

## Chapter 1

### Jessie

My heavy social studies book slid from my lap and thudded to the floor as mom's pleading voice needled its way through my bedroom walls.

"You're overreacting, he wasn't eyeing me," Mom said.

I swung my bare feet down and dug my toes into the shabby blue carpet. Grabbing the black elastic band from my wrist, I pulled my hair into a low ponytail and took a deep breath.

"You were flirting with him. I watched you," Dad said.

Perched on the side of my bed, I listened as my parent's loud exchange progressed down the hall, past my bedroom and into theirs. I reached down and shoved my feet into nearby running shoes. I always knew when I needed to run.

"That's ridicu—" Mom's angry voice cut off mid-word. Silence. All the blood rushed to my head as I flew across the hall and skidded to a stop at their door. My hand hovered in the air just an inch from the doorknob.

The bed springs creaked, and Mom gasped as I pushed the door open. Dad had pinned Mom to the foot of the bed and was choking her. Her eyes bugged out of her head, and her pantyhose clad legs kicked uselessly

against him. I bounced on the balls of my feet and flapped my hands like a panicked bird. Don't scream, don't scream. I edged my way to the side of the room and used my foot to push off from the wall. I charged toward him with my hands outstretched and shoved him with all the strength I had. The smell of whiskey and bitter body odor stung my nose as I pushed against his damp t-shirt. He toppled off the side of the bed, while my momentum slammed me into their dresser. Pain shot through my shoulder. Grunting, I pushed off the dresser and scrambled to the bathroom in the hall.

The main bathroom was the only place in the house where I could lock him out. His anger would turn toward me now. I don't know why that seemed better. I had to help her.

My thumb kept the lock on the bathroom door pushed in, as my hand gripped the handle. Dad reached the flimsy, fake wood door and pounded his fists against it.

"I'm gettin' in!" he screamed.

His body crashed against the door. The sound and vibration rattled through me. I knew he would get a wire hanger and try to pop out the button that locked the door. The lock offered little protection against the looming, drunk maniac hell bent on getting to me. I didn't want to imagine what he would do.

Sweat beaded on my forehead. I swatted my hair to the side and pressed my shoulder against the door, digging my tennis shoes into the pink carpeting. I desperately wished Brian was home to help me. Dad's fist slammed into the door again.

“Stop it! Stop now,” Mom said.

“Get out of my way,” he said. Dad’s retreating voice told me he was headed to their bedroom. He was going for the wire hanger.

This was it. Swallowing hard, I turned the knob. The door opened soundlessly, and I sprinted toward the sliding glass door in the family room. My tennis shoes silent against the carpet. As I rounded the corner to the family room, he screamed my name from the hallway.

A second later, I grabbed the door handle, slid it open and disappeared into the darkness.

By the time he made it to the sliding glass door, I was crouched behind the bushes in the Gallagher’s back yard. The smell of mulch filled my nose as I got up on the balls of my feet with one hand pressed into the dirt to steady myself. If he did come looking, I would have time to run further away. With no streetlamps, only a few dim porch lights broke up the darkness.

Dad stepped onto the back porch. “Get back here!” he yelled.

Mom slapped his shoulder. “The whole neighborhood can hear you. Come in the house.”

I cringed. The odds he would hit her back were very good, and that would mean I’d have to run back to the house to defend her, again, which is how this whole night started. He jerked away from her and stumbled back into the house.

I eased out of my crouched position and blood flow tingled back into my feet. I moved to the back wall of the Gallagher’s house, and hid behind their hydrangea shrubs. I wasn’t sure if Dad would get industrious and find a flashlight to come and look for me.

Now I would wait until he passed out. I dimmed the light on my phone and hoped Brian wouldn’t come home anytime soon. At least my brother had been spared tonight’s adventure.

The warm air made my wait comfortable. I stared straight ahead into the darkness, listening to my heart rate slow, my mind blank. I wriggled my butt searching for a softer place and rested my head against the brick wall. The TV, and the voices of our neighbors, Ted and Alyssa, broke into my thoughts. The peaceful monotony of their conversation was oddly comforting.

Sometime later, my phone dinged: *Come back, he’s asleep.*

I didn't acknowledge the message but headed toward our house. I crept up to their bedroom window, placed my hands lightly against the brick and listened.

