. I was in the last seat in the back row. I lifted my hand to wave at her, but then thought what an idiot I'd look like if I did, so I pretended to fix my hair instead.

My hair that was semi-thick, long and brown with soft waves, never needed fixed. I've always liked the way my hair looked. It had always been easy to manage in the morning before school. I have long muscular legs and a flat waist from taking up jogging this past summer. *You're probably wondering what's wrong with me then?*

Well, like most outcasts, I wear glasses that are five years old because my mom won't spend the money to get me contacts or even new glasses. Although, I'm lucky not to wear metal braces on my teeth. Because I was fortunate to have straight teeth, but not so fortunate with the occasional pimple on my face. Usually on the tip of my nose or on my forehead where everyone could see them. But that was because of all the make-up I wore. I also still wear the same clothes I bought last year because my mom can't afford new ones. Or just won't buy me some. Can you picture me now in your head? Not so attractive, am I?

Rachel turned from me and looked at her best friend Miss Queen Bee herself, Scarlet, whom of course, was sitting beside her. They never go anywhere without the other. I'm actually surprised they don't have all their classes together.

I think of Scarlet as the Wicked Witch of the West, like in Wizard of OZ. She has never done a nice thing to or for anyone. In my dictionary under the word *bitch*, would be Scarlet's name in bold letters. And possibly a picture of her to go with it.

They both giggled at one another when the bell rang. Although, it felt as if I had just sat down, English was finished for one more day. I waited for them to stand and leave the room first before I gathered my books and headed to my next class. When I walked out of the classroom, I jumped back, ramming my back into the metal frame of the door. Which caused an abundance of pain to shoot down my back. "Fuck," I murmured as I squeezed my eyes shut to eliminate the pain. When I opened my eyes, I saw Rachel and Scarlet standing in front of me as if they were waiting for me, but that couldn't be? I feared what they were going to do to me, but neither of them moved, which scared me more.

"Hey, Laura. What are you doing after school tonight?" Scarlet asked.

I looked from Scarlet to Rachel with a dumbfounded look on my face. I caught myself and stood up straight like a soldier. "Um," I started to say and then began to stutter. "Wh... what do... do you mean, what am I doing tonight?" I sounded beyond stupid right now.

"W... w... well," Scarlet stuttered back, laughing directly at me.

I hated her more now than ever.

"We were wondering if we could like, get together and study math tonight. At your house," she concluded, throwing one of her smiles onto her face as if it would win me over.

Did she think I was one of her guy toys and could persuade me to do whatever she wanted? "Math?" I questioned. *And why at my house? They had never asked me for help before. There's no way they want to be friends with me, do they?* I thought to myself. *They couldn't possibly want my help?*

My mind was racing faster than a roller coaster, wondering why they would be talking to me. Why would they want to hang out with me of all people? I'm a nobody.

"Yes, Math," Rachel repeated. "We have an exam coming up, and we really could use your help. You're so good at it and..." she stopped and spoke again. "I know it sounds strange Scarlet and I are talking to you because we never have before..." Rachel paused and swallowed.

*Rachel swallowing when she was talking was something I knew she did when she was nervous. But why would she be nervous talking to me? Or was it because she was doing something she really didn't want to do? How would I know if they were serious or not? Should I accept their invitation? Should I believe one single word they're saying?*

My mind was battling with too many questions I didn't know the answers to. Did Rachel actually think we were still best friends and that we hadn't drifted apart since the start of seventh grade?

"We'd like to get together. You know, hang out after school. Do some homework. Talk about boys," Scarlet said, taking over the conversation as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"Oh... Uh," I replied, trying to come up with an excuse to why I couldn't hang out with them, but I couldn't so I said, "Um, sure, I guess so. That sounds great!" *Sounds great*, I scolded myself. *It's a horrible idea. You know they're lying. Playing some kind of game on you. They will bury you alive. They're out to get you, Laura. Your mother will kill you if they come to the house.*

# Three

## Laura

The final bell of the day rang but I wasn't glad the day was over. I was dreading this invite Scarlet had given me. After my encounter with the *Queen Bees*, I couldn't keep my mind from thinking about what Rachel and Scarlet were up to. The two of them wanting to spend time with me. Doing homework and talking about boys, was more than strange.

