

Chapter 1

*Monday, August 18, 2003:
The Wallflower*

The afternoon had been like any other afternoon for Syrenthia. The slouching wallflower stood on the courtyard of Havensburg High, holding a disposable lunch tray as she wondered where she should sit.

A breeze aroused the tree branches beside the patio entrance, causing a ruckus from the birds that hid amongst the leaves. As the breeze dwindled, the cheerleader crowd was acknowledged and dismissed; they would never accept her. She was the exact opposite of their perfected image. Turning toward the shrubbery, she saw the soon to be high school dropouts slumming on top of two metal tables. As she turned away, one of the male delinquents with blue spiked hair stared and growled, eliciting a laugh from his clique.

While holding her lunch tray, her always empty table in the patio's far right corner beckoned. In this detached nook, there was the safety of a brick wall on which to rest her gaze. Since school started, she had dubbed this her spot and people seemed to respect her seclusion.

As she hung her head, brown strands of curly hair shielded her stretched face and bifocals. She began her journey to the shadowed nook, bypassing the table of African Americans where one guy with cornrows was freestyle rapping—a mediocre performance at best. His lyrics, although perverse, were humorous. A table of four teens, two boys and two girls, neighbored the freestyle rapper. They were all attractive but not unique enough to be branded with a title.

To her right, a crowd of guys played an anime card game. Although these boys were considered geeks and would probably

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grow into computer engineers, they were considered the lowest on the totem pole: The Nerds. It was understood she existed beneath The Nerds. This group of zit-faced, gaming junkies, although stricken with that degrading label, knew everything would be okay because they could empathize or sympathize with each other. One day, they would survive this Hell called high school.

Behind The Nerds were The Stoners, where one girl with a pierced nose had grown her hair into dreads. As Syrenthia walked by them, a guy with stringy, shoulder length black hair spoke in a drawn out tone. He discussed the latest Sonic Youth album and how one day he was going to learn guitar and cover their songs.

The female with dreads replied in the same drawn out voice. “Dude, we could so get high to that shit.”

Another guy, skinny and zit faced with fire engine red hair, said in the same baked voice, “Let’s skip next period and smoke a bowl.”

Syrenthia continued minding her own business. As she walked and surveyed her schoolmates, she realized that not one student would welcome her with open arms due to her shyness and appearance. Although accustomed to being shunned, her face heated due to the insecurities of being a black sheep.

Ever since adolescence, only her height, weight, and innocent baby face had changed. All children lose their baby face once they become old enough to understand the hurt of the world. She approached the empty table recalling all of the school transfers throughout her life. Overall, she had attended eight different learning facilities and not a single location had been prosperous.

During her elementary years, teasing required a school transfer. Many days, she ran home crying because some boy shoved her in the mud, a girl slapped her face, or a group of kids called her names: Dick Wad, Retard, Fart Breath, Nerd, Ugly, and the list continued into more creative and explicit tags.

Bullying became so familiar that she could take the slaps without tears and suffer only a bruised ego. The insulting epithets grew worse, especially when a posse of the popular kids identified her insecurities. Although able to control tears

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regarding physical bullying, the name calling had always gotten the best of her and to this day, it resulted in an eroded self-esteem.

Thankfully, the teasing slacked off at the conclusion of sixth grade. This transition occurred when her parents decided a private school would be the best for her. Considering she had been public schooled her whole life, no one would know her at a private facility. Junior High went smooth, people minded their own business and she minded hers by reading books during any free time.

After the cost of private schooling became too overwhelming, public school was reconsidered. Sadly, the teasing rekindled after the transition. During the middle of summer after her eleventh grade year, her father received a transfer to a new therapy center in Mississippi. When Syrenthia discovered this, she anticipated the new life that awaited her, but as always nothing changed. She remained unpopular and unwanted.

Upon arriving at her table, she turned her back to everyone to decrease intimidation. For two weeks, she attended this school and had yet to make any friends.

