

Chapter One

Aimee

Madelynnne was missing again. Four days in a row. Aimee stared at the empty, pencil-scarred desk and chair beside her as Mrs. Schuler called out names. Even though they had sat next to each other all trimester, the only things Aimee knew about Madelynnne were that she usually chewed gum, brought huge bottles of water to history class every day, and kept to herself unless talking was absolutely necessary. Madelynnne needed to return soon from her illness or vacation or wherever she was because there was a partner project due in five days, and their teacher had assigned the seatmates to work together for the assignment. Aimee dreaded the thought of having to do the entire thing on her own.

After class, she approached Mrs. Schuler. The plump, middle-aged woman glanced up from her planner as Aimee leaned against the desk.

“Do you know if Madelynnne is sick? She’s been gone all week, and we haven’t been able to work on our project together.”

Mrs. Schuler grimaced, her tired eyes darting away as if hiding something. “Oh, Aimee, I’m so sorry. I forgot all about this situation. I’m going to re-assign you to a different group—there will be three of you in one group. Madelynnne won’t be back before the assignment is due.”

“Is she okay?” Poor Madelynnne must be seriously ill if the teachers already knew she wouldn’t be back for at least a week.

Mrs. Schuler tilted her head from side to side to indicate so-so. Her graying curls bobbed with the motion. “She will be.”

“Is she sick?” Aimee knew she was probably prying too much, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Aimee, I appreciate your concern, but I really can’t give you any more information right now. It will be up to Madelynne to decide what to tell her classmates when she returns.”

Weird. She must be either dying or pregnant, Aimee concluded as she walked to her locker.

Sara

Sara leaned against the sink as a black fog took over, narrowing her field of vision to miniscule circles directly ahead. She squeezed her eyes shut, breathed deeply, and was back to her senses after a few seconds; unfortunately, she had not been cognizant enough to release the knife in the midst of her dizzy spell. Sara winced at the sting on her thumb as blood dripped out onto the half-peeled apple she was holding. She dropped the fruit into the trash, quickly rinsed her hand and applied a Band-Aid, and sliced a different apple onto the empty compartment of the fruit platter.

“Guys, get down here! Your breakfast is ready.” Sara set a stack of buttered toast and glass pitcher of orange juice next to the fruit and slid a greasy tangle of bacon strips into the space between Aimee’s plate and Cody’s.

One tiny corner of bacon had flaked off onto the tablecloth, and Sara’s finger covered it, the pebble of meat biting into her flesh and sticking. She drew the finger to her mouth and guiltily savored its salty taste before pouring herself a cup of coffee and easing into a cushioned seat at the table.

Her husband Dave was the first to arrive from upstairs. He bent to kiss her before taking a seat. “Morning.”

She forced a smile. Apparently all was forgiven from last night. Or postponed, anyway. She was so *sick* of their recurring fights. Literally ill. She found that their heated debates (hushed so that the kids wouldn't hear) always resulted in more dizzy spells than the days Dave chose to keep silent about their problems.

"Smells good, Mom!" Cody bounded down the spiral staircase, socks surfing across hardwood as he raced to the table. He snagged half a slice of toast in one hand and a piece of bacon in the other, balancing on his left foot while pulling out his chair with the right and calling out, "Aimee, I'm gonna eat it all!" around the wad of food in his mouth.

"Cody..." Sara warned. "I'd prefer not to give you the Heimlich this morning."

"I know you're hungry, buddy, but it's your turn to pray before breakfast today, remember?" Dave had filled his own plate but had yet to take a bite.

Cody swallowed. "Sorry." He set his toast and bacon on his plate and reached for the juice. He tilted the heavy pitcher into his glass. "Gross. You got the pulpy kind again?"

Sara eyed the greasy smears left on the pitcher from Cody's fingers. "It's good for you. I'll get the other kind next time." She sipped her coffee, plastering her hands against the ceramic mug in an effort to stop their shaking. When the gesture didn't help, she finally set the mug down and clasped her hands in her lap.

