

THE DELUSION SERIES

THE DECEPTION



WHO CAN YOU TRUST?

LAURA GALLIER

PRAISE FOR *THE DELUSION*

Impressive debut.

PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY

A complex and gripping tale that carries a powerful punch.

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

I encourage you to read *The Delusion*. It triggers your imagination about the realities of spiritual warfare.

JACE ROBERTSON, *Duck Dynasty*

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

Other books in the series:

The Delusion

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THE DECEPTION

LAURA GALLER



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Visit Laura Gallier online at www.lauragallier.com/delusion.

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The Deception

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The Deception 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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ONE

THE SPRINGTIME SUN was beginning to melt into the dense shrubbery as I ran through the trees, sneaking quick glances over my shoulder. Eleven months after Dan Bradford hid in these woods, my property behind Masonville High, then stormed the school with two rifles on his back and a demonic army by his side, there was still no fence line to keep people off my land. No barrier to stop trespassers, human or otherwise.

I had to get off the foot-worn trail fast. Find a secluded hiding spot and stay there.

I darted behind a thick oak and pressed my back against the bark. I worried that my heavy breathing would give me away, so I shut my eyes, working to calm my nerves by focusing on a familiar mental image. My all-time favorite . . .

Ray Anne's sweet face, inches from mine, smiling up at me. Her captivating blue eyes, so full of life. A snapshot-style memory that time could never erase.

It had been 321 days since she'd offered up her life to protect another. Two others, actually—Jess and her unborn child.

I heard someone approaching, jogging toward me on what was becoming a popular trail. My eyes flashed open. I couldn't help but hope

it was the glowing old man in overalls, coming to find me and teach me something vital and profound. But I knew better. There'd been zero trace of him or his white vintage pickup since my senior year. Besides, I could hear that whoever was headed my way was dragging chains. Even after months of hearing it everywhere, the clanking sound made me cringe.

The jogger passed, unaware I was there. Also unaware that a shackle groped his neck.

A hush settled over the woods again, inviting me to return to my thoughts. Ray Anne's image came right back to me. As much as I admired the courage she'd shown on the day of the shooting, I was just as impressed with her bravery every day since. Multiple surgeries and an exhausting, painful recovery—through it all, she stayed strong. She'd even made up her mind to try to start jogging, even though walking was enough to make her wince at times.

My legs were getting as stiff as the tree trunk behind me, but I didn't budge. If Ray Anne saw me or any trace of the golden glow that surrounded my feet, it would ruin my plan. Any minute, she'd pass down this winding trail just before dusk like she did most days lately, praying and willing herself to keep going. And she'd see my sign—a neon-orange poster board I'd nailed to a moss-covered tree arching over her pathway. Surely she'd stop when she noticed the photo glued on there, a picture we'd taken the night we skipped out on our senior prom.

I'd used a ruler and a fat black marker to draw a left-pointing arrow under the picture, directing Ray Anne to a less-traveled path through the rustling trees, where she'd soon discover another sign, then another—and more pictures of us with mysterious arrows.

Any second now, she'd round the bend, no doubt dressed in one of her crazy-bright exercise tops, with running shoes to match. And I'd hear her labored breaths, the battle cry of a determined young woman.

That's when Custos interrupted.

I wasn't surprised that the familiar armored Watchman showed up—he did that most days. It was his timing that concerned me. If Ray Anne spotted him, he'd completely steal her attention away from my sign, and also, she'd know I was nearby.

This particular Watchman, with blond hair, tan skin, and piercing-light eyes, came around me so often that some months ago, I'd figured he needed a name. When I asked him what it was, his only response was a polite grin. A Watchman had spoken to me the night I shed my shackle, but after that I'd never heard one utter a word, so I had no choice but to name him myself. I decided on *Custos*—Latin for “keeper.”

And right now, that *keeper* was in the way. I knew better than to ask him to move, though. Who was I to boss him around?

I heard the steady sound of shoes pounding the dirt—no metal. As if on cue, *Custos* disappeared. That was the one and only time I was grateful he left me.

A smile crept across my face as I leaned out and sneaked a glimpse of Ray Anne, out of breath and walking now, bracing her abdomen. The glow emanating from her made a perfect circle of light on the path, highlighting her neon-orange running shoes. She glanced up at the arching tree, did a double take, then stood still, peering up at my handiwork.

Her jaw dropped, then she giggled. I grinned. Sure enough, Ray followed the arrow.

I wove through the bushes, trying not to snap any branches as I headed to the space I'd prepared in the woods. I could hear Ray Anne gasping and sighing as she followed the unfamiliar course I'd set for her.

I arrived at the small clearing—Ray Anne's final destination. It had taken some time to get rid of the lifeless ground cover left over from winter. I was glad to see that all my candles still held flames despite the breeze.

I hid in the trees off to one side, anxious to see Ray Anne's expression when she beheld my romantic gesture. I'd gotten the idea from a picture I'd happened to see on the back of some girls' magazine; only, in that picture, the candles were scattered all around. Mine were arranged in a heart-shaped pattern—100 percent my own inspiration, thank you.

Ray Anne approached with careful steps, crunching leaves. Before I could see her face, I heard her inhale, hold her breath a second, then gush, “Oh my goodness!”

She came to a stop right where I'd hoped she would, in the center of the candle heart.

That's when I stepped up behind her. She spun around and smiled up at me, stealing my breath away, as usual. We'd officially been a couple for three months now, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I still got butterflies around her.

To be honest, I envisioned being with Ray from here on out—like, for the rest of my life. First, though, I had to prove I could be a good boyfriend.

Even though I'd rehearsed my speech over and over, in the moment, it all went out the window. I just spoke as the words came. "Ray Anne, I nearly lost you, and not a day goes by that I don't thank God that you survived—that we have the chance to be together. And today, on your nineteenth birthday, I want you to know how much I care about you. That you're in my heart."