While eating, she reviewed why she was a loner. For starters, her clothing style appeared bland. Today she wore oversized, brown hiking boots with paper white knee-highs. The fashion calamity continued with olive colored cargo shorts and a black belt topped with a gray T-shirt and hemp necklace. Her hands and wrists lacked jewelry.

Also, she lacked conversation skills. The only people she spoke to were her family and sometimes she would even shy away from them.

Taking a bite of salad drenched in ranch dressing, she studied her pale white skin. She placed a palm to her temple, slid it beneath her pointy chin then brought it back to a dry patch of skin above her bushy eyebrows and began to scratch. The rich dressing danced on her taste buds as she grasped the last qualification for being labeled an outcast. She was in her senior year and had maintained a 4.0 GPA along with perfect attendance

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throughout high school. This success had earned her labels such as Bookworm, Computer Geek, and Teacher's Pet.

After swallowing a gulp of sugarless orange juice, a sigh escaped her lips. She looked at her digital watch and realized it was still twenty minutes until the bell rang, which would allow her sanctuary in the library. This nursing home of tattered books offered serenity and a brief hiatus from the hustle and bustle of the loud student body. Here, she could sit back and immerse herself in the latest novel by J. L. Mulvihill.

Syrenthia eavesdropped on the conversation behind her, curious if she was the topic. Amongst the muttering, chattering, and giggling, she heard no crude jokes involving her, but there were whispers. While focusing on the hushed words, light, quick footsteps approaching from behind went unheard, until she sensed a stranger only feet away. As expected, the footsteps ended at her table.

Without turning to see the visitor, she knew it was someone hungry for homework answers. Syrenthia continued looking down at the salad, too shy to make eye contact.

"Hi," a friendly feminine voice said.

Syrenthia glanced toward the stranger, expecting to be used or pranked, and said a hesitant, "H-Hey."

The statuesque stranger glowed with confidence and an inviting smile. This was one of the four students previously noticed who lacked a stereotypical title. The member of the nameless clique wore a light brown silky shirt that matched her faded blue jeans and beige sandals. Syrenthia turned away from the stranger, wishing she could wear a similar outfit. Her body lacked the necessary curves that would keep it from looking imbecilic.

Hectored by this stranger's beauty, Syrenthia looked away in a wave of panic. Nervously, she took a swig of orange juice to defeat her developing cottonmouth. As she returned the carton to her tray, she froze and restrained the urge to ask if this stranger needed help with homework; she didn't want to seem presumptuous.

Even though Syrenthia no longer faced the student, the stranger's face had already been etched into her mind. This girl

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wore no makeup; it was obvious she didn't need any. Her tanned skin enhanced the color of her light pink lips and outlined her honey-stained irises. Thin, arched eyebrows and long jet black hair framed her face in an innocent yet provocative manner.

"I'm Sarah," the girl replied, which Syrenthia assumed to be a stepping stone to, "*so I have this problem in my geometry class that I was hoping you could help me with.*"

Even though a catch would eventually surface, Syrenthia played along because, as always, she pleased people with an aspiration to be accepted.

"Syrenthia," the loner grumbled, still looking away and seeming distant.

An awkward silence resurfaced long enough for the black sheep to think, *Go ahead, pop the homework question. You know I'll give you an answer because I'm lonesome; and if I help you with your homework, you might give me the time of day.* Thinking this way was negative, but this was Syrenthia's reality. Many students asked questions concerning homework and every time she had assisted. It was the always same. They would present the homework question, get an answer, and then leave her behind like a 'wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am.'

"If you want, you can sit at my table." Sarah noted, "the only people over there are my boyfriend Danny and our two friends, Blake and Lynn."

The offer brought surprise and she couldn't resist looking up at Sarah. As soon as the two made eye contact, Syrenthia looked back down at her tray. Many times before when people invited her to sit, it had been for their amusement as teasing would be their sole purpose.

What trick did Sarah have up her sleeves? Was it to trip her in front of everyone? Maybe something more elaborate. Maybe Sarah would wait until she was in the center of the patio and scream something obscene. Or maybe they just wanted to ridicule her appearance and clothing.

