# Prologue

Beckey Caterino stared into the darkest corners of the dorm refrigerator. She angrily scanned the food labels, searching for her scrawled initials on anything—cottage cheese, Lunchables, bagel bites, vegan hot dogs, even carrot sticks.

KP, Kayleigh Pierce. DL, Deneshia Lachland. VS, Vanessa Sutter. “Bitches.” Beckey slammed the fridge door hard enough to make the beer bottles rattle. She kicked the closest thing she could

find, which happened to be the trashcan.

Empty yogurt containers tumbled out across the floor. Crumpled bags of Skinny Girl popcorn. Diet Coke-swilled bottles. All with two letters written in black magic marker across the front.

BC.

Beckey stared at the depleted packages of food that she had bought with her precious little money that her asshole roommates had eaten while she’d spent the night at the library working on a paper that was fifty percent of her Organic Chemistry grade. She was supposed to meet with her professor at seven to make sure she was on the right track.

Her eyes flicked to the clock. 4:57 a.m.

“You fucking bitches!” she screamed up at the ceiling. She turned on every light she could find. Her bare feet burned a track across the hall carpet. She was exhausted. She could barely stand up straight. The bag of Doritos and two giant cinnamon rolls from the library vending machine had turned into concrete inside her stomach. The only thing that had propelled her from the library to the dorm was the promise of nutrition.

1

“Get up, you thieving bitch!” She banged her fist so hard on Kayleigh’s door that it popped open.

Pot smoke curtained the ceiling. Kayleigh blinked from beneath the sheets. The guy next to her rolled over.

Markus Powell, Vanessa’s boyfriend.

“Shit!” Kayleigh jumped out of bed, naked but for one sock on her left foot.

Beckey banged her fists against the walls as she made her way to her own bedroom. The smallest bedroom, which she had volunteered to take because she was a doormat who didn’t know how to stand up to three girls who were her same age but had double her bank account.

“You can’t tell Nessa!” Kayleigh rushed in behind her, still naked. “It was nothing, Beck. We got drunk and—”

*We got drunk and.*

Every freaking story these bitches told started with those same four words. When Vanessa had been caught blowing Deneshia’s boyfriend. When Kayleigh’s brother had accidentally peed in the closet. When Deneshia had “borrowed” her underwear. They were always drunk or stoned or screwing around or screwing each other, because this wasn’t college, this was Big Brother where no one could be evicted and everyone got gonorrhea.

“Beck, come on.” Kayleigh rubbed her bare arms. “She was going to break up with him anyway.”

Beckey could either start screaming and never stop or get out of here as fast as possible.

“Beck—”

“I’m going for a run.” She yanked open a drawer. She looked for her socks, but of course none of her socks matched. Her favorite sports bra was wadded up under the bed. She grabbed her dirty running shorts out of the basket and settled on two mismatched socks, one of which had a hole in the heel, but getting a blister paled in comparison to staying here, where she would go completely crazy on every living organism.

“Beckey, stop being such an a-hole. You’re hurting my feelings.” Beckey ignored the whine. She looped her headphones around her neck. She was shocked to find her iPod shuffle exactly where it was supposed to be. Kayleigh was the dorm martyr, all of her

2

crimes committed in service of the greater good. She’d only slept with Markus because Vanessa had broken his heart. The only reason she’d copied from Deneshia’s test was because her mother would be devastated if she failed another class. She’d eaten Beckey’s mac-n-cheese because her father was worried that she was too thin.

“Beck.” Kayleigh moved onto deflection. “Why won’t you talk to me? What’s this really about?”

Beckey was about to tell her exactly what this was about when she happened to notice that her hair clip wasn’t on the nightstand where she always left it.

The oxygen left her lungs.

Kayleigh’s hands flew up in innocence. “I didn’t take it.”

Beckey was momentarily transfixed by the perfectly round areoles of her breasts, which stared up like a second set of eyes. Kayleigh said, “Dude, okay, I ate your shit from the fridge,

but I would never touch your hair clip. You know that.”

Beckey felt a black hole opening up in her chest. The hair clip was cheap plastic, the kind of thing you could buy at the drug store, but it meant more to her than anything in the world because it was the last thing her mother had given her before she’d gotten into her car, left for work and been killed by a drunk driver who was going the wrong way on the interstate.

“Yo, Blair and Dorota, keep the scheming down.” Vanessa’s bedroom door was open. Her eyes were two slits in her sleep-swollen face. She skipped over Kayleigh’s nakedness and went straight to Beckey. “Girl, you can’t go jogging at damn rape o’clock.”

