

THE DELUSION SERIES

THE DEFIANCE

FACE
YOUR
FEARS...
OR RUN.

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

The Deception

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THE DEFIANCE

LAURA GALLIER



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The Defiance

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*You can't cast out a broken heart,
and you can't heal a demon.*

DANA GRINDAL

ONE

NIGHTMARES WERE NOTHING NEW for me, but this one felt different, like more than just my subconscious randomly projecting terror. I was fully aware that I was dreaming, but every color was vivid; each dead leaf grazing my shoulders looked sharp and real. The lighting was strange though—neither day or night, but an unsettling charcoal gray.

I was standing alone, shivering, in a cornfield just beyond the Masonville city limits. There was nothing scary looming over me or chasing me down, yet fear had me by the throat, making it hard to swallow. I walked row after countless row of tall, withered stalks, searching for something.

But what?

The wind scraped sandy particles against my unshaven face. I held my hands open at my chest, and a sticky airborne substance began clinging to my palms and fingers. I recognized the ashen-gray death dust, but what was that black grit in the mix? The stuff started stinging—like needles were stabbing my face and hands, burrowing into my skin.

I turned and faced a small, dilapidated house in the distance, its white wood slats barely hanging on around shattered windows. The sound of running water compelled me to approach. The knob was missing, but I pushed the thin door open—what remained of it. A faucet was pouring over a small sink, allowing me to rinse the gritty death-dust off

my hands. I still had no clue what I was supposed to find in this cornfield or why I was plagued by such crippling dread, but I couldn't shake the intuition that this nightmare held meaning.

The shimmering water—the same temperature as my hands—brought instant relief to my skin, but before I could enjoy the sensation a sudden movement above my head startled me. A horde of grungy brown bats that reeked like rotten meat swarmed in circles above the few rafters that were all that remained of the roof. There had to have been at least a hundred, each of their bodies the size of my fist. They spied down on me with beady red eyes. Bizarre as it was, I sensed they were mocking me. Their laughter sounded like a smoker's cough.

One by one, the devilish creatures began swooping down, colliding with my head and face. I swatted at them, but they didn't flinch. More came at me, mouths open, fangs bared. I ran out of the house and dropped to the ground, crossing my arms over my head. Tucking my chin, I saw the supernatural light around my feet, a welcome reminder that I was at the mercy of no evil, no matter its form.

For a fleeting second, a sense of reassurance displaced my fear.

But then I saw him.

The unmistakable purpose of the dream. The mystery I'd been searching for.

Inches from my aura, a pale face was jutting out from the dirt, frozen and dormant. A festering mouth, shriveled nose, and depraved eyes were all that breached the soil, along with a few long wisps of bone-white hair, swaying in the tainted breeze. Several inch-long black spikes poked up from the buried forehead—a blasphemous crown of thorns.

Molek.

The petrifying Creeper King lay motionless beneath the dirt, one eyelid drooping lower than the other while his jaw gaped open. His pointed tongue lay limp against a row of sharp teeth. His features were more human in proportion than those of the demons that formed his ragtag army, such a mix of feminine and masculine that his subjects could have just as easily hailed him as their queen.

Was Molek, the Lord of the Dead, dead himself?

Could a spirit-world principality actually die?

I took deep breaths, shielding my mouth with cupped hands, refusing to panic at the mere sight of him. The bats flew around me in every direction, faster now, a hurricane of hostility. I thought perhaps they were in turmoil over Molek's defeat.

Then, like a gallon of spoiled coffee being poured into a twelve-ounce cup, the bats dove headfirst into Molek's mouth, disappearing down his throat as if his lifeless chest, concealed underground, was somehow a vast cave. I thought I might barf.

I wanted to escape—to wake up—but the dream wasn't done.

As the last bat made its plunge, I heard something charging toward me, stomping with such ferocity that the ground shook. And it was coming from all directions, like I was surrounded—not just me, but all of Masonville. I could feel the intense hatred this force had toward me. Its determination to devour my town.

I braced myself, prepared to encounter a massive invasion of Creepers. Or some gruesome manifestation of evil I'd never laid eyes on before. But it was only a shadow, billowing toward me through the cornstalks like haunted smoke. It enveloped me and wrapped my face in icy darkness, whispering at me in high-pitched voices in a language I couldn't understand. But I didn't freak out—not until the whispering shadows started choking me. Freezing, invisible claws constricted my airway.

