

# One

The first day of my senior year arrived, leaving nine months until graduation. Nine months. It sounded like a pregnancy. I had never been pregnant, though I believed school could be as excruciating as giving birth. The tantalizing and bullying that went on here. The pressure from the teachers and our parents.

“Kat, I want so much more for you than I had,” my mom once said.

I know that she did want more for me, but that didn’t change the way these kids treated each other. School was every kids’ worst nightmare, almost like a Freddy Krueger movie, except you don’t get killed only emotionally abused, sometimes physically.

The school bus jolted to a stop, snapping me out of my daydreaming. Students younger than me were scattered about. Was I the only senior who didn’t have her own car? Sure, I could drive my father’s, but not until six in the evening. I didn’t want to think about the car in the garage. The one under the blue tarp. The one I hadn’t been in for almost a year. If I were being totally honest, I had nowhere to go or any friends to hang out with anyway.

I sat tight while everyone else clambered off the bus. Then, I scooted out of the green, leather seat and ambled down the aisle. The blazing sun warmed my face as I stepped off the bus and onto the cracked concrete sidewalk. The bus doors swooshed closed behind me, then jerked forward, gears grinding as it drove away. Exhaust fumes hung in the air then drifted up my nose. I coughed, tasting the carbon fumes in the back of my throat. I reached for the water bottle in the side pocket

of my backpack when my body propelled backward. For only a split second, my feet left the pavement. I stumbled backward, colliding into another kid.

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I regained my footing, stepping out of the line of traffic that materialized on the sidewalk. My head whipped around to see who had bumped into me. A boy I hadn’t seen stopped and glanced over his shoulder back at me.

“Watch where you’re going,” I shouted.

He smiled at me.

Completely taken aback. I stood there blinking. A flutter of tingles swirled inside my stomach as I drooled over his muscular build and good looks. I turned, shaking away the images. What was wrong with me? I didn’t normally gawk at guys, especially ones I don’t know.

My chest rose and fell, a sigh escaped between my flesh-colored lips. I rolled my shoulders back, letting them slump beneath my light blue cotton sweater. A semi-warm gust of wind whooshed my auburn hair into my face. I tucked the lock of hair behind my right ear and peered out into the parking lot.

I scanned the scenery, everyone around me was also staring out into the parking lot. Less than half of the students who attended Hoffman High were rooted on the sidewalk, ogling a parked car.

I believed it didn’t have anything to do with the car, but who was sitting inside the car. There were rumors about Trevor and Mia breaking up when I returned home from my trip. Just a little surprised the rumors were true. Something drastic must have happened for them to break up. I couldn’t imagine him or her cheating on one another. So, what tore those two love birds apart? I’d

have to keep my ears alert, as I was sure the other students here at Hoffman High would gossip about it.

I shook the thought from my mind and fixated back on the car. What I and everyone else saw was not his girlfriend in the passenger seat. At least it didn't look like her. It didn't look like a person with blonde hair or was even female. Trevor wasn't gay. Not that him being gay was wrong. It was that Trevor was definitely into girls, or should I say, a girl. Mia was the love of his life, and vice versa. I wouldn't be surprised if they got back together.

At that very moment, whispers filled my ears. The same words heard through the halls of Hoffman High for years.

*"Oh my God, I can't believe it."*

*"Are you kidding me?"*

*"Trevor and..."*

*"I hadn't heard. Did you hear anything?"*

*"Is he gay?"*

*"No way! It will destroy Mia."*

*"No wonder she broke up with him."*

And on and on. More gossip.

We all stood on the sidewalk waiting for the person to get out of the car. It reminded me of a movie playing in slow motion, except no one was moving. A *creak* as the car door opened. Trevor Chapman, the all-star football champion, stepped out of the car. He extended his left arm, which

I'd seen him do a million times and ran a hand through his flowing, brown, shoulder-length hair then slammed the car door shut with his right hand. I must admit; he was gorgeous. He acted like he was on a Gap commercial the way his shirt clung to his chest and biceps. Let's not forget the way his hair cascaded along his shoulders, as if someone were styling it where he stood. His shirt rose, showing off his muscular abs. Did he feel like a movie star with everyone flaunting over him?

