

LAURA GALLIER

THE
DELUSION

WE ALL HAVE OUR DEMONS

Laura Gallier's book *The Delusion* is a very entertaining and thought-provoking read. It's full of relevant content no matter your faith perspective. I am excited to see its impact on bookshelves as well as on the big screen.

MAURICE EVANS, former NBA player

The Delusion is a great book that allows both teenagers and adults to dive in and get captivated by Owen's life. I couldn't put the book down as I found myself visualizing the details and looking forward to what happened next. The truths behind this fictional book are outstanding.

RODNEY BLAKE COLEMAN, M. ED., Assistant Principal,
Anthony Middle School

The Delusion is a page turner that I couldn't put down, and neither could my husband and teenage son. Laura Gallier has a firm grasp on the challenges that our students face today, and her novel reveals challenging, eye-opening truths.

KELLY MARTENS, president and founder, Lighthouse for Students

As a film producer, I'm constantly looking for great stories. With *The Delusion*, Laura Gallier has delivered on all levels.

CHAD GUNDERSON, Out of Order Productions

I appreciate Laura Gallier taking the time to help us remember where the real battle is. *The Delusion* was a priceless reminder that we must be constantly exchanging the lies of the enemy, and our culture, with the truth of God's Word. The book is a fresh perspective on where our true power comes from: PRAYER. That's where the real victory is gained.

WADE HOPKINS, former NFL player and Regional Vice President,
Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Laura effectively depicts the day-to-day battle between good and evil through powerful story and imagery. As a father, it is a wake-up call to the responsibility I have as the spiritual leader in the home, to recognize the battle that is raging and to stand firm for the sake of the next generation. *The Delusion* is a must-read for every father.

RICK WERTZ, founder and president, Faithful Fathering, faithfulfathering.org

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The Delusion: We All Have Our Demons

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The Delusion is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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PROLOGUE

IT WAS BAD ENOUGH I had to up and move in the middle of my senior year, but to be the new guy at a high school where eight students had committed suicide since September?

I felt cursed.

By spring break, three more students were gone. Eleven total. Dead. But that wasn't the worst of it.

Even though the students died by their own hands, their deaths were provoked—and I'm the only one who could see what tormented them. Believe me, I tried to warn people. I begged them to listen, but they wouldn't. Not even the people closest to me.

Chances are, you won't take me seriously either.

My stories are twisted and bizarre—and so terrifying that I'm sometimes told to shut up a few minutes into them—but I can't.

And who knows? Maybe you're one of the rare ones—one of a small minority willing to venture beyond your five senses to believe in what is rarely seen. What intentionally stays hidden.

What I wished I'd never seen.

It all began on a typical Monday morning.

Well, typical for me.

ONE

A DEEP, GUTTURAL GROWL jarred my eyes open. It was so dark I couldn't see a thing, but I knew where the sound was coming from. Exactly where she was, crouched low to the floor.

My psychotic dog was at it again.

I didn't move. Maybe she'd give up and lie down. For once, let it go—whatever *it* was.

But she kept on, this time with a snarl. I had no choice but to throw my sheets back and peer over the foot of my bed. “Stop it, girl. It's okay.”

Labrador retrievers are known for their protective instincts, but my dog's senses were way off. More nights than not, she'd fixate on my closed bedroom door and growl like an ax murderer was stomping down the hallway.

I tapped the mattress. “Daisy. Get up here.”

She didn't budge.

“Come on, girl. Nothing's there.”

This time, I was wrong.

My door flung open and collided with the wall, sending Daisy scurrying under the bed and me scrambling to my feet. A silhouette stood

in the doorway, framed by the hall light. This was no ax murderer. Still, I wasn't entirely relieved.

Mom.

What does she want now?

She steadied herself against the door frame, her hair still wrapped in a towel from last night's bath. Her pasty-white bird legs looked even thinner than usual.

"Owen?"

Don't step in here. Don't come in my room . . .

She usually ended up knocking something over. And somehow she'd always make it my fault.

I grabbed my cell off my nightstand—6:03 a.m.