The last time someone invited her to sit with them had been in elementary school and that experience turned into a disaster. But, this could be different. Still, she decided to keep her guard up.

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“Why do you want me to sit with you?” she asked. A knot expanded in her stomach.

“Well, it’s not fun sitting alone. Our group is between the nerd and popular section on the chart and we just thought you might want to sit with us,” responded Sarah. “Well...I mean...I’m not saying you’re a nerd. I guess I’m just trying to say we aren’t judgmental.”

Syrenthia weighed the options between minding her own business and testing new waters. With nothing left to lose except the wee remainder of her pride, she decided to take a chance.

“I guess,” she answered while experiencing clammy palms.

Placing the fork back on her tray, she took her food and stood, trying to disguise her jitters with a deep but silent breath. Syrenthia had to break the silence. Although inexperienced at starting or continuing conversations, she asked, “How long have you lived here?” as they walked to the silver table shaded by a ramp.

“Too long,” replied Sarah.

“It doesn’t seem that bad,” commented the newcomer.

“How long have you been here?” Sarah asked as they passed the table of cheerleaders, some of who spoke in screechy valley girl voices.

“Since the middle of summer,” she replied

“Wait until the newness wears off,” warned Sarah.

Once the girls reached the table under the ramp, everyone fell silent as Sarah began introductions. “Okay, this is Lynn,” Sarah announced, tilting her head toward the blonde girl.

Syrenthia placed her tray on the table and said, “Hi,” attempting to keep her voice strong without stuttering. Although speaking clear, she spoke in a whisper. Lynn was short with a slender build. The rebellious, glam girl offered a smile under pink lipstick and lip gloss. The females made eye contact and Syrenthia saw Lynn’s light blue eye shadow matched her peculiar pale eyes. Her braided pigtails hovered at shoulder length over her black T-shirt that read ‘ZERO’ in glittery letters. Her complexion appeared tanned and flawless.

“Hi,” Lynn replied uneasily as Syrenthia eyeballed the possible future roadie.

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Out of the corner of her eye, Blake caught Syrenthia's attention. She noticed his slender body and realized he looked like a stereotypical garage grunge band member. His blue jeans were baggy with torn knees. This was topped with a faded, vintage rock T-shirt.

Blake sported a farmer's tan where the field of light brown skin tapered into white at his collar and sleeves. He appeared to have a good complexion albeit mildly greasy. On his chin, a black goatee rested and fried blonde hair hung in bangs over his half blemished forehead.

"Good meetin' ya," he announced in a Southern accent, which he attempted to hide. The garage band member lookalike extended a hand to shake, which she accepted while swallowing a lump in her throat.

"Same here," she mumbled, realizing his grip was unexpectedly weak.

Sarah moved away from Syrenthia's side and sat beside her boyfriend.

"This is Danny," Sarah announced after giving him a small peck on the lips.

Danny had a buzz cut and bushy eyebrows, both raven black. His skin appeared as though he had never tanned or even sunburned for that matter. His lips were luscious and looked irresistible. The newcomer felt hypnotized by his gray eyes, then remembered he was taken. More importantly, he wouldn't want a second rate version of a beautiful nerd.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine," she replied as her face heated and shoulders stiffened.

"Well, sit down," invited Lynn, scooting over on the bench.

"Thanks," mumbled Syrenthia as she sat, wondering if she had already made an ass of herself. *Knowing my luck, after today, they won't let me sit with them again; they're probably regretting it now.* Placing her hands under the table, she rubbed her sweaty palms on top of her cargo shorts.

Syrenthia looked at her food, too nervous to continue eating. She glanced toward Blake and noticed him chowing down on a barbecued beef sandwich. Although her nerves caused a loss of

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appetite, she decided it would be best to finish her meal so she wouldn't appear intimidated.

Her palms had been wiped dry and now appeared red, which no one seemed to notice. She took the plastic fork in hand and continued eating the salad, clueless as to what to say. A series of jitters started in her right foot, causing her leg to bob up and down. As soon as the tremors began, she stopped them before anyone noticed.

