

CHAPTER ONE

The battle raged on, the fight for life or death. One hung on, doing everything in his power to survive. Pulling and tugging, they continued to fight. Pieces of meat were ripped off with all the thrashing back and forth. One of the two combatants desperately tried to hide in the tall grass. The larger one grabbed and ripped the other's flesh, while the weaker one curled up, trying to defend himself. It was a losing battle.

I sat, shocked, amazed, and speechless, my mind racing as the events unfolded before my eyes. My heart was pounding like a big bass drum and for a moment, I thought it would bounce out of my chest. I had never witnessed anything like this before. Should I do something? What could I do? I was only a child.

I gazed to my right, watching the bees buzz in the nearby flowers. I caught a whiff of jasmine as the wind blew in my direction, and the soft flowery scent filled my nose. I took it all in. The flowers were my mother's favorite, and they were in full bloom. The bees went on about their business, oblivious to the battle taking place a few yards away. I glanced to the left—nothing but a row of trees lined the driveway. What should I do? Watch? Interfere? My mind raced, thoughts bouncing around my head like a ping pong ball in a closed box. I sat motionless, unsure of what course of action to take. This wasn't something I could solve by searching a textbook. No, this was something I would have to figure out on my own.

Time slowed down, every second lasting an eternity in this fight for survival. I watched as the worm hung on for its life and the other tried to fend off starvation. The worm clung onto whatever it could; the bird pulled and ripped, piece by piece, as it slowly devoured its prey. The battle finally ended, one happy with a full belly, and the other, gone, wiped off the face of the earth. My nerves rattled; my hands trembled. Nature was brutal but had taken its course. The battle was over, and the bird had won. I never doubted it would. How fast things can end. One moment the worm was waking up, minding his own business, crawling out of his hole to welcome the new day, and the next second, it was over. I wondered what went through your mind as you took your last breath. I just hope I'm old and gray before I die.

I didn't know how I felt, maybe perplexed? Part of me was thinking how cool it was that I had been able to witness nature at its finest. Was I wrong to think this way? The other side of my brain said it was disgusting. I guess that really depends on whether you're the bird or the worm. The scene challenged me, and I drifted off to another time when I had lost my puppy. I never knew what happened to him. Mommy said he ran away. I wondered if that was true or if she had decided to return him to the pet store. Or had she done something unthinkable? I loved that little runt, even though I only had him for a few weeks. Was he still alive? Was he living a good life? I wish I knew.

I often think about that day as I go through life. I was ten years old when I witnessed that murder. It's a day that will be etched into my mind forever. I often look back at my life the same way, yet I'm always the worm—the one who's being picked on by others. I dislike bullies. When you have a name like mine, of course, all the kids are going to make fun of you. I'm Gerald, but that's not the bad part since a lot of kids have that name. No, I'm Gerald, Gerald Dupickle. See the problem? Pickle head, pickle boy, green pickle, green machine . . . you name it, I've heard it.

Did I mention I was smarter than the other kids, too? I also took advanced classes in high school. I was the smallest kid in school, and I was a few years ahead of my age group. Then throw in the name, and that made me one easy target.

My mother, Lydia, did all she could to protect me when I was younger. She always called the other moms and complained about the boys who beat me up or tossed my backpack up into a tree. I begged her to stop calling, it only made matters worse, but she never listened to me. The older I became, the less I told her about my problems.

See? Even I can learn from my mistakes.

I guess if I had a father or even knew my dad, it might have made a difference. Maybe he would have taught me how to fight or defend myself, or at least block a punch. Ah, who am I kidding? I was clumsy with a capital C. The awkward kid in the class, it made me think life wasn't fair—I had plenty of book smarts yet no street smarts. Someone played a cruel joke on me. But that's life, and you can't change who you are—believe me, I've tried.

Over the years, I have learned to embrace who I am. I even like who I am, but I always wondered what it would be like to be part of the cool crowd—the person who everybody loved, the guy the other kids wanted to be and hang out with, the sports hero who won the game at the final buzzer. The girls would all want to flock to me. Maybe I would even have a girlfriend. But that wasn't going to happen. That's right, I was still the worm fighting for survival.

Then things changed, and my wish came true . . . well, sort of. The house next door sat empty for a long time. An investor purchased the home, fixed it up, and sold it for a profit. Smart move, if you ask me.

A new family moved in, and that's when I met Bates Bergen. Bates and I sort of became friends. Bates was older than me and twice my size, but not very smart. Bates offered me protection if I would help him with school. That worked for several years, and over time, we formed a pretty good friendship. But like many things in life, it expired. Things change, times change, and people go in different directions. Even though I promised to write, I hope he keeps in touch.

That pretty much sums up my childhood. Now I'm starting college. It's my first day, and I have to admit, I'm nervous. My stomach ached, felt twisted, like a dozen butterflies flying

around. I only hoped I wouldn't retch in front of everyone. That would doom me before I even had a chance to be one of the cool kids.

That's right, I won't stop trying. That's what people say: 'Never give up.' I don't know or understand why I want to fit in so badly. Maybe it's because I never have. You see, we always want what we can't have.