I hit my knees. I tried to yell but couldn't make a sound.

That's when everything went completely black, and I feared I'd gone blind. I flailed my arms, swinging fists in the dark.

My lungs became so desperate for air, I was sure they were about to explode. Then an electric-red bolt of lightning pierced the darkness above my head and struck my right forearm with an explosive boom.

Before the pain had time to register, I sat straight up in bed, my mouth open even wider than Molek's had been in the dream, gasping for breath. My dog, Daisy, whined at the foot of the stiff mattress.

I reached for my phone but still didn't know my way around the musty room well enough to find the bedside table right away. I'd moved out of my upscale apartment and into this hole-in-the-wall two weeks ago, and even though I'd save thousands on rent over the next few months, I was already second-guessing my decision.

I'd nobly agreed to live in this free makeshift room in the back of Ray Anne's church—upstairs, behind the sanctuary—because of some recent acts of vandalism against the church. Also, it was helpful to lie low here instead of at my apartment after my identity had been outed at the occult's auction block.

Pastor Gordon was working to raise money to renovate the late-80s building, which would include a new high-tech surveillance system. In the meantime, I'd volunteered to keep an eye on things at night. If anyone tried to break in again, it was my job to call 911. But there was no helpline to dial when a nightmare invaded my sleep.

I'd been having them every night since I'd moved in here, but tonight's was the most heart pounding by far.

I breathed a little easier when glimmering light radiated through the sheer curtains covering the only window in the room—a set of paned-glass double doors leading to an outdoor balcony overlooking a grassy field and pond. Custos was out there, keeping watch. Still, I was way too on edge to lie back down. For one, this cluttered room didn't feel right. It had given me the creeps since the moment I'd moved in, even though it was in a church and I had yet to see a Creeper or their hateful graffiti on the property. And now that dream . . .

I replayed the whole thing in my mind—Molek buried and lifeless while another form of terror closed in. Something just as vicious and powerful. Maybe more so. And that dramatic blast of lightning.

For months—four, to be exact—I'd nearly driven myself crazy wondering what had become of Molek since the night I'd seen Watchmen drag him and his spirit-realm throne off my forested acreage. Had Ray Anne and I managed to succeed the next day at following the instructions in Arthur Washington's prophetic letter, Molek and his Creeper army would be banished from Masonville, Texas, for good—in which case, it wouldn't have mattered to me where they were now. Well, except that it sickened me to think some other town might have Molek lording over their spiritual atmosphere in furious retribution over having lost ours. But since I'd seriously fumbled the mission that day back in April, I wasn't surprised that my acreage, along with Masonville High, remained crawling with Creepers.

Unfortunately, I was now faced with Arthur's disturbing warning outlining the consequence for failing our mission. "Unthinkable darkness and sorrow" would come to Masonville—hence my obsession with finding out where Molek was and what his next move would be. He'd already done such devastating damage; I couldn't imagine what *unthinkable darkness and sorrow* could possibly look like.

I leaned and flipped on the nearest lamp, then opened the squeaky drawer on the nightstand where I'd tucked Arthur's decades-old envelope with my name on it. No, it didn't literally say *Owen Edmonds*—or *Ray Anne Greiner*. But both she and I remained convinced the letter inside had been written specifically for us, decades before we were born.

I reread the final statement for the millionth time, the sobering prediction that still seemed absurd to me: *What happens in Masonville will affect the spiritual condition of the rest of the nation and the world.*

The whole planet of people. No pressure.

My thoughts dragged back to my nightmare. The longer I mulled over it, the more unlikely it seemed. Bats mocking me? Molek dead and buried? Far-fetched, for sure—even for the paranormal realm. And yet the location of the dream carried a hint of hope. Molek was outside Masonville city limits. I considered the possibility that the Watchmen had banished and beat him so badly, he was no longer a threat to our town. Even if another wave of horror was rolling in, it would be satisfying to know Molek was deported and disarmed.