After taking another bite of food, Lynn said. "Don't tell me you're on a diet. You're already skinny enough."

Was Lynn being critical? How skinny did she look? Did she need to gain some weight? Maybe she did.

"No... I'm a vegetarian," Syrenthia noted.

"Why?" asked Blake with a mouthful of dry bread and spicy beef. To the left of his lips, a stain of ignored barbecue sauce dried.

"It was an animal," Syrenthia retorted.

"If you don't think about it, it's not that bad," defended Lynn.

"Yeah, but there's other problems. Do you have any idea what all goes into most meat?" asked the newcomer.

The crowd fell silent. Although the subject would be disgusting and chanced making vegetarians of everyone listening, Syrenthia noticed they awaited an answer. "In the barbecue sandwich, I'm sure you're eating some ground up cow brains or a snout. After all, not only is it meat, its school food. Being meat that is served at school, don't you wonder exactly how old it is or if it has been dropped on the floor? With salads and fruits if something is dropped it can be washed off."

Blake glared at the sandwich with repulsion, then dropped it on the tray after swallowing the chewed bite in his mouth. Lynn grinned at him.

"That's why I like salads and fruits. They come from nature and there are no foreign substances," Syrenthia continued, hoping not to scare away the new acquaintances.

"You know," said Danny with a smirk, "I don't believe I've ever seen Blake lose his appetite."

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Wow, you've done it now, figured Syrenthia. They're going to tell you to leave because you got all brainy about food. They were going to be your friends, but now you screwed it up.

"Payback's a bitch, isn't it, Blake?" Lynn teased.

The situation was unfamiliar. She should just grab her tray, say she was sorry, and leave. *You don't belong here*, the voice in Syrenthia's head teased.

"You get definite brownie points," gloated Sarah while Blake took a gulp of orange juice.

Syrenthia smiled and felt strangely accepted. Relief washed over her when she realized they weren't mad. *Calm down; maybe this is the start of a new beginning.*

Her negative inner voice debated. *How can you be so sure? You've never interacted with a group before. Just be careful not to screw this up.*

"So, what do you drive?" Sarah asked, changing the subject for Blake's sake.

"I don't have a car. I live on Henry Street, down the road," answered Syrenthia.

"Lucky, you're near town and everything," said Danny. "I live past the hollow. There's nothing out there except some house a psychic kid used to live in."

This statement seized Syrenthia's attention. "Did you ever see him?"

"Wait....are you into weird stuff?" Sarah asked.

Syrenthia's face flushed and her smile faded. If she answered yes, would they discard her? Acting as if she misunderstood the question, she asked, "Huh?"

"Like, are you into ghosts? Urban legends? Stuff like that?" Sarah continued in an excited tone.

"I suppose. From what I've read of the paranormal, I like it."

Danny answered. "I saw him once. He told me to beware of full moons. It sounded like some werewolf movie, so I'm guessing he did whatever it took to make a buck."

Although figuring the psychic boy had been a hoax, this Southern style of paranormal entertainment suckered Syrenthia in. Even if the psychic guy was a fake, she wanted to see him.

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“Well, the town sounds pretty exciting,” noted Syrenthia in between bites.

“Have you been to the gypsy graveyard?” Lynn interjected, exhilaration riveting her voice.

Syrenthia smiled and responded, “No. Is it anything like the grave of Marie Laveau?”

“Who?” Lynn pondered.

“She was a voodoo queen in New Orleans. If you draw three X’s on her tomb and make a wish, they’re supposed to come true.”

“I wish,” Danny said in a monotone, emphasizing the word ‘wish’. “If that was true here, there would be a line at the graveyard when semester exams come around and Lynn would be first in line.”

Lynn rolled her eyes at Danny then continued, “On Halloween night the spirits of a gypsy family are supposed to rise from their graves and dance in the cemetery.”

“That’s just a myth,” argued Sarah. “Last Halloween, we went to the cemetery and all we saw were graves.”

