

# prologue

*Damn, she's ugly.*

My bio-dad's first words when he saw me. It's my only image of him. A shadowy figure bending over Mom wearing a hospital gown, holding a flannel-wrapped bundle in her arms.

*Damn, she's ugly, Tara. What did you do?*

Like she ate or drank something strange that made me come out red and pimply with a purple blotch on my forehead. No hair. Cone head from the delivery. My baby face screwed up and screaming at him.

Mom didn't hate him enough to actually tell me that story. She doesn't talk about him—not to me. He played in a rock band. Not a big one. That's all I know. I've seen the picture, though. It's in our family album with the rest of my baby pictures. The only one that survived with him in it. But Mom did hate him enough to tell that story over and over to his sister, her best friend since high school, every time his name resurfaced between them.

It's my first clear memory. Stacking Cool Whip bowls and margarine containers on the kitchen floor, listening to Mom talk on the phone, tuning into the quiet intensity of her voice.

*"Damn, she's ugly. Our beautiful baby. That's all he had to say."*

I was her beautiful baby. She called me that all the time.

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Beautiful? Now I knew the truth. I was ugly. *Damn ugly*. No wonder Dad took off. Never looked back. Not at his ugly daughter making a fairy-tale tower from white and yellow plastic bowls, singing the first song she ever wrote, quietly to herself.

*Da-amn ugly, da-amn ugly.*

At least I can sing. Got that from my mom's side. I may not look like a songbird—more like a song stork—but if you close your eyes, it's beautiful.

# Chapter 1

## THE OFFERING

Crap. There's a naked freshman chained to my locker.

No. Not naked. Briefs. Not a good look, kid. Spindly white legs, wimpy chest, shaking arms. Black socks. Maybe his mom didn't do the laundry all spring break, and that's all he's got today.

A bike chain encased in lime-green plastic goes through my locker's handle down the poor kid's underwear and out a leg, loops up, locked tight. He could escape if he wanted to streak.

Sniggering behind me. I don't turn. That's what they want. The sound multiplies. Amplifies. Magnifies into an audience.

I didn't see it coming while I slumped into the hall traffic, sinking lower into my baggy sweatshirt and loose Levi's, my eyes tracing the regular lines in the floor tiles, as I hid behind my long brown frizzed-out mane, face rigid just in case.

My progress was strangely quiet. No guys darting in front of me telling me to "get my effing ugly face" out of their way. No one shouting, "Take cover. The Beast is loose." No dying animal moans echoing off the lockers as I walked by. Only silence. Deadly silence. I thought I'd escaped this morning. I should have known. The hunters are on the attack.

But I'm not the only one they attacked this time. I focus on the trembling kid. "Did they hurt you?" I accidentally brush his arm.

He jerks back, stares at the spot I touched like it will burst into flames or harden to stone and turn to dust. Can't blame him. I'm Beth the Beast. Too tall to ever stand straight. Bony body. Face full of zits. Bug eyes magnified by industrial-strength glasses. The braces have been off for three years, but no one sees my straight, white teeth. Just fangs, long yellow ones. Dripping blood.

"They said"—the kid shudders and swallows hard—"to tell you I'm the offering."

*They.* We both know who *they* are. Colby Peart, Travis Steele, Kurt Marks. The Horsemen. Aren't there supposed to be four? And I think that's biblical. Ironic. Nothing biblical about Colby and his senior ultra-jock following who hold Port High School in their grasp. Apocalyptic? That works. But the end of their reign approaches. Seniors graduate. Unless by some sick shake of fate's dice they fail, next year this place will be liberated. The Horsemen will ride off into the sunset. I hope warriors hiding behind the hills get them and tear them to pieces.

The kid's talking again. The press behind me seethes in close enough to hear. "They said the Bea—you—require a sacrifice." He shudders again and looks down at the floor. "Every full moon."

The crowd behind us roars. Laughter is supposed to be healthy, uplifting. Not in Port, Michigan.

"It's okay." I restrain myself from patting his shoulder. "We'll get Mr. Finnley to bring his bolt cutters."

The kid won't shut up. His head comes back up, and he grimaces at me. "They said you'd drag me into your lair—"

More laughter.

Heat pours into my face, and I mumble, "I don't eat freshmen for breakfast."

“Eat me?” Confusion knits the kid’s brows together. “That’s not what they said you’d do.”

Riot levels break out behind us. It sounds like half the school has crammed into the hall.

I don’t turn and look. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Can you knock me out first?”

The laughter, mocking and harsh, bounces back and forth across the hall, off the metal locker stacks.

This kid must have swallowed every word of the Beast legend. I’m a giant. I’m hideous. But a crazed female rapist preying on skinny freshmen?

I hold up my hands and back off. “They got you, okay.” My eyes sting. They got me, too. “You’re safe.” I turn and try to push through the wall of unyielding bodies to find the custodian. My eyes are blurry. Crap.

Don’t lose it. Don’t lose it. Don’t lose it. “Excuse me. Please.” The surging wall of cackling bodies solidifies.

Then I see Mr. Finnley’s head. Scott’s there, too—leading him through the crowd. I swallow hard.

“Sorry, Beth.” Scott bites his lip. “I wanted to get this cleaned up before you got here—but the kid wouldn’t leave his whities.”

“That’s enough, people. Don’t you have classes to go to?” Mr. Finnley glares, and the masses scuttle off back to the cracks and drains they came from. The Finnster shakes his head and gets busy cutting the chain. “I’ll have to report this.”

That’s all I need. Another session in the office. Questions I can’t answer. “Who did this?” Silence. “Who do you think did this?” Who do *you* think did this? We all know. Colby and his clones are behind everything nasty that goes on here. Nobody names them. We have another assembly about bullying. Nothing changes.