I had to be dreaming, but I knew that I wasn't. I had no clue what they were going to do to me. Or maybe, maybe they really wanted to be my friend? I shook my head at the thought. *You are an idiot*, my inner-self yelled. *Don't let them do something to you. Be strong. Be aware.* I smiled. "Yes, be strong and aware," I whispered as I walked.

I made my way through the narrow hallway to my locker while hugging myself. I was afraid that my classmates would bump into me and cause me more pain than I already had, as they hurried to their lockers to grab the books they needed for homework tonight.

I stopped at locker #321 and turned the lock, stopping on each number of my combination. I opened my locker door and grabbed my things before turning to leave, hoping to escape before they found me.

No such luck.

I was startled once again and stepped back. My back pressed against the locker door. The same sore spot from earlier. I knew there was a bruise from days ago, still tender to the touch.

Both Rachel and Scarlet were standing there smiling at me. *This can't be happening. This must be a dream or a horrible nightmare that I'm about to wake up from.* But it's not and I don't. I swallowed and pasted a smile on my face.

"Oh, sorry," Scarlet said. "Didn't mean to scare you," she snickered as if she'd just told a joke.

"Ya', sorry," Rachel replied in queue.

*God, Rachel sounded so stuck up. Those two could be fraternal twins; always finishing each other's sentences and thoughts,* I thought to myself. *Whatever they're up to, I'll have to keep my guard up because I so don't trust them. But if that's the case, then why am I going to hang out with them? Maybe they do want to be friends with me?* I questioned myself yet again.

*At one time, Rachel used to be my best friend while we were in grade school. Once Junior High came along, she became popular, leaving me behind. I watched her shine next to the bitch, Scarlet. Not once asking if I wanted to join her crowd. Be a part of her **girl clan**.* Not that I'd have wanted to.

"Are you ready to go?" Scarlet asked. "We'll take you home in my car."

"Oh, uh, sure, that'll be fine," I said, sounding more and more like a dork.

"Then let's go," Rachel said.

I waited as usual for them to go first because the rule had always been to never walk in front of them or beside them. When I slipped in behind, Rachel stopped and turned toward me.

"What are you doing?" Rachel asked.

"What?" I asked, not sure what she was talking about.

"Are you going to walk with us?" Rachel asked, slinking her arm in mine and pulling me close to her.

She started to walk with me beside her, like I was part of their group now. Their crowd. This was *so* going in my diary. I couldn't let this day be forgotten. I was hanging out with the most popular girls in high school. I wanted to announce to everyone that I was now friends with Rachel and Scarlet. But, I didn't have to; all our classmates were already gawking at us as we walked out the front entrance of the school and down the stairs, arm-and-arm.

It was different this time leaving school because I had someone to talk to. Usually, I would just put in my earbuds and listen to music that lifted my spirits as I walked home alone. We stopped when we got to Scarlet's red BMW she got for her sixteenth birthday. I only knew this because it was all she talked about.

Rachel climbed into the front seat, while I opened the rear passenger door and slid into the back. I had never been inside a BMW before, especially one with leather seats. I ran my hand over them. They felt smooth, almost silky to the touch. The smell of new leather drifted in the air, and I breathed it in.

Scarlet backed out of the parking spot, and we headed down the road toward my house. Rachel asked if I had anyone special in my life, meaning a boy. I shook my head, knowing she couldn't see me from the back seat. "No," I said, just loud enough for them both to hear me over the music playing on the car radio.

"Well, that'll change now," Rachel hollered back. "Now that you're hanging out with us, you're sure to get a date to the Homecoming Dance."

I cleared my throat. "I'm not sure if I want to go to Homecoming," I lied. God, it would be nice to go, especially with a boy from school like Travis Evans.

"What!" Scarlet shrieked from the driver's seat. "Not go to Homecoming? Why wouldn't you? This is our last dance before Prom. You have to go," Scarlet shouted. "This is our senior year!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's not important to me. I don't really like going to dances," I said. I hadn't been to any dances, so I wouldn't know if I liked them or not. To be honest, I had read the book *Carrie* by Stephen King. Me, being an outcast, I didn't want the same thing to happen to me at one of the school dances. Not that it would happen, but you don't know some of the kids I go to school with. They'd love to play a joke like that on someone. Although, I don't have telekinesis, but it would be cool to have it.