She managed to slur a few words, but I interrupted. "Go lie down, Mom. I'll make breakfast in a minute."

A half hour later, I had gotten dressed, fed my dog, pressed start on the coffee maker, and was sorting through the mail left in a heap by the microwave. My stomach leaped into my throat when I came across a slim letter stamped with a cardinal-red logo. Finally, the letter I'd been waiting for—working my guts out for—since my freshman year.

I exhaled, trying to rid my body of nervous tension. I didn't get anxious very often, but this was Stanford. My dream university. I tore into the envelope. In less than sixty seconds, I'd know if I'd succeeded or bombed.

I read at warp speed. "Admissions Committee carefully reviewed . . . much consideration . . . regret to inform you that your application . . ."

And just like that, my number one goal was facedown in the water.

I wanted to protest, to somehow convince the letter to change its mind and rewrite itself. But reality began to seep in like the damp cold of the drizzling rain outside.

It occurred to me that maybe my mother was right, that I was too ambitious. Maybe the world had enough doctors already.

I crumpled the letter with the rest of the junk mail and hurled the wad clear across the kitchen. It felt good seeing it slam into the recycle bin.

Maybe if there hadn't been a sink full of dishes, I would have sat and sulked.

I rinsed my mom's sticky wineglasses, battling the sting of disappointment. *It's not the end of the world*, I reminded myself. I'd already been accepted to my hometown university, Boston College. Hardly a bad plan B.

And it fulfilled my second biggest goal: to get out of Masonville, Texas. For good. I'd been here three months and still couldn't get used to seeing cattle graze next to busy streets.

I stared at the wet streaks on the kitchen window and shook my head. Another dreary day. It was like a gang of storm clouds stalked this Hill Country town, bringing downpours and gloom and charcoal-colored sunsets.

But the press loved the weather. The ominous drizzle was the perfect backdrop for their never-ending news coverage about the Masonville High suicides. Sure enough, on the TV mounted to the kitchen wall, a reporter was going on and on about the deaths. She was interviewing some psychiatrist whose big words failed to offer any solutions.

What would cause a whole string of people to murder themselves? As much as I prided myself on having logical answers for everything in life, this was beyond me.

I wiped dishes dry while footage played from the last town hall meeting. Same as all the others: sobbing mothers, finger-pointing fathers, school administrators pleading with the crowd to stay calm.

Then it was back to the know-it-all reporter. She was one of the worst. With every suicide at my school, she was among the first to flock to our campus in a race to broadcast the latest tragedy. It was like having ravenous vultures perched over you every day. Watching you. Licking their beaks.

Thanks to the media, the nation was now captivated by the so-called Masonville Suicide Saga. It was reporters like this one who made our brand-new school out to be the eighth wonder of the world, the ultimate reality freak show. I'd go to class today knowing that people all over the world were on the edge of their seats, wondering who would off themselves next. And how.

This was *not* how I'd envisioned my senior year.

I texted my kind-of-girlfriend, Jess: **About to leave.** We'd been

spending time together for two months now but had yet to make it official. I wasn't big on commitment, and I guess she picked up on that.

I carried some buttered toast and a cup of coffee into the living room for my mom, who was sprawled on the sofa. Why was she lounging around while *I* made breakfast? This was my life. Most days I was pretty good at dealing with it.

Today? Not so much.

But it wasn't all bad. With the exception of her constantly correcting my grammar and making me learn a new Latin word every week or so, she pretty much left me to myself.

I set the food on the coffee table, along with a bill she needed to pay today. Two weeks ago, actually. Then I grabbed my backpack and headed out the door to see my baby—my 1986 Ducati Scrambler motorcycle. Iconic yellow panels.

My mom may have been a near failure as a parent, but she managed to do a few things right—like get me this Italian bike two years ago for my sixteenth birthday. It needed some work, but I couldn't complain. It was a classic.

Thankfully, today it started right up.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into Jess's circular driveway and stared at her mammoth house, a stark contrast to my place. It's not that my mom couldn't afford better; we were living in her childhood home because it had been willed to me by her parents. To *me*, even though my mom hadn't spoken to them in decades and I seriously had no idea they even knew I existed. The plan was to fix up the place and sell it for a decent profit. And the key to the house showed up just in time, when we needed to get out of Boston fast.