So, here I am, a freshman in college at the age of sixteen. Who wouldn't want to hang out with me? I've grown over the years, and now many kids have to look up when we talk, so I look older than I actually am. However, I could stand to gain some weight. I avoid sunlight as much as possible—it's not good for my skin. My blonde hair always looks messy because it's hard to do anything with all these curls. My best feature is my smile, or so my mother and aunt have always told me. So, what's not to love, right? Maybe it's my lack of people skills—or so I've been told.

I stared out the window as Mom rounded the bend, the college coming into view. The three to four-story buildings looked grand. The red bricks told a story in themselves—the dark-colored bricks looked aged. Instantly, I knew those buildings had been here for decades. Then there were buildings made with lighter-colored bricks, which had to be relatively new, maybe built in the last three to five years.

Wait. Do other students think like this?

Mom slowed down as we approached the black, wrought-iron gates. Lock Haven University was stenciled over the entrance. She chose this university for me. It would not have been my first choice, especially since there were others I had my eye on, but they were larger schools.

The campus was located in a small Pennsylvania town overlooking the Susquehanna River—that's an Indian name if I ever heard one. The school bore the same name as the town. I guess my mom felt I would be safer attending a small college, hidden and tucked away from the world.

She smiled through the rearview mirror. "We're almost there."

I half-smiled back; yes, she still made me ride in the back. Another embarrassing fact, she felt I was safer in the backseat. After all, it was the late 1960s and our car didn't have anything called seatbelts.

The registration paperwork stated fewer than four thousand students attended the school annually. I loved facts. I wondered how many parents and students have passed underneath this entryway. It wouldn't take long to figure it out if I did the math. Mom turned her blinker on before making a slow, left-hand turn onto Eagle Lane. Our school mascot was the flying eagle, so it only made sense to have the main road named after it.

We passed one of the older buildings on our right, Mason Hall—the science center. That’s where I planned to spend most of my time. My excitement level rose a notch and my eyes grew wide. The building reminded me of an old turn of the century palace. It stretched for an eternity. I couldn’t wait to step inside and breathe in the rich history.

I quickly noticed the large windows that spanned across the entire four stories of the Nelson Center. My mouth fell open. I gawked at the racks of books as we drove passed. Row after row of books appeared on every floor.

Oh my, I gushed, I’m going to love this library.

I flew forward, crashing into the seat in front of me.

“Are you okay, baby?” Mom bellowed.

“I’m fine, and stop calling me baby,” I begged and searched for my glasses on the floor.

“But you are my baby, and you always will be.” She smiled and turned her attention to the group of boys crossing the street in front of us. She cranked her window down slightly. “This isn’t a crosswalk,” she howled.

I took cover behind the seat, once again hiding from the world. That’s the last thing I needed—a large target pasted on my back. *Oh look, here comes the kid whose mother yells at students walking in the streets.*

I heard one of them holler as we passed, and I caught a glimpse of his rude and all-too-common hand gesture.

“Your mother needs to teach you some manners,” she threatened.

“Mom, will you please move on?” I whimpered from the floorboard.

“I don’t need your snide remarks,” she scolded me. The car lunged forward as we continued down Eagle Lane. I crouched low in the backseat. I couldn’t wait to get out of the car and be free of her. It’s times like these that I wish I had a father. I’m sure he would have been cool and told her to relax, then he would probably wave at the boys, who would have waved back. He would have been the kind of father everyone wanted . . .

He would have been my best friend.

Mom turned right down the lane toward the college dorms. They were nestled in the center of the campus, giving easy access to all of our classes, and everything was within walking distance. The newest building towered before us as the car slowly came to a stop. Decan Hall, the freshman dormitory building and the place I would call home for the next year. Each year I would have to move to a new building. I never understood that; *wouldn’t it be easier to stay in*

the same location every year? I'm sure there was a reason for it though, one I couldn't wrap my head around at the moment.

The door screeched open as Mom stepped out of the car. I rose and peered out the window. *Everything is going to be okay.* I pulled the handle and pushed open the door. A new world awaited. I placed a foot outside and stepped into the fresh, crisp mountain air. I looked around. The other students were doing the same—getting out of vehicles and looking around, many as lost as I was, and for the first time, I didn't feel alone. We were all lost.

Boys and girls bustled about carrying luggage and boxes into the building. The trunk sprang open, and Mom instructed me to grab my bags. I wrapped my hand around the handle and removed the bag from the trunk.

Snap.

Pop.

I watched the contents of my suitcase spill all over the ground. Others stopped, looked, laughed . . . it was high school all over again. Not the entrance I'd planned on making. T-shirts, underwear, and socks galore, I scurried to grab them as quickly as possible, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. Mom leaned forward to help.

"I got this," I snapped.

"Excuse me," she screamed. "How dare you bark at me?"

Things were going from bad to worse in seconds. "Mom, I'm sorry. Please, calm down. I don't need a scene, please!" I begged.

She softened and gave me one of her half-smiles. "Okay, I'll let you handle this."

I jammed the last piece of clothing into the bag and snapped the lid shut. I raised my head to notice if anyone seemed to care. Everyone kept walking.

Huh, maybe college was going to be different.

I stood and wrapped both arms around the bag and started toward the door with Mom on my heels. I then spotted a few older boys standing along the block wall next to the park wearing blue jeans and black T-shirts—a stark contrast to the plaid button-up shirt and brown corduroy pants I was wearing. They pointed and laughed, and I was sure they were calling me all sorts of things.

Ugh, maybe this was like high school all over again . . .