With my knees bent at my chest, I tapped my foot against the mattress, eyeing the cluttered bookshelf across from me. What had made me think this dream was any different from all the other nerve-racking ones I'd had? The only answer: a gut feeling. The problem was, my gut had led me in the wrong direction before—*way* wrong. But sitting here alone in this cramped space, my bedsheets in a wad around me, it nagged me still.

I'd been asking God to reveal where Molek was, to give me an unmistakable sign of some kind. Had he answered me in a dream?

I wanted to jump out of bed, drive past the town's *Welcome* sign, and start searching cornfields, but if I went now, at four o'clock, I couldn't bring Ray Anne—and I wanted her with me. It's not like I was afraid

to go alone or before sunup. It's that Ray and I were a team, inseparable partners in the mission to defend Masonville and protect the world.

I wanted to be more—as in, life partners—and last spring I'd gone so far as to get down on one knee, bare my soul, and practically beg her to marry me. She'd just stared at me a minute, while her family and friends stood by, mouths open, but she finally gave a tearful reply. "I want to say yes, Owen, I really do. It's just . . . this feels rushed." She hugged me, then drove the dagger the rest of the way through me: "I'm so sorry. I can't."

It crushed me, but it's not like I could really blame her. We were only nineteen, and plus, I'd done some idiotic things and had a lot to prove. So we committed to doing the boyfriend-girlfriend thing and giving our relationship more time.

I switched off the retro-looking lamp, but hard as I tried, couldn't go back to sleep. Finally, as much as I wanted to wait for Ray before venturing into the cornfields, I gave up on that, too.

I threw on jeans and a T-shirt I grabbed out of a dresser that had to have come from Goodwill, then shut and locked the door to my room and traveled the narrow second-story hallway. I turned a corner, then walked to the center of the old cherrywood choir loft—unused for at least a decade—overlooking the sanctuary from the back. I stared down at the empty pews, the long benches as comfortable as back braces and old-fashioned as phone booths. They were barely visible in the dim floor lighting. Four sections, some two dozen rows each. *Surely if vandals were coming tonight*, I told myself, *they'd have made their move before now*. The previous break-ins had all happened before 2:00 a.m.

The longer I stood there, the only person in the entire building, the more I battled the disturbing sense that I wasn't alone—a familiar feeling I'd endured off and on since I'd become a spirit-world sensor. But it was getting stronger lately. And right now, it was like I could feel someone staring up at me from among the pews. Something threatening. It was so tangible, I could have pointed to the exact spot where the unwelcome gaze was coming from: the center aisle down below, three or four rows from the stage.

The experience played on one of my worst fears—that I might

somehow lose my spiritual sight. Or just as dreaded, that a certain species of Creeper could somehow elude it. But I had to consider that the sensation could have been nothing but a paranoid superstition, symptoms of post-traumatic stress brought on by all the repeat exposure to spirit-world terror I'd suffered.

Be with me, Lord.

I'd been going out of my way lately to react to situations with faith, not doubt. A new outlook for me.

A text hit the burner phone my father had given me, and yeah, I jumped. It was from an unlisted number—aka, him: **I hope you are well and you're seeing things improve in your town. Have you been able to team up with other Lights, as you call them? It's the strategy we've employed here, and it's proving fruitful. I think of you often.**

I'd only met my dad for the first time a few months ago, but I already knew this was so like him. Texting me in the middle of the night from Uganda, offering advice to help me turn the tables on the spiritual war raging in Masonville. His advice was usually easier said than done, but at least he cared enough to give it.

Turning my back on the feeling of being watched, I slipped out a side door and got on my Ducati. Other than the rumble of my motorcycle's engine, there was no sound or traffic this time of night. I kept checking my rearview mirrors. I swear, a black Suburban had been tracking me lately. But right now, it was just me and the town of Masonville, alone together. Her, a captive to painful secrets and tormentors, and me, dead set on freeing her and exposing decades of corruption.

The string of local abductions had come to a sudden, suspicious stop after the night I'd become an eyewitness to the selling of human beings—the horrific exploitation of teenagers and children. The elaborate ceremony had ended in chaos, scattering the buyers, members of Masonville's secret occult society, but there was now an increase in kidnappings in surrounding counties—they hadn't stopped poaching children, only switched up their hunting grounds. And since they'd all seen my face that fateful night, I knew I'd better watch my back.