The familiar sound of my dad's loud snoring greeted me. My muscles relaxed a bit. Mom stood by the sliding glass door waiting for me.

"I'm sorry. You okay?" she said. I glared at her stress-lined face and pressed-together lips. She clasped and unclasped her hands in perpetual motion.

"Whatever. Nothing changes, so don't talk to me," I replied.

She hovered behind me as I huffed back to my room to grab a blanket and pillow off my bed. The temporary bed on the bathroom floor wasn't comfy, but at least I would have some barrier between me and my father. I never knew when the other shoe, full of horrible, slimy, dead things, would drop.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Jessie**

I folded the initial chapters of the paperback book under my current page and immersed myself in Pecola's black and white world once again.

“What’re you reading?” Rebecca used her finger to push the book cover into view.

“*The Bluest Eye*,” it’s on the school’s banned book list. I’m reading them all one by one,” I said.

“Any good?” Rebecca asked.

“It’s brutal, but interesting,” I said.

What I didn’t say was that I could relate to the dark, hateful humans portrayed in the book. I leaned against the wall and waited for the first bell to ring. Our high school, Valley Christian, was a long, two-story, cinder-block rectangle surrounded by mature trees and dense woods. The pervasive greenery seeped in through the mostly glass entrance, tinging the school lobby an eerie gray green. The white halls and florescent lighting made it feel a little institutional, but I didn’t mind. I was safe here.

I winced and adjusted my shoulder against the white-washed wall. The memory of my crash into my parent’s dresser flashed through my mind. The cold penetrated the painful bruise and brought some relief. Rebecca didn’t notice as she dug in her backpack.

My eyes locked with the large blue eyes of a boy across the hall. He was very cute —thick black brows, black hair. Tall too, around six feet.

I glanced away. For the past two weeks, we'd been playing this staring game. It gave me an odd sense of control.

"Don't look now, but see the guy across the hall?" I asked.

Rebecca, my bestie and neighbor since kindergarten, shifted her position and pretended to stretch. "Which one?"

"Black hair."

"Ah, okay," Rebecca said.

"He stares at me every morning." I kept my eyes glued to her and pretended to be unaware of him.

"He's cute," she said

"Yeah, he is. Maybe he'll actually speak to me at some point."

"You're too scary." She elbowed me and we both laughed.

The bell rang, and we joined the mass of kids streaming up the stairwell to the second floor. I made it to my locker, spun the lock's dial and opened it. I pulled out what I needed from my backpack.

Ally and Kristi, my blond counterparts in shenanigans, stood at their lockers as well. The beauty of lockers being assigned by grade and last name in alphabetical order ensured we were always together.

"What's up?" I said as we walked toward homeroom together.

“A whole lot of nothing, as usual. I’m so tired, seriously, I could lie down in this hallway and go to sleep,” Kristi said.

“What time did you go to bed?” I asked.

“Around midnight or so.”

“You know, simple math tells you if you go to bed at midnight and get up at six in the morning, you’re not getting enough sleep.”

“Whatever, don’t talk to me about math.” She kicked her leg up from behind and hit my butt with her foot. Good thing my ass wasn’t bruised.

“So polite.” I gave her a mock smile and slid into my desk sideways to continue our conversation. Holly, who sat across from me, joined in as well. I propped my feet on Kristi’s chair and leaned toward them.

“I’ve followed him on Twitter and Instagram. I messaged him a few times, but no response,” Holly frowned.

“Who?” I asked.

“Alex Corbin.”

I had heard the name but wasn’t sure who it was. “Oh, you’ll have to point him out to me.”

“Will do.” She winked at me. “He’s hot.”

I loved her flirty attitude. We shared the same first period, so when the bell rang, we walked to our first class together.

As we rounded the corner, her eyes darted to the side and she whispered, "That's him."

I followed her glance to the boy with the big blue eyes. My mouth became sawdust dry. He stood outside his classroom, joking with his friends. I hadn't noticed before, but apparently, he had class right next to me.

"Oh, okay." I scratched my neck. Here come the hives.

We lingered in the doorway. "You've got to give him my number and ask him for his," Holly said.