Cody dug his hand into the grapes and dropped a small pile of them onto his plate. "You guys are coming to my game tonight, right?"

Sara nodded as Dave said, "Planning on it."

Aimee finally dragged herself down the stairs, wet auburn hair scattered in loose, natural curls across the back of her black suit jacket. Her clean, pale face was marred by shadows under her blue eyes and a new cluster of acne on her chin.

“Good morning, honey.” Sara smiled at her tired daughter.

“Hey.” Aimee’s lips barely moved. She gripped the back of a chair and slid it out, her slow movement hinting that even lifting an item weighing in at ten pounds was far too much manual labor for that time of day. Reaching for the juice, she splashed some into her glass and a few drops onto the pristine, spring green tablecloth.

“I’m praying!” Cody announced and completed his usual ten-second prayer of thanking God for the food.

“Why so dressed up today?” Sara asked Aimee.

Aimee dabbed half-heartedly at the juice stains. “I’m interviewing the principal.” She broke off half a strip of bacon and nibbled at it.

“Wow, good for you!” Dave slathered strawberry jam onto a piece of toast. “Biggest interview yet, huh? I bet you’ll be a famous journalist some day, Aimes.”

Aimee shrugged and leaned one elbow on the table, eyes drooping.

Cody belched. “Guess I have more room after all,” he stated triumphantly and stuffed more toast into his mouth.

Aimee glared at him, relieving Sara of the need to say anything.

Cody, tired of apologizing for his behavior, glared back and showed his sister the mangled mess of bread and strawberries in his mouth.

Aimee rolled her eyes, finished off her glass of orange juice, and stood, snatching a piece of apple. “I have to go put my makeup on.” She carried her dishes into the kitchen and trudged back upstairs.

Sara looked into her half-full mug and decided she didn’t want any more. The acidity of the coffee was beginning to bother her stomach.

“Do you guys want anything else to eat?” She rose slowly to avoid any more potential blackouts.

Dave scraped the rest of the scrambled eggs onto his plate and shook his head.

“Nope.” Cody swiped a napkin across his mouth and leaned back in his chair. “I’m full.”

“Did you remember to pack your uniform and cleats in your backpack?”

“Oh, man!” Cody jumped up. “No!” He ran from the room.

Sara cleared the dishes from the table as Dave finished his meal. He finally spoke to her again as she scrubbed at Aimee’s orange juice stains with dish soap and water. “What are your plans today, hon?”

“I need to set up dentist appointments for the kids. Then grocery shopping, probably.” She would also spend a couple of hours working on her project, but she left that part out. Dave knew almost everything about her, but as far as she knew, she’d been able to keep that part of her life a secret.

As she packed leftovers into the refrigerator, Sara noticed that there was one more piece of apple resting on the fruit platter. She ate it, hoping to calm her stomach by mixing the coffee with a little bit of food. By the time she had stuck the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, Aimee was downstairs again, yelling for Cody to hurry up so they wouldn’t be late. Sara grabbed her purse, car keys, and a cropped denim jacket and joined her daughter in the entryway.

Aimee scrunched her hair in the mirror. “It’s so frizzy today.” She lifted her chin and blended a small blob of foundation she had missed at her jaw line. “Do I look professional?”

“Very,” Sara reassured.

Cody scrambled into their midst, pulling on Nikes and swinging his backpack over his shoulder. “I’m ready. Let’s go!”

“All right. Aimee, how about if you drive today? You still need to get in fifteen more hours of practice before your driving test, right?” *And I’m afraid if I drive we might get into an accident.* As long as Aimee drove on the way there, Sara would have a few more minutes to pull herself together before she needed to drive home. She handed her daughter the keys.

Aimee

Aimee crossed her legs and slumped in an ugly orange chair, looking over the page of interview questions and tapping the end of her pen against her cheek as she waited for the school secretary to send her back to Principal Owens’ office. It was an honor to be interviewing the principal, but *ughhh*. This article was going to be so boring to write.