Surprisingly smooth, if I do say so myself. I took her hands and pulled them to my chest. "You mean the world to me, Ray."

Her eyes got glossy, and she gave me the biggest smile I'd ever seen. "I feel the same way about you, Owen."

She hugged me, and the aura on the ground around us was twice as bright now that we stood so close. It was a perfect moment.

But then Ray stepped back, her grin replaced by straight lips. "Owen, there's something I really need from you—for our relationship."

"Okay?" I was prepared to do anything.

She gripped my shoulders and stared me in the face like a coach about to give a key play. "Quit blaming yourself for what happened to me."

I instinctively turned my head, as if she could see shame welling up in my pupils. Of all the things she could have asked of me . . .

"Ray Anne, you got shot because I couldn't take Dan down. Nothing will ever change that."

"I chose to do what I did." She craned her neck, keeping her face in mine so that I had to make eye contact. "It's not your fault, and it breaks my heart to watch you beat yourself up about it. And believe me, I know what guilt does to a relationship." Her voice cracked with emotion.

“You know my mom still blames herself for my brother’s suicide, and it’s destroying my parents’ marriage.”

I’d seen the way Mrs. Greiner pulled away when her husband tried to hug her or take her hand, like she didn’t deserve the tiniest amount of affection.

I sighed and raked my fingers through my gelled hair. This was far from the first time we’d had a conversation like this. I had no idea why it was so hard to let go of a grudge against myself.

I guess Ray could tell I was struggling. She put her hand on my chest, over my heart. “Owen, I’ll say it for the millionth time, even though I never once blamed you to begin with.” Her palm on my chest was warm. It felt like kindness was spilling from her soul into mine. “I forgive you. Completely.”

I wanted to believe and accept her words this time, but it felt like they slammed into a steel wall that kept anything from getting to the guilt and shame I carried inside me.

Still, I was determined to work this out. “Look, I don’t know how to force regret away, but I can make you a promise.” I cupped Ray’s soft face in my palms. “I will do my very best to quit torturing myself over what happened.”

It was all I had to offer. I searched Ray’s face for a sign that she was satisfied and believed me, especially given my track record. I’d broken some major promises to her before. But that was the old me.

Finally, she nodded, her grin coming back. “I believe you.”

And suddenly I could exhale. I tried to keep my huge smile on the right side of stupid.

A normal couple would have sealed the deal with a long kiss, but Ray Anne was still saving her first kiss for marriage. I’d mostly learned to live with it. I held out hope that someday, I’d be the guy who won the right to give her that first kiss.

I fantasized about that sometimes. Okay, maybe a lot.

I settled for another hug, then changed the subject. “I have something for you.” I pulled out a gift bag I’d hidden in the brush. No tissue paper, but at least it was sparkly.

Ray Anne reached inside and gasped when she saw the photo book I'd made especially for her.

"Your mom helped me gather the pictures."

She stared at the cover, her bottom lip quivering, but still smiling. Nearly every photo she'd ever taken with her brother was in there, from Lucas's birth until a month or so before he died.

"I've been wanting to make something like this." She flipped through the first few pages, taking deep breaths. She cleared her throat. "This is incredible."

She brought the book closer to her face and stared at a photo taken when she looked to be about four and Lucas was a toddler. They were looking up at the camera, peeking out from inside a toy box. Ray Anne pressed a balled fist to her lips, and a tear spilled down her fingers.

She closed the album. "I can't wait to look at this from cover to cover later, by myself."

"Sure. I understand."

"How can I ever thank you?" She blinked fast, working to dry her eyes.

"I'm just glad you like it." I reached into my pocket. "I want you to have this, too."

I pulled out a small velvet bag, then opened it and held up the silver chain necklace I'd bought for her, a choker with two cool-looking, interlocked loops. "The circles symbolize eternity," I told her, "and things that last forever." Like my feelings for her, I wanted to say, but I didn't want to come on too strong.

Ray Anne turned around so I could fasten the necklace around her neck, then faced me again, running her fingers back and forth over the chain. "I love it, Owen. Seriously, I'll wear it every day."

It was another kissable moment, but oh well. Instead we stood there hugging, swaying in the mild breeze until we were basically slow dancing. We didn't need music.

The sun had nearly set now, and the trees were shadows against the darkening sky. Still, neither of us was anxious to leave—until a chilled gust ushered a rancid smell our way. We let go of each other and looked

toward the last shred of sunlight barely visible through branches. We were downwind from a Creeper.

“We should go.” Ray Anne started blowing out candles, and then so did I. It’s not that we were scared—we knew our light repelled Creepers. But who wants to hang out in the woods at night with a demon, maybe more than one?

Our own illumination lit our immediate path as we walked hand in hand down the main trail toward our vehicles, keeping a pace that was comfortable for Ray Anne. I shined my cell’s flashlight around and above our heads. I admit I tensed up when a pair of glowing eyes shined back at me from a tree, but it was only an animal. A raccoon, I think.

Ray Anne covered her nose. “There’s definitely more than one Creeper here.” The putrid smell was so strong now, I had to agree. But where were they? They usually stuck close to Masonville High, and we were over a mile from there.

Ray Anne stopped walking. “Listen.”

A low, ominous, monotone hum made the hairs on the back of my neck stiffen while rousing my curiosity. Ray Anne grabbed my hand and pulled me off the path. “This way.”

I let her lead the way as we followed the creepy chorus, fighting through a dense section of woods where entangled vines made it nearly impossible to walk. The mammoth cobwebs didn’t help.

Finally we crouched behind a boulder, spying on a bizarre, disturbing scene in the moonlight.