“Yeah, and I bet y’all would have sealed the deal that night if Danny wasn’t gay,” teased Lynn.

“Yeah, ask your boyfriend how gay,” Danny replied blowing a kiss to Blake, who laughed.

Lynn flipped Danny off, then replied, “Bitch.”

Syrenthia giggled. “Are they always like this?” The question was directed to Sarah, who rolled her eyes, but remained smiling.

“Unfortunately. It’s known as slight retardation,” admitted Sarah.

“Hey babe,” said Danny as he wrapped his left arm around Sarah’s waist, “just ‘cause I have a shrine of severed heads in your honor doesn’t make me a retard.”

“No,” replied Lynn, “it makes you a crazy bitch.”

“Right, so and anyway....Have you heard of The Falls yet?” Blake asked as the bell ending lunch rang.

“No.”

As the group arose from the table, Blake announced, “I’ll tell you at lunch tomorrow. We always eat at this table and every other day we have third lunch. Tomorrow, we have first.”

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This unfinished subject was one of Syrenthia's pet peeves. She hated to be informed of something vital only to suffer a cliffhanger. After they threw their disposable lunch trays away, she begged, "Tell me now."

"It's too much to go into," explained Blake as he entered the drafty building.

Once inside the school, the group parted ways. "I'll tell you tomorrow," Blake reassured before he and Lynn vanished.

Syrenthia turned left, away from the history and literature hall where her new friends ventured, with no other choice but to accept the unfinished subject.

She began climbing the staircase across from the cafeteria, pondering The Falls. *Was the area haunted? Had people been massacred there?* Her right hand gripped the wooden rail leading upward while advancing to the art section of the building.

Tomorrow, answers would be revealed and, although she was impatient, there were no other options but to wait. When she arrived on the second floor, she passed the cramped counselor's office on the left and the library to the right. Looking in through the library door, she wondered if her visits to this sanctuary would diminish.

She crossed a stretch of the hall that overlooked the patio where she had sat. A smile curled her lips while realizing she would sit in the same spot tomorrow and, for a change, she would be amongst friends. After all the years of teasing, cruel jokes, and ignoring, she could call herself a part of something.

As she entered art class, everyone ignored her. Syrenthia sat and began drawing a charcoal sketch of the instructor, Mrs. Richard.

For the first time, she worked smiling. Although her mind focused on new friends, her thoughts didn't affect the effort detailed in the portrait.

In the drawing and in reality, wrinkles hung under Mrs. Richard's hazel colored eyes and beside her thin withered lips. The woman's hair was light brown and cut short below her ears. Two artificially drawn eyebrows lay beneath a row of bangs. Looking at the portrait, she noticed her skills justified the image of the fifty-six-year-old.

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After placing the drawing in front of the sketchpad, she flipped through the pages of recent still life. In boredom, the still life model before her was debated for an abstract piece. She studied the potted plants and fake flowers then decided they were too easy. To the model's left, discolored cow bones were situated where gray and dark shadows fell upon the subjects. She saw nothing remained intriguing from the fixture.

The Falls... What happened there? Not only what happened, but what does the area look like? She doubted the area had the appearance of a resort; it was probably nothing more than a waterhole with a tiny cliff. She decided to elaborate the mental image.

At first, her mind was blank. She placed the point of the pencil down and began creating. Before class ended, weeping willows and pine trees outlining a body of dark water appeared on the page. In the distance, between the trees, a cliff towered over ground level. From this drop, water spilled from the edge and crashed into the pool beneath, creating a cloud of mist above the choppy surface.

The fabricated art existed as a skeletal structure without value, shading, or texture. Studying the art, she wondered if the scene had been captured accurately.

The bell rang, ending the last period. She placed her pad and charcoal pencil in her backpack with intentions to complete the scenic sketch that night.

Syrenthia left the room then walked to the school's entrance looking over the crowd of people, and at times over her shoulder, hoping to see one of her new friends. She wasn't too distressed when they weren't spotted. Soon, there would be a tomorrow and then she would learn of the urban legend.