Creeping a hand up to the collar of her blazer, Aimee made sure nothing was sticking up that was not supposed to be and ended up playing with her diamond necklace, a gift from Mom and Dad for her fifteenth birthday. She twisted the pendant back and forth between pointer finger and thumb, biting her lip and wondering whether she should reword her first question.

“Aimee?” The elderly secretary, Mrs. Collins, pushed a stack of papers out of the way and leaned across her desk. The movement slipped one of the top buttons out of its hole on her ill-fitted white blouse, and Aimee barely caught herself from making a face at the wrinkled skin and cleavage that suddenly appeared. “That was Mr. Owens I was just talking to on the phone. It’s going to be a few more minutes, and then you can go back there to talk with him.”

“While I wait, could I get a comment from you about the principal?”

Mrs. Collins cringed and then sighed. She ran a hand down the back of her short hair and cleared her throat.

What on earth was that about?

“Sure, I guess that would be all right.” She looked as though Aimee had just asked her to eat a rotten egg. Maybe Mrs. Collins and Mr. Owens weren’t getting along well?

“Okay, what is your opinion about what Mr. Owens is doing for this school? Do you think he’s improved it in the year and a half he’s worked here?”

Mrs. Collins looked up to the ceiling and pondered her answer so long that Aimee thought the woman might be about to renege on her agreement to provide a statement.

“I think...I think he really cares about the kids and wants to do what’s best for the school,” she replied vaguely.

“Any specific examples of great things he’s done for the school?”

The phone rang at that moment, and Mrs. Collins looked thrilled to answer it. She held up a finger. “Just a moment, dear.”

Mr. Owens walked into the office while his secretary was still on the phone. He held out his hand to Aimee, and Aimee made sure to use her firmest handshake.

“You must be Aimee Jones.”

She nodded. “I am. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today.”

He smiled. “Of course. Sorry about your wait.”

Once inside his office, Aimee took a seat in a chair that was the identical twin of the orange one she had just vacated. Mr. Owens’ chair, on the other hand, looked to be brand new. Aimee could smell the leather.

He sat down behind his desk and leaned back, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. “So what’s your first question?”

It was clear over the course of the interview that the principal was distracted. Aimee couldn’t quite figure out what was going on; she knew that he constantly had a lot of work to do

to keep the school running, but the phone wasn't ringing or anything. If he would have focused, they would have been finished in fifteen or twenty minutes. Instead, he rambled on with stories about topics unrelated to her questions, and she was stuck in his office for nearly forty-five minutes. Aimee felt discouraged at the prospect of digging out a few good quotes from this mess of an interview. She hoped Mrs. Collins would have a good statement for her now that she'd had nearly an hour to think about her answer to Aimee's question. *I can't believe I spent so much time deciding what to wear so I'd look professional today. Mr. Owens isn't acting professional at all.*

Unfortunately, when Aimee exited Mr. Owens' office, Mrs. Collins refused to look up and quickly began to dial a phone number. *Forget that quote. Whatever.*

She headed to journalism. Mrs. Bennett always gave them some time in class on Fridays to work on their current assignment, so Aimee would have some time to organize the information Mr. Collins had given her. Before allowing the students free reign of the computers, though, Mrs. Bennett had an announcement.

“We have one more normal paper to put together after this one, and then the paper at the beginning of April is going to be a special issue. I am not going to assign topics. I want you to pick a topic on your own—an appropriate topic, please—and write an article about it. If it's not appropriate, it won't make it into the newspaper, and it won't count as one of your four required articles for the trimester. Since you have about a month from now to finish it, I'm going to give you two weeks to figure out your topic and start writing an outline for your article. You'll need to bring your outline to class on March 8th.”

Oooohhhh, this sounds fun. So many of Mrs. Bennett's topics were less than interesting. Aimee looked forward to the creativity allowed in this assignment.