She leaned into me and insistently pressed the note with her number into my palm. I had to give her a little credit; she wasn't afraid to go for what she wanted – via a COURIER.

"What? You want me to just go up to him and ask for his number?"

*She's lost her mind.*

"Yes," she said bluntly, and pushed me toward Alex and his group of friends. "Hurry up before the bell rings."

Her earnest face demanded action. No use arguing, she was going to get her way no matter what. I shrugged.

Fine. I peeled my tongue off the roof of my mouth.

Alex moved toward me as soon as he noticed my approach.

“Hey, uh...my friend Holly wants me to give you her number, and she hoped to get yours,” I stammered.

Holy crap. We're five years old.

I kept looking from the floor to his face and then back again. The black and white tile floor was suddenly interesting.

“Who wants my number?” He reached out his hand to take the note from me.

I turned to indicate Holly, standing in the doorway of our classroom, with her pretty face and long wavy red hair. She smiled tentatively at us.

“Okay. Thanks,” he said.

Although my eyes were on the floor, I could feel his stare burn into my brain.

“But I want your number,” he said.

My head snapped up. His eyes sparkled under his thick, black brows, and his black hair curled slightly around his face. My cheeks flushed with heat.

Asking for my number was not how this was supposed to go. Holly would kill me.

“Uh... okay,” I said. Speech had deserted my brain. I backed away toward my class. The second bell sounded. I chanced a look back; he hadn’t moved. He stood there, still looking at me.

Holly wanted all the non-existent details from our short exchange. I didn’t know how to tell her he had asked for my number. I sighed with exasperation and said for the fifth time, “Yes, he took your number, yes, he said he would give you his later and no, he didn’t say when. Next time, you go talk to him.”

Guilt made me grumpy.

The moment Alex asked for my phone number played over and over in my mind for the rest of the day. I remembered his twinkling blue eyes and intense stare.

The next morning, I got up early to straighten my frizz-prone hair. A genetic gift my mother had passed onto me. After I ran the straightener over it for the thousandth time, I decided it looked good enough. It would only take a hint of moisture though and *bam*, it would be a fuzzy mess. I sprayed an excessive amount of hairspray and peered at myself through the fog.

I glanced at my phone. Time to leave, if I wanted to catch my bus. I unplugged the straightener, stopped to get my backpack and headed into

the gray, gloomy morning. I crossed my arms tightly over my chest. My long-sleeved cotton t-shirt wasn't a good choice. Ohio mornings could be chilly, but nice and sunny by the afternoon. The bus pulled up and I gratefully stepped into its warmth. I plopped down next to Rebecca.

"You excited?" Rebecca asked, practically bouncing in her seat.

"About what?" I said. She just stared at me. I knew exactly what she was asking.

As soon as we walked in, I noticed Alex with his group of friends, checking out everyone who entered the school. Was he looking for me? As soon as Rebecca and I made it to our spot, he appeared next to me with a big smile.

"Hey, how's it going?" He gazed down at me, sliding a hand into his pocket.

He wore a button-down, pale blue shirt and dark jeans. I breathed in his clean soap smell. His hair was still damp from his morning shower. I was so jealous of easy hair care.

He stood close to me as we talked. His warm arm touched my arm. I wanted to lean into his warmth.

"What classes do you have first period?" His eyes moved from me to Rebecca.

“English,” I said.

“Social Studies,” said Rebecca.

“I have Geometry. It sucks.” He shrugged his shoulders, and grinned.

The look floored me. He was hot.

He continued chatting with us as the bell rang. I liked that he included Rebecca in our conversation.

He followed me to my locker and leaned against the one next to mine, his body turned toward me. Our body heat created a warm inclusive bubble.

“Can I get your number?” His blue eyes stared into mine.

“Sure,” I said. Telling him no didn’t seem like something I was willing to do.

My senses were overloaded with his big, warm, gorgeous presence so close to me. Ally and Kristi stood at their lockers in unusual silence. I could practically feel their ears straining to capture every word. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and entered my number into his contact list. He entered my first and last name. I hadn’t given him my name. The second bell sounded.

“Gotta go. Talk to you later.” He grinned in supreme satisfaction.

Ally and Kristi were on top of me as soon as Alex cleared hearing range.