I swallowed and glanced down at the ground. I shouldn't be thinking about him in that way. Never had I ever viewed Trevor as a piece of meat. Scanning the crowd, I detected I wasn't the only girl fantasizing over his body. The rest, I believed, were having difficulty wrapping their heads around what the hell was going on.

"Is that Gavin Bowers?" Someone said, from the crowd of onlookers.

My head whipped back toward the car. My eyes followed Trevor as he glanced to his right. The passenger door opened, and Gavin appeared with a wide smile spread across his face. He stepped out of the vehicle, soaking in the scene.

I blinked, directing my attention back on Trevor, who wasn't smiling. Nope, today he was discreet. He didn't make eye contact with anyone, but everyone was watching him. In fact, he stared down at the ground, like an obedient dog. Did he sense our eyes on him? If so, he didn't let it show. Keeping his emotions sealed like a can of tuna. Something he had become good at doing. After what happened to his father two years ago, but I'll get into that later.

Then again, maybe I jumped the gun because now Trevor was smiling. Does that make him a liar? Not necessarily. He had to be the popular, good looking, all-star football player we visualized him to be. Winning the town its first undefeated state championship last year.

Trevor stepped away from his car, walking toward the school. Gavin slammed the car door and rushed to catch up to him. They had never been friends. I was sure of it. Had I missed this piece of information? I scanned through my memory but came up blank. Nope, I didn't recall hearing anything about them two since I'd returned home.

Trevor puffed out his chest. He didn't seem to care what anyone was thinking. To me it would feel like an itch I couldn't scratch in the middle of my back. I didn't like being the center of attention, but he did.

I scoped the scene with inquiring eyes. Trevor's posture was usually easy to read, but today I wasn't sure what he was thinking. His demeanor off. God, I hated not knowing. His teammates were going to ask him questions, and he better have a good explanation. I had to be there when it went down.

With my thumbnail between my teeth, a habit I couldn't seem to break, my mind whirled with judgments. I dropped my hand and placed it on the strap of my backpack. Turning away, I skittered up the walk, and into the school.

As I made my way through the hall lined with lockers, my ears crammed with more chatter. If it were a competition, there was definitely more babble inside the school than outside. *But they hadn't seen what I had seen.*

The students talked about what they did over the summer. The vacations they went on. This town wasn't huge by any means. Not that everyone knew everyone's business. Secrets could still be hidden away from nosy neighbors who loitered on their front porch. The hushed whispers in the aisles at the local grocery store. People in Crawford tried to mind their own business; they just failed in every aspect.

A week before school started, the administration office sent out everyone's class schedule and locker number with the combination. Orientation was an option. Being that this is a small school, I already knew most of the teachers and where my classes were. Besides, it was always something my mom and I did together.

I stood at my locker, turning my head toward the loud outburst coming from down the hall. Just my luck. My locker was in the same hallway as the dumb, loud jocks. They think they're so much better than everyone else. They have no respect for those around them. I watched as a couple of the jocks pushed one another in a rough, yet playful manner. But there were only two people who stood out from that crowd, and that was Gavin and Trevor.

Closing my locker door, I leaned against it and observed the scene. Yes, I'm a curious person when it comes to unexpected things like Trevor allowing Gavin to hang around him and his football buddies. Sometimes I got myself into circumstances I had trouble getting out of. But I liked the detective part of me. I get it from my father who was the detective here in Crawford. I enjoyed digging for clues and finding out the truth. But this summer, I promised myself I would mind my own business. Thing was, summer was over.

Gavin was a so-called loser at this school. Normally, I didn't put labels on people, but Gavin was different. I actually believed he relished being picked on. In fact, some guys from the team bullied him for years. Did that make him feel uncomfortable standing there with them? Wondering if the jocks were going to stuff him inside a locker like they did last year and the year before that? Or maybe he felt like the King of England standing next to Trevor. Could that be why he was hanging around Trevor? Was Trevor protecting Gavin? No, that didn't seem plausible. Trevor wouldn't jeopardize his reputation for a person like Gavin. Would he?

I searched my brain but came up with nothing. There was nothing that made sense about Trevor and Gavin being friends. Then again, did something happen over the summer, and they became friends? No, that couldn't be true. Trevor wouldn't be caught dead hanging around with Gavin, but here he was. So, what could it be? How did this happen? Why did it happen? I had to find out. I couldn't watch like everyone else. There goes not meddling in anyone's life.