“Before we focus on that, though, we need to decide on assignments for the next paper. I’m going to pass out the list of topics, and let’s make some decisions quickly so that you’ll have time left to work on your current articles.”

Aimee scanned the list and circled the ones that interested her. The most fascinating idea on the sheet was labeled “Josh Trudeau—seventeen-year-old millionaire.” She raised her hand when Mrs. Bennett asked if anyone had any questions. “Who is Josh Trudeau? Does he live around here?”

“Josh Trudeau was born in our city but moved to New York a couple of years ago. He invented something last year that’s become a big hit and is now making a ton of money off of it. It would have to be a phone interview instead of in-person.”

“Is he cute?” One of Aimee’s classmates, Kirsten, smiled mischievously as she asked the question. A couple of other girls in the class giggled.

Aimee rolled her eyes. Kirsten never took their assignments seriously.

Mrs. Bennett sighed. “I don’t know, Kirsten. Do you want this topic?”

“Yeah, I’ll take it.”

Disappointed that her first choice was now eliminated, Aimee searched through the list again. She didn’t see anything else that looked out of the ordinary from what she typically wrote for the paper, so maybe she would sit this one out. They only had to write four articles per trimester, and she’d already completed three.

After journalism and geometry, Aimee joined her best friends in line for pizza in the cafeteria. As they waited, she complained about her history class from the previous afternoon and the mystery of her missing partner. “I know Mrs. Schuler didn’t forget to tell me on purpose, but I feel like she should give me an extension now.”

Meghan looked at her with wide eyes and appeared to be fighting to keep her mouth shut the longer Aimee talked. “I know what happened to Madelynne!”

“Of course you do.” Coralee grabbed a tray and raised her eyebrows at their friend. Meghan spent much more of her time socializing than she did working on assignments or paying attention in class.

Meghan stuck out her tongue at Coralee. “She’s staying at a clinic for eating disorders.”

“How did you hear that?” Aimee selected two slices of pizza and a little container of carrots and dip, following Coralee. She ate a quick bite of pizza, unable to wait any longer to satisfy her hunger pangs.

“Her brother and my brother are on the basketball team together. Scott was mad because her brother missed their last game so the whole family could drive down to the clinic in Arizona to drop Madelynne off.”

Sounds legit. Meghan’s information was correct eighty percent of the time. “How long does someone go to a clinic like that for?”

Meghan shrugged and brushed some crumbs off of the countertop in front of her. “No idea. My guess is that it’s more than just a week or two, though, since the whole family took her together instead of just her mom or dad dropping her off alone. She was in the hospital for a weekend last month, I heard. She was having heart problems from not eating enough.”

“Wow.” Aimee felt sorry she had been angry with Madelynne for not participating in their partner project. Obviously the girl had other issues that took precedence.

As they found an empty table and moved on to other topics, Aimee scarfed through the rest of her pizza, the vegetables, a thick piece of chocolate cake, and a can of pop. She had a few minutes left before class to study for a biology test, so she dismissed herself from the table

during a lull in her friends' conversation and walked out to her locker. She enjoyed the authoritative click of her high heels against the cold linoleum; uncomfortable as they were, the shiny black shoes looked great with her blazer and were worth the blisters Aimee knew she would develop by the time school let out for the day.

Even though many of the students were still at lunch, a few gathered supplies from their lockers. One girl, pale and scrawny, stepped out of the women's restroom a few feet in front of Aimee and mumbled an apology for nearly running into her. Aimee watched the girl skitter toward a locker, head down. She appeared to be as skinny as Madelynne had been looking the past few weeks. Aimee instantly had an idea for her next article, one that should catch the attention of many students. She smiled.

Bingo.