I glance down at the binder I'm carrying for first period. I scribbled out the words, but I know what they say:

*Your words—  
Why do they define me?  
Why do I believe you?  
Your face,  
Your lips, and your fingers—  
Don't spill them on me.  
I'm bones, blood, and flesh  
Not clay to be pounded,  
And scorched in the fire  
That seethes in the hate you feel.  
I bleed when you wound me  
Just like the pretty girls do.*

It needs some kind of hopeful chorus. Can't seem to squeak anything like that into the equation. No music, either. Just those thin lines that make me sound so angry. I guess I am—angry. But I don't want everyone knowing that. I do a lot of erasing, burning, shredding, hiding, hurting. I run back to *Da-am ugly* and stay there.

The end of the year can't come fast enough. If I tiptoe next year, I'll be able to breathe—like when they left junior high.

Scott reads my mind. "Only three months, eight days, thirteen hours, and twenty-nine minutes until they graduate."

"Why do you help me?" Scott and I were best friends in preschool, and then he was in my class again in third grade. He was skinny and had to go to the nurse's office for hyper drugs at lunch. I was already taller than everyone else and wore thick, round glasses that made me look like an overgrown bush baby. My hair was short back then. Cut it now? No way. Where would I hide?

Scott doesn't have to hide. Doesn't have to help me and doom himself to eternal loserhood. He's cute since his face cleared up. I don't think he sees it. He's still way short, Quiz Bowl captain, core nerd. Still my friend.

He grins, nonchalant, self-sacrificing, Clark Kent to the core. "I don't take gym anymore. They can't steal my clothes and throw them in the toilet."

"But they could hurt you."

"You're worried?" He pats my shoulder. "That's nice, Beth. See you in choir."

Choir. School choir. Not my real choir down in Ann Arbor. Not the choir I begged Mom to let me audition for when I was thirteen. Not the competitive *all-girls* choir where I sit unobtrusively in the back and anchor the altos. Not the one I have to drive a hundred miles to, through Detroit's rush-hour traffic down I-94 every Tuesday and Thursday to rehearsals in a freezing cold church. Not Bliss Youth Singers of Ann Arbor. The choir I live for. The choir that takes me away from who I am to what I long to be. Beautiful? I guess. Isn't that what everyone wants? They all probably want love, too. I live with so much hate that I'm not even sure what love is. Neither is on my horizon.

Scott's just talking about our struggling school choir. Kind of a joke. Marching Band is almighty here. But choir passes the time. Easy A. Music is music. Singing is singing. A respite from the madness. No jock senior boys allowed. Out of this school of nearly two thousand kids, there are only eight guys in the whole group, so I sit by Scott and sing tenor. I've got a decent low voice and perfect pitch so sight-reading parts come naturally. I can sing high, too. I can sing as high as anybody if I want. I help out the sopranos and altos when we run parts. They go to pieces when I go back to tenor.

Scott can't sing, but he tries. I asked him once why he takes choir. Any guy who signs up is instantly labeled "gay" by Colby and his jocks—and the rest of the school.

Scott turned kind of pink. “So I can hear you sing.”

That was probably the nicest thing any guy had ever said to me. Not that Scott was serious.

I played along. “Be careful.” I punched his arm. “You’ll ruin your reputation.”

He got serious then. “I’m not gay, Beth.”

“Of course, you’re not.”

He was going to say something else, but he just shook his head and walked off.

I dare you to say I’m not ugly.

So, back to this morning. Scott’s halfway down the hall, but I catch up easy. Long beast legs cover ground quickly. “Thanks, Scott. I mean it. School would be hell without you.”

He puts out his arm like he’s a prom princess escort. “My pleasure, ma’am.”

A shuddery, weak laugh comes out of me. I rest my arm on top of his and let him lead me down the hall, grateful for the support.

He smiles up at me. No braces for him now, either. Teeth recently whitened. A bit dazzling. “I wonder what people think when we walk down the hall together.”

I laugh, stronger this time. “Beauty and the Beast. Dr. Namar did a great job on your face.” We go to the same dermatologist. So far the miracle of clear skin hasn’t happened for me. Dr. Namar keeps trying. He says the scarring will be minimal. But I have eyes.

Scott stops and turns to me. He’s got a dreamy look on his face. “Beauty and the Beast? So if we dance in the moonlight—”

“You better bring a stool.”

“One of the wheelie ones from the library?”

“Perfect. Mind if I lead?” Then I feel dumb. This giant girl dwarfing sweet, little Scott. I let go of his arm and move forward, head down,

withdrawing into myself again. My shoulders round to their usual downward curve.

Scott hustles to catch up. “What I want to know is,” he grabs me by the elbow and makes me stop walking, “if I kiss you when the music stops,” he stands on his toes and whispers in my ear, “will you be my Princess Charming?”

I snort. “Dream on. No magic’s going to help this.” I pull back, deeper into my beastly cave.

Scott smiles. “I wouldn’t mind an experiment.”

I don’t like it when he gets like this. “You don’t want to waste your virgin lips on me. You could dazzle a half-decent looking freshman into making out easy.” I head for my class. “Look in the mirror.”

He scurries along beside me, scowling. “I wish you’d get over the looks thing.”

I scowl right back at him. “Look at me, Scott.” I part my hair with both hands and pull it away from my face long enough to give him a frightening glimpse. “How could I *ever* get over the looks thing? I am the Beast.”

“If you believe that, they win.”

“Wake up. Look around.” I wrap my arms across my chest, trying to control the delayed reaction that shudders through me. “They won a long time ago.”