Scarlet's shrill voice echoed throughout the car, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Well, we'll get you to change your mind, won't we Rachel?" Scarlet said, winking in Rachel's direction as if I couldn't see her.

I hid the real me and gave them a false smile, looking out the window beside me. I'm not sure if I wanted to change the way my life was going. High school was almost finished, and I had plans after graduation, which was to get the hell out of this town for good. I already had a college picked out in North Carolina. Change wouldn't be good. Because I wasn't staying.

Craven Falls was large in land, making the houses further apart. It also seemed to be divided into sections on how much money you had. The rich lived on one end and the poor on the other. The average incomes, well, they lived in the middle; almost like a wall between the two. We turned the corner, and my house came into view.

My house was an average size home in the poor section of town. The house was big enough to fit four people, although there were only two of us living in it. It wasn't as fancy as Rachel's or Scarlet's homes, but who needed a home that could fit two houses inside like Scarlet's did? I've seen both of their homes, but I'd only been inside Rachel's back when we used to be friends.

Scarlet parked the car on the side of the street, and we all got out and walked up the driveway to the front door. There was no car in the driveway, which told me my mom wasn't home from

work yet. This was a good thing. I unlocked the door, pushing it open, and then stood back until both Scarlet and Rachel went inside before I closed and locked the door behind them.

“Are you guys hungry?” I asked, then felt stupid for asking. They looked at one another as if they needed to come to a decision together before answering.

“Sure,” Scarlet replied, shrugging her shoulders. “What do you have?”

I glanced around the living room grateful that I had cleaned it before I left for school that morning. I walked into the kitchen and turned on the light because my mom always kept the shades drawn so it didn’t get so godawful hot in the house. My mom didn’t like to use the air conditioner either. Her way of saving money. Money, we didn’t have. I honestly thought she kept the blinds closed so no one could see inside our home and what went on behind closed doors.

I opened the refrigerator and scanned the shelves. There were several containers of leftover food from two nights ago or was it three? This I wasn’t sure about, and I knew for certain, they weren’t going to eat our leftovers. I grabbed a bowl of red grapes, although they were wrinkled and minimized in size, and placed them on the table.

“Let’s go to your room,” Scarlet said.

“Oh, I guess we can study in my bedroom,” I mumbled. Still unsure what they had planned for me. I grabbed my bookbag and hesitated before taking the lead, showing them where my room was, although Rachel already knew.

I opened the door and flicked the switch on my right. Light accentuated the room, giving off a vibrant glow. Two summers ago, I used some of my babysitting money and painted my bedroom two different shades of teal. A lighter color on two opposite walls and a darker color on the other two remaining walls. I strung lights around the room with pictures hanging from them, using

colored clothes pins. I had white silk curtains hanging over my window that I had sewn myself. With matching pillows and a teal throw on my bed. This room was my sanctuary.

“Wow, Laura, this room looks so cool,” Rachel said, sounding jealous.

“Yeah, my bedroom doesn’t even look this good,” Scarlet muttered.

I rolled my eyes at her words, glad that I was standing behind them and not where they could see my face. I knew all too well Scarlet’s room was way better than mine. She lived in a mansion, for heaven’s sake. They had more money than all the people combined in Craven Falls.

“You must tell me who designed it?” Scarlet asked.

“I did,” I said with a huge smile on my face. I’m very proud of the work I do, and that’s why I’m going to be an Interior Decorator one day.

“You did this?” Rachel questioned as if I wasn’t skilled enough to decorate my own room.

I nodded, “Yes, I saw some photos in several different magazines and matched them together to come up with what I wanted.”

The room filled with silence, and I felt awkward as hell standing in the same room with them. I still couldn’t believe they were here at my house.

In my room.

Wanting to hang out with me.

Me, of all people.

I wasn’t anyone special and far from popular. So, it still remained a question as to why they were here in my house? There had to be a catch; I just couldn’t see it yet.

I walked to my bed and sat down. Rachel and Scarlet followed, taking a seat on the other side as if not to get too close to me. As if I had cooties.

“So, what do you do for fun?” Scarlet asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer the question. Was it really any of their business? No, not really, but I told them anyway. "Well, for one," I waved my hand around the room, palm up. "I love to decorate as you can see."

"I'm not sure if I would call that fun," Scarlet replied in her snotty and all too familiar annoying voice. "I mean like going to parties or hanging out with boys."