Chapter Two

Aimee

Aimee could hardly wait to get home from school to start researching. She wanted to write something on anorexia—something that was not just the typical stats and please-seek-help-if-you-fit-these-five-symptoms informative articles that appeared periodically in teen magazines. Over the course of the afternoon, she had quietly made plans while pretending to listen to her geography teacher drone on about the weather in South America and while waiting for the rest of her class to finish their biology test. She was going to do a three-day experiment and live as if she were an anorexic, consequently experiencing on a small scale what anorexics had to do in order to keep their eating habits a secret and discovering whether other people noticed her diet change or not. Her hope was that the article would give the students more compassion for those who had eating disorders and would help them to recognize any problematic behaviors that their friends might be exhibiting.

Her excitement about this experiment and article was slightly dampened by the fact that deep down, she knew Mrs. Bennett would think the temporary extreme dieting was too dangerous for Aimee's health.

But it was just three days. And she didn't even have to tell Mrs. Bennett the topic of her article for another fourteen days.

So, basically, Aimee could do the experiment now, without telling anyone (it would make it more authentic, anyway—see if people noticed), and then deal with the consequences later if Mrs. Bennett was angry. At that point she would be finished with the experiment and could write a unique article, and hopefully her teacher would see that the article should be published in the school paper.

Aimee's mom was waiting for her in the car, reading *Woman's World* to pass the time. The scent of Sara's favorite air freshener, pine, wafted out as Aimee swung open the passenger's side door and dumped her heavy bookbag on the floor before sitting. "Hey, Mom. Are we going to Cody's game now?"

Sara tossed the magazine into the backseat and started the car. "It's up to you. I told him I would come, but I can drop you off at home first if you aren't interested."

Aimee hadn't exactly been planning to start her experiment already, but this did give her the perfect opportunity. Instead of waiting for a brand-new day to start, she could run the experiment for 72 hours—start now and finish on Friday. *If I don't go to the game, I can tell Mom that I ate something while they were gone when she tries to get me to eat supper later.* "Home, please."

A few minutes later, Aimee unlocked their front door and waved to her mom as she backed out of the driveway to head for the soccer field. She suddenly thought of the snacks she would miss by not going to the game; even though she didn't care much for soccer, the junk food served at the concession stand was enjoyable every once in a while—especially when it had been over three hours since lunch, and she knew she was not going to be able to eat much the next few days. Her mouth instantly salivated, and her heart rate sped up a little at the thought of the salty taste of nachos and cheese. *My word, Aimee, calm down! You can eat it next week.*

She slammed her hand down on the spotless kitchen island, willing herself to be calm and level-headed. In order to stick to this diet, she needed to approach her experiment from a logical standpoint, rather than from an emotional, starving sort of mentality. *What can I eat that would be low-calorie?* Aimee peered into the refrigerator, eyeing the leftover fruit from that morning. Fruit didn't have that many calories. She wasn't sure how many each type of fruit had;

she just knew fruit didn't have many calories in general. Pulling out the Tupperware container, Aimee decided she would begin her article research by looking up the number of calories in grapes and strawberries.

She tucked the plastic dish under her arm and toted her backpack upstairs to her bedroom. Gently kicking open the door, she was greeted by the sight of her green comforter falling off her unmade bed; a small, squishy pile containing last night's pajamas and yesterday's school clothes; and the sound of her tower fan calmly whooshing air into the room. She couldn't stand sleeping without the fan on but almost always forgot to turn it off before leaving each day.

Aimee slumped into her swivel chair, threw an empty plastic water bottle and a folder onto the bed behind her to make some space on the desk, and popped open the plastic lid on her snack. She waited impatiently while her computer warmed up, sticking a slick grape in her mouth every ten seconds or so. Before she knew it, the grapes were gone. Just a couple of small strawberries lingered in the transparent bottom of the dish, and she hadn't even typed her search into Google yet.

Man, I'm bad at this diet thing, she thought guiltily, wiping her damp hand on her pants before resting her fingers on the keyboard.

Scrolling through the first page of results, Aimee's eyes landed on a blog that contained the words *grapes*, *strawberries*, and *calories*, making it fit her search terms. The name of the website was *pro_ana525.com*. *Ana*? Ana must be the blogger's name? She didn't know but figured if the website contained calorie information, she was all about it.