“What was that?” Kristi vibrated with hyperactivity. “Did he just walk you to your locker?”

“Yes, he did. I’m in shock.” I mock fainted and fell against Ally.

“Did you notice the way he looked at you? It’s classic; he’s smitten,” Ally said. She bumped her hip into mine to emphasize her assessment. My heart raced. As we hurried into homeroom, Kristi excitedly pumped me for details.

“What’re you guys freaking out about?” Holly asked as we took our seats.

I frowned and tried to think of something to say, but I tended to blurt information when stressed. “Alex asked for my number.”

Cringing, I briefly met her eyes. I could see the sadness I caused. Ally and Kristi slowly turned to face forward in their seats; they wanted no part of this chat.

“I’m sorry, Holly.” My face crumpled with the knowledge I had hurt her. “I didn’t ask for his number or anything. He just came up to me and started talking.”

She stared down at her desk, so I turned forward in my seat. We sat quietly for the rest of homeroom. When the bell sounded for first period, I made sure I stayed with Holly. Before we got to our class, I reached out my hand to her.

“Are we okay? Say the word and I won’t speak to him,” I said.

“Nah. He’s just one guy. Right?” But I knew she was upset. My stomach rested on my feet.

I squeezed her hand. I sensed Alex watching us, but I didn’t want to talk to him in front of her.

As the school day went on, Alex stopped by my locker several times, which surprised me. No beating around the bush from this guy: he made his intentions clear. I basked in his attention, like honey to a bee.

“If one more girl asks me if Alex Corbin is coming to your locker, I’m going to be sick,” Kristi said, leaning, as if exhausted, against the locker next to mine.

I pushed my books into my locker.

“What? Who’s asking you if Alex is coming to my locker?” I said.

“Um, every girl who knows me even slightly.” She shut her locker.

“Seriously, you’re the talk of ninth grade.”

“Great, because that’s my goal for this year.” I shut my locker, made a big-eyed face at Kristi, and we both started to laugh. A swell of pride bloomed in my chest.

The ninth-grade girls were all abuzz with this current information. It wasn’t like they could be mad at me for scoring the cutest guy in tenth grade--which he actually was--because it was so obvious, he was pursuing me.

I felt bad about it because of Holly. Did I even like him? Or did I just like the attention?

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Jessie**

The cheerleaders jumped up and down, shaking their pom-poms as the football team ran into the stadium. Ally and Kristi had made the JV squad, so Rebecca, Holly and I sat in the front row of the bleachers to support them. It was the first football game of the year and perfect sweater weather. As the sun went down, so did the temperature. Every girl participated in the Friday night fashion show of fall sweaters.

Since I was now a proud freshman, I sat with my friends instead of Mom to watch the game. A whistle shrilled and the game began. Brian played wide receiver and caught the first pass. I jumped up to clap and smiled as Ally cheered enthusiastically for him. Her crush on my brother was epic. My eyes searched the sidelines. I spotted Alex after a minute or so. I peeked at Holly to see if she'd noticed. She hadn't. My eyes gravitated back to him. He looked good in his football pants. He texted me before the game, and said he hoped he could see me later. Cheers broke into my thoughts. We had just scored a touchdown.

Jumping to our feet, we all threw red, black and white confetti in the air. Each pocket of my jacket held several containers. A sea of confetti rained down around us. Rebecca and I smiled as we bent down to shake the confetti out of our hair.

"We might as well not bother. I'm sure they'll get another touchdown," I said.

"Yeah, seriously," she answered.

Several plays later, Alex ran out on the field. He was a wide receiver as well. He wore number 88.

Alex caught the ball and gained ten yards before being tackled. Cheers went up on our side, and several girls a few bleachers behind us yelled for number 88.

I glanced back and noticed a girl with blond hair and the number 88 drawn in black on her cheek. Pretty bold to put a guy's number on your face unless he was your boyfriend, and Alex didn't have a girlfriend as far as I knew. He sure didn't act like it. I looked at her too long because her eyes locked onto mine, and she gave me one of those shitty, lips-pressed-together smiles. Crossing my arms over my chest, I turned back around in my seat. What a bitch. I thought she was a sophomore, but I wasn't positive.