I turned onto the main stretch of highway that led to the outskirts of town and gassed it. My former tutoring student Riley came to mind.

I wondered if she'd been taken down this very road against her will on a night as dark as this one, only to be auctioned off states away, purchased through some encrypted wire transfer by a shell of a human being who'd already sold his own soul to the kingdom of darkness. She was only seventeen.

What kind of person *buys* another person?

There were multiple situations I couldn't think about for long without getting nauseated, and Riley was one of them. I still saw her face around town now and then, on tattered *Missing Person* flyers. Like the other victims, she deserved justice, even if all that was left of her was her discarded body. I winced at the thought.

The stoplight next to Masonville High changed to red, and I succumbed to the pointless delay, eyeing the school and surrounding moonlit acreage. As usual, there were Creepers scurrying up the building like roaches and clinging to the suicide memorial fence, still covered in pictures and stuffed animals and faded fake flowers that dated back to my senior year. But the Creepers had a new area to roam now—the freshly-bulldozed field behind the high school. Soon, foundations would be poured for a new middle school and elementary. About the worst place in America to construct buildings to house more students.

My mother's parents had donated more than enough land to the school district to allow for additional campuses, a highly deliberate move on my grandparents' part, for sure. They knew an extreme infestation of unseen forces of destruction covered the land, lying in wait to devour souls—the younger, the better. Sick as it was, my grandparents had gone out of their way to ensure that evil's appetite for human suffering would remain fed, even after they were dead.

I still owned the 1,253 acres they'd willed to me that bordered the school district's property, but of course I had no say-so whatsoever about what the city chose to build on their side of the boundary line. Now that the oil and gas industry was more profitable than ever in Masonville and the teen suicides seemed to be a thing of the past, people were breathing easier and talking expansion. On top of that, an increase in local law enforcement was credited with stopping the abductions, conveniently blamed on organized crime, and just like that, the bond passed

practically overnight to build two more state-of-the-art, shark-infested schools (spiritually speaking, of course).

I was sure I wasn't the only one in Masonville who had concerns over putting new campuses right next to one that had suffered a mass shooting, coupled with the highest suicide rate in the country, just two school years ago. But by now, I understood: the secret society ran this town, not the everyday people. It was the same underground occult group my grandparents had raised my mom in before she ran away at sixteen years old.

I pulled off the road just past the *Welcome to Masonville* sign. It seemed like a lifetime ago since I'd first seen that sign, when my mom and I moved here from Boston. Not long after that, my eyes were opened to the invisible realm. In those early days, I'd have given anything to get my ignorant, blind life back, but now, my supernatural awareness was as vital to me as my physical senses. More so at times.

The first cornfield outside town stood some fifteen feet back from the road, not shriveled and dead like it had been in my dream but growing ripe for harvest. I concealed my bike among the stalks, then walked one identical row after another. The air was clear and crisp in the sparse moonlight, not an ominous, gritty gray.

I wished I'd have thought to grab my big flashlight. The constant aura on the ground around me was glorious, but not far-reaching enough to show me much. I put my cell in flashlight mode and swept it around. I was used to seeing huge shadow-like streaks darting in the night, but that was on my forested land, defiled by centuries of violence, overrun with Creepers. Out here, beyond the city limits, all was still, as vacant as the streets on my drive over.

I so desperately wanted the same atmosphere for my property and the schools built on its soil.

Someday.

There was no path to follow, and I contemplated whether to change directions or keep forging straight ahead. I took a random right, second-guessing my decision now to come here at all—to take a dream so seriously that I was out of bed at five in the morning, searching a vast cornfield for a spirit being's revolting face in the dirt.

Am I really doing this?

I ignored logic for the moment and traveled deeper into the maze of crops, stopping at times and using my foot to slide fallen leaves back, exposing the bare ground. Nothing but soil, every time. Had I expected to simply stumble on Molek?

Time marched on, and as the first hues of sunlight colored the sky, I spun on my heel, content to give up and get back to the church and get some sleep while I still could. But then, to my left, I spotted an old weathered structure among the rows of corn. A little dilapidated house with white wood slats barely hanging on around shattered windows.