I shoved off from the locker and walked down the hall, stopping several feet away from where the football team stood. I pretended to read something on the bulletin board.

"What's with the cockroach you have following you today?" Andrew asked.

I always considered Andrew as Trevor's bitch. He followed him around and wanted to be like him. I surveyed the scene. Trevor scanned from his friends to Gavin and then back to Andrew.

"Guys, you all know Gavin Bowers?" Trevor announced.

"Well, duh," Chad replied. "Who doesn't know this douche bag?"

Chad was a defensive lineman. His nickname to everyone was The Fridge. If you stepped in front of him on the field, you were going down, and it was going to hurt.

"I want you to be nice to him. He'll be hanging around with us from now on," Trevor announced.

My jaw went slack, my eyes widened. I didn't see this coming at all. *Hang out with them? What the hell!*

"You're kidding, right?" Andrew spat.

"No! So, get used to it," Trevor snarled, looking Andrew in the eyes.

Like outside, I could tell Trevor was hiding something. A secret. I hated secrets. But I loved discovering what the secret was. Because something was definitely up.

Andrew stiffened then glanced away like a shy child. Was he terrified of Trevor? Then again, who here wasn't? Trevor sauntered away with his tail between his legs. Gavin one step behind him like a lovesick puppy. He must have a moral reason for allowing Gavin to hang around him, right?

# Two

I slipped in behind them, following until Trevor stopped outside one of the classrooms. He muttered something to Gavin but I couldn't hear what he said. He then turned and strolled into the classroom. I wanted to feel sorry for him but whisked the thought away like a mosquito buzzing around your ear. If you asked me, Trevor deserved whatever happened to him. If he got himself into trouble, then this was his punishment.

I skittered across the hall and into the restroom, ducking into one of the stalls. I flushed and turned to leave the small cubicle when the restroom door swooshed open. I'm not sure why I hesitated to leave but something pulled me back. Instead, I peered through the narrow slot to see who it was before leaving the security of the stall. I wasn't sure why exactly. I wasn't afraid of anyone. I wasn't being bullied. My stomach swirled with uneasiness. A feeling you get right before something bad happens.

This was turning into an interesting day after all. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A wide smile spread across my face. First, hearing the words exchanged between Trevor and the football team. And second, as I perched behind a locked stall door, Mia Barnes breezed in and stood at the sink.

What were the chances that Trevor's ex-girlfriend would walk into the same restroom I was in? One out of seven, to be exact. There being only seven restrooms in the entire school.

Squinting, I peeked back through the narrow opening as Mia applied lipstick to her lips. The dull fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling gave off a yellowish glow. I couldn't be sure what

shade of color she was applying. Hopefully a color darker than her pale complexion staring back at me through the mirror.

My eyes traced over her hair which was once long and beautiful, but now appeared dried and split like straw. Had a vampire bitten her? Then again, I had been reading too many supernatural books lately. There was no such thing!

The sweater Mia wore draped over her shoulders like a shawl, hiding her thin figure. Probably so no one would notice how much weight she'd lost in a short amount of time. Was she on a diet? I don't recall Mia ever being fat. Was it why she and Trevor broke up? There were no other rumors about her since I returned home. Well, except about her and Trevor breaking up. I guess Mia was the only one who knew the truth of why she stopped eating. Besides, you couldn't always trust the things people said around here. A story could get all twisted like a root of a banyan tree. Especially with people adding their own philosophy.

But I do recall hearing an argument last night while walking the dog. Which came from inside Mia's house. "I need some normalcy, and school will help instead of being trapped in this house with the two of you," Mia had hollered.

Why would she have to beg her parents to go to school? Most kids would be thrilled to stay home. Though most parents wouldn't want their kids to stay home from school. They seemed to be worried about her. Mr. and Mrs. B, as I like to call them, had been strict with Mia all her life. Ethan, Mia's older brother, usually got all the attention. Did they wonder what had happened to their little girl with the sea-blue eyes? What had caused her to stop eating? Though the question should be, *why* had she done it? She was one of the thinnest girls at our school; along with being popular and smart.