My attention turned back to the game. We were pretty much kicking the other team's butt. Brian caught another pass but was taken down by some huge dude. I stood up, worried, and stared intently as the guy rolled off him. Rebecca and I clasped hands. Brian's teammates ran over to him to help him up. He steadied himself and staggered off the field. Rebecca and I both exhaled in relief.

The game seemed to wrap up quickly after that. Tim, my brother's best friend, came over to us near the end of the fourth quarter.

“Looks like we have this game in the bag,” he said. “You ladies ready to go?”

“Yep. Where’re we going?” I asked.

“McDonald’s. We always Mickey D after the football game.” Tim looked at me like I was dumb.

“Just asking. I’m new to high school, remember?” I widened my eyes as I said it.

“Yes, I know. Hence my babysitting duties per your brother’s instructions,” Tim said.

I leaned close to him and whispered, “Is this your only move to hang out with Rebecca?”

He frowned, shook his head in a quick “no” gesture. My cue to shut up. Tim stared at Rebecca a lot, taking us to McDonald’s after the game didn’t represent a big hardship.

“Let’s leave now so we can actually order food and sit down before it gets nuts in there,” he said.

“Okay, wait a sec though, who’s the girl a couple of bleachers behind us with 88 drawn on her face?”

He stole a look over his shoulder. “Amanda something. She’s a sophomore. Why?”

“She gave me a dirty look for some reason.”

“Don’t worry about it. You could take her.” He pushed my shoulder.

“Yeah, right. I don’t think a fight will be necessary,” I said.

“Why? I would *loovve* a good girl fight.” He laughed.

I rolled my eyes at him in reply.

“Come on, let’s go.” He motioned for us to get up.

I shot a quick look behind me and Amanda directed another nasty look my way. Frowning, I followed Tim to the car.

Me, Rebecca and Holly packed into McDonald’s with what appeared to be the rest of the high school. Ally and Kristi would show up after the game.

“This is so much fun,” Rebecca said, smashed next to me in a booth.

“I know.” I grinned back at her. It was fun just to watch who was talking to who, how the boys tended to push and mock punch each other and the different girl groups.

“The football players are here.” Holly said from across the table. She faced the doors.

A jolt of excitement zipped through me.

I didn't want to act excited in front of Holly, but I didn't know how this would go down or if anything at all would happen. The whole situation sucked. I didn't want to like a guy my friend liked.

Before I could think about it more, Alex appeared beside our table with damp hair from the shower and a bag for takeout. Topher, another sophomore, stood beside him.

"Hey, how's it going?" He directed the question to me but smiled and made eye contact with everyone at the table.

"Good. Great game, I saw your catch." A big smile covered my face. I probably looked like an idiot.

"Thanks." He dug a hamburger out of the bag and then looked around for a place to sit.

I jumped up and offered my seat.

"I don't want to take your seat. Do you want to sit with me over here?"

He motioned to a newly vacated table.

"Sure." As I stood up, Topher took my place.

"Would you like something to eat? I don't want to eat in front of you," Alex said.

"I'm good, thanks. I ate already," I said.

“Okay.” With one bite, he devoured about half his burger. He swallowed. “Sorry, I’m starving. I didn’t get to eat before the game.”

“No problem. I eat with Brian most nights, so it would be hard to offend me.” I smiled at him, and he responded with the cutest closed-lip smile.

His blue eyes studied me. He shook his fry container at me, indicating I eat some, so I took a few.

“Right, I forgot you’re Brian’s sister.”

“At least you’re willing to share food. With Brian I have to guard my plate like I’m in prison.” I munched a fry and watched him.

He laughed, and I tried to keep the conversation moving by saying “Brian said you guys have a great team this year.” I hoped he couldn’t tell that I had no idea what to say.

“Yeah, we do have a lot of good players. I wish I got to play more,” he answered between bites.

“It’s just the first game. I’m sure they’ll put you in more,” I said.

As the words left my mouth, the girl from the game, Amanda, showed up beside our table. She put her tray down on the table next to ours.

“Great catch, Alex.” She beamed at him and bent down to give him a hug.

“Thanks.” He awkwardly hugged her back. I didn’t know what to say with her and her buddy sitting so close to us. They would hear everything we said. I picked at my nails in my lap.