Beckey started running. Past the two bitches. Up the hall. Back into the kitchen. Through the living room. Out the door. Another hallway. Three flights of stairs. The main rec room. The glass front door that needed a key card to get back in but screw that because she had to get away from these monsters. Away from their casual malevolence. Away from their sharp tongues and pointy breasts and cutting looks.

Dew tapped at her legs as she ran across the grassy campus quad. Beckey skirted a concrete barrier and hit the main road. There was still a chill in the air. One by one, the streetlights blinkered off in the dawn light. Shadows hugged the trees. She

3

heard someone cough in the distance. Beckey’s spine was shot through with a sudden shiver.

*Rape o’clock.*

Like they cared if Beckey got raped. Like they cared if she barely had money for food, that she had to work harder than them, study harder, try harder, run harder, but always, always, no matter how much she pushed herself, she ended up two steps back from where everyone else got to start.

*Blair and Dorota.*

The popular girl and the sycophantic, chubby maid from *Gossip Girl*. Two guesses as to who played which part in everybody’s mind.

Beckey slipped on her headphones. She clicked play on the iPod shuffle clipped to the tail of her shirt. Flo Rida started up.

*Can you blow my whistle baby, whistle baby . . .*

Her feet matched the beat as they hit the ground. She passed through the front gates that separated the campus from the sad little downtown strip. There were no bars or student hang-outs because the university was in a dry county. Her dad said it was like Mayberry, but somehow whiter and more boring. The hard- ware store. The children’s clinic. The police station. The dress shop. The old guy who owned the diner was hosing down the sidewalk as the sun rose over the treetops. The light gave everything an eerie, orangey-red fire glow. The old guy tipped his baseball hat at Beckey. She stumbled on a crack in the asphalt. Caught herself. Stared straight ahead, pretending like she hadn’t seen him drop the hose and move to help because she wanted to keep at the forefront of her mind the truth that every person on earth was an asshole and her life sucked.

*“Beckey,” her mother had said, taking the plastic hair clip out of her purse, “I mean it this time. I want it back.”*

The hair clip. Two hinged combs with one of the teeth broken. Tortoiseshell, like a cat. Julia Stiles wore one in *10 Things I Hate About You*, which Beckey had watched with her mom a quadril- lion times because it was one of the few movies that they both loved.

Kayleigh would not have stolen the clip off of her nightstand. She was a soulless bitch, but she knew what the hair clip meant

4

to Beckey because they had both gotten stoned one night and Beckey had spilled the entire story. That she was in English class when the principal came to get her. That the resources officer had been waiting in the hall and she had freaked out because she had never been in trouble before, but she wasn’t in trouble. Somewhere deep in her body Beckey must’ve known that something was horribly wrong, because when the cop started talking, her hearing had gone in and out like a bad cell connection, stray words cutting through the static—

*Mother . . . interstate . . . drunk driver . . .*

Weirdly, Beckey had reached back behind her head for the clip. The last thing her mother had touched before leaving the house. Beckey had opened the jaws. She had finger-combed her hair to shake it out. She had squeezed the plastic clip so hard in her palm that a tooth had broken. She remembered thinking that her mother was going to kill her—*I want it back*. But then she’d realized that her mother couldn’t kill her ever again because her mother was dead.

Beckey brushed tears from her face as she neared the end of Main Street. Left or right? Toward the lake where the professors and rich people lived, or toward the tiny lots punctuated by doublewides and starter homes?

She hooked a right, away from the lake. On her iPod, Flo Rida had given way to Nicki Minaj. Her stomach churned the Doritos and cinnamon buns, squeezing out the sugar and sending it into her throat. She clicked off the music. She let the headphones drop back around her neck. Her lungs did that shuddery thing that signaled they were ready to stop, but she pushed through, taking in deep gulps, her eyes still stinging as her thoughts skittered back to sitting on the couch with her mother, chomping on Skinny Girl popcorn while they sang along with Heath Ledger to “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You.”

*You’re just too good to be true . . .*

Beckey ran faster. The air grew stale the deeper she got into the sad neighborhood. The street signs were oddly breakfast- themed: SW Omelet Road. Hashbrown Way. Beckey never went in this direction, especially at this hour. The orangey-red light had turned a dirty brown. Faded pick-up trucks and old cars

5

pocked the street. Paint peeled from the houses. A lot of windows were boarded up. Her heel started to throb from pain. Surprise. The hole in her sock was rubbing a blister. Beckey’s memory tossed out an image: Kayleigh jumping out of bed wearing nothing but a sock.

Beckey’s sock.