I remember when we would challenge one another. She usually always won, but it was close most of the time. There are days I miss that. I miss her. Kat and Mia. Mia and Kat. The dynamic duo back in middle school, but we weren't in middle school anymore. And we weren't Kat and Mia, Mia and Kat any longer. We weren't friends anymore.

My back stiffened to attention as Mia dropped the lipstick back into a small black bag. She slipped the bag into the side pocket of her backpack, all while keeping her eyes on the mirror in front of her, occasionally shifting a glance at the stalls behind her. I pondered for a second if she sensed someone hiding behind one of the closed doors. She gave no sign or had the urge to look.

She let out a tiresome sigh, letting her shoulders wilt with exhaustion. I bet she was wishing she was anywhere but here. She was once a cheerful person. A person full of life and ambition. A laugh that stayed with you for a long time. She turned and walked toward the exit, pausing for a second then reached for the door handle. The small room filled with chatter as the door swished open. Mia shifted the backpack onto her shoulder. A single piece of paper fluttered to the floor. The folded note came out of the open zippered pocket of Mia's backpack.

Once the door closed, the room fell silent. I quickly unlocked the stall door, raced over to the piece of paper, and picked it up. Mia's name was scribbled on the outside of the note. My fingers searched for the edge of the paper to open it when the door to the restroom swung open. My heart erupted inside my chest, knocking against the bones of my ribs. I quickly cupped the paper in my hand and shoved it into the back pocket of my jeans. Then rushed to the sink to wash my hands. I glanced over my shoulder and spotted two girls from the cheerleading squad. Their laughter cut-off the moment they saw me standing there. Running water filled the awkwardness in the air. I hadn't meant to stare at them.

“What are you looking at?” asked the brunette, with a look of disgust.

I wanted to say, “I don’t know; I’m trying to figure that out.” Unless you’re egging for a punishment, you never sass a cheerleader. They were friends with all the jocks if you get my drift. So, I turned away, finished washing my hands, dried them, and left the restroom without saying a word.

Once in the hall, my right hand slipped into the back pocket of my jeans. I touched the thick-papered square. I wanted to hide somewhere and read it, but the other part of me wanted to give the note back to Mia who was heading down the hallway in the opposite direction. Kids swiveled around as she walked past them. Could she feel their eyes on her? Hear the gasps and whispers filling the air and seeping into her ears? If she did, she didn’t show any kind of reaction.

I shifted my eyes to the classroom in front of me, strolled across the hall, and through the opened door. Trevor was sitting at a desk in the third row. His neck was lying on the metal back rest and his eyes were closed. My cheeks lifted as my lips parted way for an uncontrollable smile. I hurried past and sat two seats diagonally from him.

Minutes later, I lifted my eyes from my cell phone. Mia stood beside Trevor, stiff as a board. His chest expanded as he took in a deep, aspirated breath. His eyebrows twitched as if he’d eaten the most delicious food. A smile spread across his face. Did he smell her standing there? Smell the sweet fragrance of her perfume lingering in the air? His eyes jerked open, and he sat upright. They stared at one another. The smile disappeared from his face and his mouth fell open.

“Mia, what happened to you?” Trevor whispered.

He sounded like he was about to cry. Had he not seen her in the weeks before school? Why had they broken up? I lived across the street from Mia. I had watched from behind the curtain of

my bedroom window each time Trevor came to visit her. But then, I remembered her parents not letting him inside their house two weeks ago. There was shouting, then Trevor sauntered down the sidewalk. He climbed back into his car and drove away. Obviously, I didn't know what was going on or what had happened, but now it had me thinking. Did they believe he did something to her? I was sure he wasn't the cause to whatever was going on with them, but I couldn't be sure. I had been gone for three months. I know they were in love. There was no way he would ever hurt her. Would he?

Mia hurried past him and sat at the back of the room. She dropped the backpack on the floor against the leg of the chair and laid her head on her arm across the desk. People were looking at her. They were talking about her. What secret was she hiding? My chest ached. Even though I shouldn't care, I did. A small part of me wished that she and I were still friends. Then I could help her through whatever this was, but that bridge had burned a long time ago.

# Three

Trevor hopped from his seat and bolted out the door the second the bell rang. Strange, I assumed he would want to talk to Mia with everything that had happened between them. He had spent most of class looking over his shoulder back at her. What was more important than Mia? What was he hiding? I needed to find out.