Brian approached our table with a frown. Rebecca and Holly followed him with pained expressions.

“Hey, we’ve got to go. Tracey isn’t feeling well,” Brian said. He gave Alex a full once over. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” Alex replied.

Brian’s frowned deepened. “Come on.” He motioned his hand for me to follow.

I stood. “Guess I have to go. I’ll talk to you later?”

Alex gently reached out and tugged on the bottom of my sweater.

“Wait a sec, we’ll go too.” Alex signaled Topher, who was talking to Ally. We all made our way out to the parking lot. I noticed Alex didn’t say goodbye to Amanda. Thank God.

Since Ally lived near Topher, she rode with them. I wished I could’ve gone with them. They waved to us before they got into the car. Rebecca, Holly and I scrunched into the backseat of Brian’s car. Tracey sat up front.

I leaned forward and put my arms around her shoulders. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Okay, I’m not feeling so hot.” She was unusually soft spoken. She patted my arm affectionately.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s no biggie. I’m sure I’ll be fine by tomorrow.” Brian shot Tracey a look of concern and squeezed her hand.

I patted her shoulder, then sat back in my seat.

“Alex really likes you.” Holly said close to my ear. The loud radio drowned out our conversation to anyone else.

I didn’t know what to say.

“You like him too.” She lifted one corner of her mouth in a smile. “I guess I’ll let you have him, but just this once,” she said and elbowed me.

“Thanks, that’s big of you.” Relief washed through me. At least we were joking about it.

“What’s up with Amanda coming over and sitting next to you guys? Hello, she seems desperate, which is not a good look.”

“Yeah, pretty psycho of her,” I said.

“Everyone can see Alex is into you, big time.”

I glanced down at my lap, but I couldn’t stop the huge smile that spread across my face.

The rest of the weekend was a flurry of texting with Alex, a huge goofy grin plastered to my face. I took a deep breath. All this attention felt like oxygen to me.

Monday morning dawned bright and early as it always does for high school students. Even though Alex wouldn't be anywhere near my legs, I carefully shaved them in the shower and let the conditioner soak into my hair a few more minutes. Squeaky clean, I toweled off and got ready quickly.

Unconcerned with my impatience, the bus lumbered to a slow stop in front of our high school. I couldn't wait to get off and see Alex. Would we click in person like we had with texting? I hustled around the corner to our morning spot and there he was. Our eyes met and grins spread across both of our faces. Thinking of nothing else, I walked straight to him, like I had been pulled. Everything around me disappeared. There was only Alex.

"Hey, it's good to see you." His sparkling blue eyes searched mine.

"It's good to see you." I stood just a few inches away from him. He reached out his hand and pulled me close with his warm arm circled around my waist. Goosebumps rose on my neck and spread down my back. My shoulder fit under his, and our hips were perfectly aligned.

It felt so good to be next to him. I couldn't remember ever feeling quite this giddy. I became aware of other people again and noticed Rebecca had followed me into the group. Ally was there too, talking to Topher. I couldn't tell you what we talked about. I was too busy soaking up the physical thrill of being pressed close to him. He smelled freshly showered to.

The bell rang and we headed up the stairs. He leaned against the locker next to mine, one finger hooked into the loop in my jeans as I opened the door to get my books.

"I was thinking when we could get together, you know, outside of school," he said.

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Do you want to ride home with me after the football game on Friday?" he asked.

"I'd like to, but I don't think my parents will let me. Maybe we could meet at the movies on Saturday?"

"Yeah, we'll figure something out," he said. He gently tugged at my belt loop "See you later.

I hated my parents immensely at that moment for being ridiculously strict.

Ally and Kristi waited until Alex walked away before they joined me.

“That seems to be going well,” Ally said as she waggled her brows at me.

“You know that face you make is ridiculous, right?” I laughed.

“Don’t try to distract me from my fact-finding mission. I want all the sloppy details,” she said.

“No sloppy details as of yet, but hey, maybe you can help in that department?”

“What?” Ally said.

“Help me figure out how to meet up with Alex somewhere without my parents knowing.”

“Hmm, I love that. I’ll put my secret hookup skills to use,” Ally gleefully rubbed her palms together.

Smiling I said, “You do that.”