I never did understand how my mom managed to bank a six-figure income while working a few hours here and there as an online tutor—and I didn't really care to ask—but with Jess's dad, there was no mystery. He was a real-estate genius.

I sent Jess a text, then ran up the slippery steps to her front porch, holding the new pink helmet I'd gotten her. When she didn't come out, I grabbed the thick knocker on her front door and hit it against the mahogany.

And there I stood.

And stood.

By now, the drizzle had picked up. I texted Jess again, then looked toward the three-car garage. The door was open. Weird.

As usual, Mr. Thompson's Tesla was gone, but so was Mrs. Thompson's SUV. Jess's convertible was the only vehicle there. I knocked again, with my fist this time, and rang the doorbell. It chimed like a pipe organ.

Nothing.

I called Jess's cell. Straight to voice mail.

Stay calm.

I texted: **Where are you? You okay?**

I sucked in a damp, deep breath and ran into the garage. It wasn't my place to go barging in, but the door to the house was locked anyway. I tried knocking again. Still no answer.

I hurried to my bike, glancing back at the front door through the rain, then put my helmet on and sat with the engine off. I didn't care that I was getting soaked. My pulse pounded against my watch. I forced myself to breathe deep, squeezing my handlebar grips.

Most people in my shoes wouldn't be so alarmed, but most people weren't burying classmates every few weeks. Truth is, I'd been worried about Jess. She'd seemed down lately. She'd get quiet all of a sudden, and not even our inside jokes would get a laugh out of her. When I'd ask what was wrong, she'd just shrug.

I hated that.

Still no word from her, so I started my bike and pulled back onto the street. I noticed an old man in a white, vintage-looking pickup truck parked across the street. More like he noticed me—he stared a hole through me, then tipped his cowboy hat.

I gave somewhat of a nod, then took off, hardly touching the brake all the way to school. Maybe Jess's mom had driven her, but wouldn't Jess have told me? She'd been riding to school with me every day for a month now. Our bonding time, she called it.

Unwelcome images paraded through my mind, vivid and colorful. Jess on her bedroom floor, not breathing. An empty pill bottle a few inches from her open palm.

Maybe her mother is rushing her to the hospital right now.

That would explain the garage door left open, the missing SUV, Jess's parked car.

I exhaled, slow and steady. Jess would never hurt herself . . . would she?

I played my music through my earphones, but that didn't stop the mental footage. A school-wide announcement. A funeral procession. Me in my new black suit I'd worn way too many times already.

I turned my music up. *Jess is fine. I'll see her in a few minutes at school. Nothing to worry about.*

I wiped blobs of rain off my helmet visor, and by the time I neared the intersection two blocks from my school, I could see better. Unfortunately.

Religious fanatics surrounded our campus. They shouted and held up signs, protesting as if our suicidal student body were defiling their holy planet. Their posters said all kinds of cruel, idiotic things. My personal favorite: "Satan lives at Masonville High."

I shook my head. Just yesterday I'd vented to Jess that if Satan *did* exist, he'd be outside waving a sign with them.

From day one, the protesters had creeped Jess out.

"Why do they hate us so much?" she'd say.

I'd just sigh. "Who cares?"

But I had to admit the hostile scene was becoming unnerving. Especially today. My stomach hurt, sloshing with nervous adrenaline, and these people were not helping me fight the urge to puke.

A lanky guy with stringy red hair shook a fist. "It's the end of the world! Repent or perish!"

Wouldn't you know it—traffic stopped, putting me next to him for a good two minutes. Let's just say that if looks really could kill, I would have flatlined.

The light changed, and the freak ran alongside me, shouting nonsense. I made a hand gesture to let him know what I thought of his hate speech.

Eyes back on the road, I instantly squeezed hard on the brake, unable to breathe.

Television network vans lined the curb outside my school. That obnoxious reporter was scurrying to get in front of a camera.

Please . . .

Not Jess.