I hurried from my seat and followed Trevor down the hall, zigzagging through the crowd of students. My body bounced off someone's chest and I stumbled backward, knocking into another student. This was turning out to be a brutal day.

"Sorry," I murmured.

Arching my neck, I glanced up at this tall person. It was the same boy who had bumped into me outside. *Great.* I peered around the guy as Trevor disappeared around the corner. I moaned, looking back up at the boy. The more I analyzed his features, the more he looked like a man rather than a boy. He seemed too old to go to this school, but most kids these days looked older than they were.

"Excuse me," I growled, positioning my feet in flight mode.

The boy stared at me for a long moment then stepped aside. There was something in his eyes. The way he held his posture. A shiver swept over me. I didn't know him. I hadn't seen him at our school before today. Was he a new kid? He wasn't carrying a backpack or any books. Maybe I shouldn't have snapped at him like I did. Being a new kid in a new school was hard, it was stressful.

But I wasn't going to stand here and apologize or be his friend, besides he's the one that stepped in front of me, not the other way around. I had things to do. Like finding out what was going on with Trevor.

I dashed away, my hair blowing behind me as I raced down the hall, leaving the guy in my dust. My stomach soured as I felt him watching me. I didn't have time to waste, looking to see if he was. Speeding down the hall, I turned the corner where Trevor had gone, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Damn it!" I muttered under my breath. I had lost him. I was about to turn away when I spotted Paige Ziel, the Class President, talking to Jim Covinski, my ex-boyfriend.

My mouth was left gaped open for so long that it felt like it was filled with sand. What the hell? Was he dating her now? He wasn't Paige's type. He was a geek who loved photography. My geek, not anyone else's, but we were no longer together, which was my choice, not his.

Truth, I never stopped liking him. I had only wanted space. That was all. I didn't expect him to find someone else and replace me so soon. Yes, granted it had been three months; despite that, when you love a person, you don't give up on them. You try to get them back, or at least let them know you're still interested. I guess that was what I get for leaving town over the summer.

Keeping my head down, but my eyes glued to them, I slinked in closer. Yes, it was none of my business, but it was in some sense. When it came to matters of the heart, you needed to know. Nothing and no one else mattered.

"Hey, can we go somewhere and talk?" Paige asked.

Jim's eyes widened.

Maybe they're not together. Then why did she want to talk to him?

"Yeah, where do you want to go?" His eyes zoomed across the crowd of students. I quickly ducked behind The Fridge who stood in front of me. I wondered for a split second if Jim was looking for me. No, I doubted he even still cared about me. Any idiot could see he had moved on. Shifting my head, I peeked around The Fridge and watched.

"Follow me," Paige replied and twirled around, walking down the hall. She opened a set of double doors that led into the stairwell.

I hurried in their direction and placed a hand between the frame and door. On tiptoes, I peeked through the small window on the door. There was no one there. Where had they gone? Glancing over my shoulder, I slipped inside, still holding the door with one hand. I pressed my back against the wall. Their voices echoing all around me. They were talking on the other side of the wall. Apparently, they didn't know how to whisper.

"What do you want to talk about?" Jim asked.

"We need to do something. I think *he* knows."

My eyebrows narrowed. *He?*

"Do you think it's a good idea to talk here? I mean, what if someone comes? What if someone hears us talking?"

"Jim, no one's here but us. Stop being so paranoid," Paige hissed.

"Like you've never been afraid?"

“Really, you’re going to gripe about that now. Look, we need to come up with a plan which includes Mia and Trevor.”

“Mia?” Jim questioned, sounding a little perplexed. “Why is she involved; she wasn’t even there? Besides, can’t we handle this without them?”

“No, we need to do this as a team.”

“Can’t you leave me out of this?”

“No, you are as much a part of this as I am.”

“Okay, fine. Set it up with Mia and Trevor and I’ll meet you there.”

I flinched, placing my free hand over my ear to mute the sharp sound of paper ripping.

“Here’s my number. Text me the place and time. I need to get to class,” Jim stated.

My heart sped up as I slipped back through the open door, dashing away. I glimpsed back over my shoulder, but Jim wasn’t anywhere in sight. Had he taken a different way? It was possible he had a class upstairs and took the stairs.