She slowed to a walk. Then she stopped in the middle of the street. Her hands rested on her knees as she bent over to catch her breath. Her foot was full-on stinging now like a hornet was trapped inside her shoe. There was no way she would make it back to campus without skinning off her heel. She was supposed to meet with Dr. Adams at seven this morning to go over her paper. Beckey didn’t know what time it was now, but she knew that Dr. Adams would be annoyed if she didn’t show. This wasn’t high school. The professors could really screw with you if you wasted their time.

Kayleigh would have to pick her up. She was a deplorable human being, but she could always be relied on to ride to the rescue—if only for the drama. Beckey reached for her pocket, but then her memory dredged up another set of images: Beckey at the library slipping her phone into her backpack, then later at the dorm dropping her backpack onto the kitchen floor.

No phone. No Kayleigh. No help.

The sun was higher above the trees now, but Beckey still felt an encroaching darkness. Nobody knew where she was. Nobody was expecting her back. She was in a strange neighborhood. A strange *bad* neighborhood. Knocking on a door, asking someone to use the phone, seemed like the beginning of a *Dateline*. She could hear the narrator in her head—

*Beckey’s roommates figured she was taking time to cool down. Dr. Adams assumed she had blown off their meeting because she had failed to complete her assignment. No one realized the angry, young college freshman had knocked on the door of a cannibal rapist . . .*

The pungent odor of rot pulled her back into reality. A garbage truck rolled into the intersection at the mouth of the street. The brakes squealed to a stop. A guy in a onesie jumped off the back. Rolled a trashcan over. Clipped it onto the lift-thingy. Beckey

6

watched the mechanical gears grinding inside the truck. Onesie-guy hadn’t bothered to look in her direction, but Beckey was suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling that she was being watched.

*Rape o’clock.*

She turned around, trying to remember if she’d taken a left or right onto this particular road. There wasn’t even a street sign. The feeling of being watched grew more intense. Beckey scanned the houses, the insides of trucks and cars. Nothing stared back. No curtains twitched in the windows. No cannibal rapist stepped out to offer his assistance.

Her brain immediately did that thing that women weren’t supposed to do: chided herself for being scared, pushed down her gut instinct, told her to go toward the situation that frightened her instead of running away like a baby.

Beckey countered the arguments: Get out of the middle of the street. Stick close to the houses because people are inside. Scream your fucking head off if anyone comes close. Get back to the campus because that’s where you’ll be safe.

All good advice, but where was the campus?

She edged sideways between two parked cars and found herself not on a sidewalk, but in a narrow strip of weeds running between two houses. In a city, she would’ve called it an alley, but here it was more like an abandoned lot. Cigarette butts and broken beer bottles spotted the ground. Beckey could see a neatly mowed field behind the houses, then the forest just beyond the rise.

Going into the woods seemed counter-intuitive, but Beckey was intimately familiar with the packed dirt trails that crisscrossed the forest. She would probably find other Type A students riding bikes or heading to the lake to do tai chi or squeezing in an early morning run. She looked up, using the sun as a guide. Heading west would lead her back to campus. Blister or not, she would eventually have to return to the dorm because she couldn’t afford to fail Organic Chemistry.

Beckey tasted a sour burp in her mouth that had a distinct cinnamon undertone. Her throat felt thick. The vending machine treats were pushing for a second appearance. She had to get back to the dorm before she puked. She was not going to barf like a cat in the grass.

7

Walking between the two houses made her shudder so hard that her teeth clicked. She picked up the pace across the open field. Not running but not exactly strolling, either. The blister felt like a pinch on her heel every time she stepped down. Wincing seemed to help. Then she was gritting through it. Then she was jogging through the field, her back burning with a thousand eyes that were probably not watching her.

*Probably.*

The temperature dropped as she breached the line into the forest. Shadows moved in and out of her periphery. She easily found one of the trails that she’d run on a million times before. Her hand reached for her iPod, but she changed her mind. She wanted to hear the quiet of the forest. Only an occasional ray of sun managed to slice through the thick tree canopy. She thought about earlier this morning. Standing in front of the fridge. The cool air cupping her burning hot cheeks. The empty popcorn bags and Coke bottles scattered across the floor. They would pay her back for the food. They always paid her back. They weren’t thieves. They were just too lazy to go to the store and too disor- ganized to make a list when Beckey offered to shop for them.

“Beckey?”

The sound of the man’s voice made Beckey turn her head, but her body kept moving forward. She saw his face in the split second between stumbling and falling. He looked kind, concerned. His hand was reaching out to her as she fell.

Her head cracked against something hard. Blood filled her mouth. Her vision blurred. She tried to roll over, but only made it halfway. Her hair was caught on something. Pulling. Tugging. She reached behind her head, for some reason expecting to find her mother’s hair clip. What she felt instead was wood, then steel, then the man’s face came into focus and she realized that the thing that was lodged inside of her skull was a hammer.