Aimee was astonished to find the entire blog was devoted to service as a food journal of sorts. She quickly figured out that "ana" stood for "anorexic," as each of the five entries shown on the main page of the site listed small amounts of food, paragraphs above and below the lists

detailing the girl's weight fluctuations and exclamations of guilt over the foods she had indulged in. Despite the girl's apparent shame from allowing herself to eat more than she had originally planned at the beginning of each of the days, she had not eaten more than 800 calories in any single entry. Three days ago she'd only eaten 75 calories over the course of twenty-four hours. That particular entry was full of rejoicing and encouragement for other anorexic girls who might be reading her blog. "Keep at it, girls! I know you can do it!"

Aimee remembered reading something in the past about minimum daily caloric intake. She didn't remember the exact count but thought it was 1500 or 2000 calories and wrote a note to look that information up later to include in her article. She clicked on the link for the 12 comments left on yesterday's entry. Girls with blog names like `soon_to_be_Barbie` and `toomuchfat419` had left brief notes, such as "I wish I could be as disciplined as you! Ana love!" with accompanying profile pictures of super-thin celebrities.

She spent the next hour paging through different girls' websites, all with either bulimia or anorexia or a little of both. The ones Aimee spent the most time reading were blogs which provided tips on how to resist food and which foods contained the fewest calories but still tasted okay. She learned about all sorts of diets and "thinspo"—inspirational pictures of ultra-thin women, mainly celebrities, to help those with eating disorders not to give up on their diets. She wrote down various ideas to help her in her experiment, so engrossed in her research that she forgot about the two strawberries left in the bowl. When it came time to start her homework, Aimee had a little more willpower and knowledge to help her, and she felt good about herself for dumping the two tiny, red enemies into the kitchen trash. Small victories counted. *It's all about the experiment.*

Sara

Sara huddled on the metal bleachers wrapped in her husband's large jacket, nursing a bottled water. Rain sprinkled onto her head and dripped slowly down her neck, sneaking its way inside her sweatshirt. Out on the field, Cody ran back and forth, trying to help his team win. Sara looked over at the scoreboard every five minutes or so, keeping track of how much longer she had to sit through this game.

"Honey, you want anything to eat?" Dave asked, crumpling the trash left over from his hot dog. "I'm going to go get some popcorn."

"No, I'm fine, thanks." Sara smiled at him briefly, pulling the jacket tighter and holding her water up to show it wasn't gone yet. Rain dripped into her eye, and she wondered what her eyeliner and mascara were looking like.

"You sure?" Dave glanced from the bottle to his wife, staring at her extra long. "Did you have a big lun—"

"Yeah," Sara interrupted. *Let's not get into an argument in front of all these people.*

"Okay." Dave shrugged, feet thudding against the bleachers as he made his way down to the grass.

Setting the bottle of water beside her feet, Sara focused on the next steps she needed to complete for her project in an effort to drown out thoughts of how much it bothered her that Dave was worried about her habits. When Dave didn't talk about her health, she was able to pretend she was a normal person—a normal wife and mother. But when he brought the topic up (seemingly every day now), she was forced to face the fact that it wasn't normal to feel like she was going to pass out several times a day. Then, when she would delve deeper into that thought process, she would begin to worry about their marriage and worry whether Dave might be

thinking of divorcing her. As often as she argued with him, she really did want to preserve their marriage—not just for the kids' sake, but also because she loved Dave. She had loved him for twenty years and couldn't imagine what life would be like without him.

Tears welled up in her blue eyes, and she reached for her purse to give herself an excuse to turn away from the crowd so no one would notice. She dug out her cell phone as one tear managed to slide out and down her cheek. Horrified, Sara tilted her head forward so her hair could hide her face and scrolled through her email. She spent the rest of the game deleting old messages from her inbox and occasionally glanced up to check on the status of Cody's game.