Stopping in my tracks, I gazed around. I was going the wrong way. My class was in the opposite direction. I did a U-turn and rushed down the hall, entering the classroom just as the tardy bell rang. First, Trevor and Gavin, and now Jim and Paige? Whatever was going on had nothing to do with Mia. None of this made sense.

# Four

“Okay, class, settle down. I know there’s a lot to remember on the first day of school,” said the English Literature teacher.

Everyone in front of me jumped, including myself as Paige burst through the door. She was never late for anything in her life. *Well, she shouldn’t have been slumming it with my ex-boyfriend.*

“Sorry. Sorry, I lost track of time,” she announced as she hurried toward the only seat left open which was diagonal from me. “Meeting in the office with the principal.”

“Do you have a pass?”

“No, sorry. Principal Brown said it was fine. That I didn’t need one,” she said, her lips spreading wide into a smile, showing her pearly whites.

“Fine, take a seat, Miss Ziel.” The teacher turned and began writing on the chalkboard.

He accepted her story, but I didn’t. She was lying about where she was. The principal, *please*. Unless something had changed, and Jim was now the principal of the school, and his office was in the stairwell. I crossed my arms, the corner of my mouth twitched so violently that I was sure my jaw might snap. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to yank Paige’s perfectly combed ponytail or punch her in the head. Instead, I sat there letting my eyes bore into the back of her head like a bull ready to charge.

Several minutes later, a cell phone chimed, disrupting the class once again. Everyone turned toward Paige, and she stiffened like a frightened cat. In all the years I had known Paige, she had

always checked her phone. She was too good of a goody-two-shoes in my book, as if she were better than everyone else. It was about time she messed up and got into trouble. In fact, everything about Paige was off this morning.

I still couldn't believe she was hitting on Jim. How dare she! It wasn't like we were best friends, me and Paige. Hell, we weren't friends at all. But she knew we had dated, so why would she do that to me? Well, I'd have to say something to her. I didn't want to see my ex with her of all people. Anyone else but Paige. Or maybe I didn't want him with anyone but me. I pursed my lips. I wasn't sure why I'd said that I needed space and now—now he was going out with Paige. Well, I wasn't certain that they were dating, but they were being mysterious about something.

“Sorry,” Paige said again as she reached into her black, Burnello Cucinelli handbag leaning against the leg of the desk and pulled out her cell phone. The screen lit up as she silenced her phone. She opened her used literature book and propped it up on her desk to read the text. I leaned forward in my seat to get a look at the message, thankful I had good eyesight. It was from an unknown number.

**Unknown number: My Dearest Paige, you have until the end of the week and then I want your answer, or I'll tell the entire school what I know. I know you have a lot riding on this year, but how do you think Harvard will react when they find out exactly how you achieved such a high-test score on your SATs? I would hate for you not to go to your dream school.**

I blinked, registering what the text had said. Did that mean what I thought it meant? Paige pressed the phone against her chest and scanned the room. I glanced down at my notebook, pretending to take notes.

I peeked over at Paige, who was now facing forward. Her rosy cheeks had disappeared, and her skin turned ashen. She wiped her hand on the side of her high-waisted plaid tweed skirt. Whoever sent the text was blackmailing her; this I was sure of. I needed to find out who the unknown sender was.

Paige held the phone out to reread the text, then typed a message to Trevor.

*Wait, what!* my mind shouted. Trevor? Since when did she and Trevor talk? What the hell was going on? What had happened this summer? My dad had shipped me down to Florida to visit my grandparents for almost three months, only to return three weeks ago to find out that the town went to shit without me here.

Paige sent Trevor another text. She continued flipping her phone over to check the screen, but he hadn't texted her back yet. Did she expect him to jump every time she needed something? How close did they get over the summer?

The teacher cleared his throat, and I glanced up to see him staring at Paige, again. She lifted her head, and swallowed, nonchalantly dropping her phone inside her purse.

"Yes, I know it's the first day of school, but we need to get your minds reeling," the teacher said. "Next time, Miss Ziel, I will take your phone away."

"Sorry, it won't happen again," she replied.

"I trust that it won't," the teacher said.

Twisting her neck, Paige skimmed the room until our eyes met. We stared at one another before she shifted her eyes back to the book on her desk. I hope she sensed me watching her. She better watch her back around me.