

## Chapter One

I awoke to Jake muttering under his breath and my stomach churning angrily. Uncertain as to what was going on, I glanced at Jake and, noticing that he was spending an awful lot of time looking in the rearview mirror, I followed his example and looked in my side mirror.

Police lights flashed one hundred feet behind us in the fog.

All of the fear that we'd experienced before returned at a new level. Everything was much more serious now that we actually had the products in our possession. It was easy to lie about our plans to the cop before, when we didn't have any evidence to suggest otherwise...but now...

"What *now*? What do I do?" Jake whispered. "What do I *say*, Grace?" He shakily swerved over to the gravel, palming a small bottle of Intenzyme Forte resting in the ashtray and thrusting it under his seat before coming to a complete stop.

I struggled to remember why it had seemed like such a great idea to continue with my career once it became illegal.

###

*Four years earlier*

"I can't wait to get out of here." Fellow English-class warrior Rhonda VanDeMort flagged a page in an Edith Wharton biography with a bright pink Post-it and set her head down on the table, the book flipping shut with a soft clunk.

Fumes from the musty, yellowed piece of literature drifted my way. I accidentally dragged in a deep breath of it and sneezed.

"Jackson's going to kill me," Rhonda whined. "She gave me an extension last semester for my final paper in Brit. lit., and I'm scared to ask for another one, but I'm going to fail this

paper if I have to turn it in tomorrow by noon. I've slept about four hours the past two days, and I still only have three pages typed."

I clicked on print preview and sighed at my four pages of writing that more closely resembled notes rather than the coherent, senior-level paper that it needed to be. "I'm already planning to turn it in a day late. She'll only take it down half a letter grade for that." Or maybe I would just turn it in on time as it was. This was the last paper of my undergrad career, and I just didn't care. I hadn't cared much at all during the past eight weeks when I realized that there wasn't anything that I wanted to do with my English degree. I used to think I wanted to be a journalist, but writing for the campus newspaper for two semesters had shown me that was not the path I wanted to take.

Rhonda, on the other hand, was already accepted at a grad school for the upcoming fall semester. Her grades were slightly more important to her than mine were to me. "I would do that, too, but I still need to spend some time studying for the Shakespeare final. One extra day for this paper isn't going to be enough."

It was good that I'd taken Shakespeare last semester. I would probably just quit school altogether if I still had another exam for which to study, especially one as complex as Shakespeare.

I looked up at a familiar face peering through the narrow window in the door. Rhonda and I were sitting in a group study room in the library, and it was customary for other students to peek in to see if the room was empty. Small grid lines traced across the glass, forming diamond-shaped spaces to smudge—some bored student had already pressed his or her lips to the surface in three spots, and someone else had come up with the idea of placing one fingerprint inside each diamond but must have been interrupted by an angry librarian when just halfway completed with

the task. I was distracted every single time someone walked by, whether he or she actually looked in the window or not. I was also distracted by the occasional bursts of loud laughter from the group study room next door and by the fly whizzing past my ear every few minutes. I had studied the various scratches in the door several times, running through name possibilities for some initials carved into a small heart near one of the hinges. All in all, I was accomplishing virtually nothing, and I had been sitting in this scuffed-up desk chair for an hour and a half.

I motioned for the person at the door to come in. Candace McCormick lived just down the hall from me; we'd been friends since sophomore year, when she nearly beat down my door in the middle of the night to tell me that one of her gold mollies was giving birth, and she wondered if I wanted to watch the event. Procrastinator that I am, I was not in bed at 2 a.m. when she knocked, and watching a fish give birth sounded much more interesting than studying for a biology mid-term. We kept our eyes on that molly until 4:30, whispering to each other in an effort not to wake up her roommate. When I asked Candace why she'd picked my door, she shrugged and replied, "You're the only one in our hall who I always see up at this time of night. I figured that tonight would be like all the other nights and that you'd still be up."

It was true. I frequently passed Candace at 1 or 2 in the morning, on my way to brush my teeth or throw some laundry in a dryer. She tended to study just outside her room door. Her roommate could not handle any light while sleeping, and so if Candace wanted to accomplish anything after her roommate went to bed at the typical 11:30 time, she had to go somewhere other than the room. Candace and I usually just smiled at each other in passing, and I had never tried talking to her before that night. We bonded over procrastination, chocolate mint Pop-Tarts, and the strangeness of fish birth.

Candace swung open the group study room door and plopped down in the squeaky seat across from me. Her dark, shoulder-length hair was French-braided back, short layers poking out here and there, while side-swept bangs dangled into her blue eyes.

Her arms were wonderfully free of books and I couldn't help but be envious. "Are you finished with exams?" I asked.

She nodded, a satisfied smile beaming on her face. "Yes, I am. I just turned in the last of my library books and paid off my late fines. Now all I have to do is finish packing and wait for commencement."

"What's your major again?" Rhonda asked Candace. The two of them only knew each other through me.

"Communication Arts."

"What do you want to do with that?" Rhonda twirled a gel pen between her fingers like a baton, back and forth, pinkie to index.

"Nothing, actually. I picked it freshman year because it sounded like a fun major, and I thought about switching a few different times, but nothing ever sounded any better. I'm going to start classes next month to become a bioenergetic practitioner," Candace stated proudly, straightening up in her chair.

"What is that?" Rhonda asked, her nose crinkling at the strange phrase.

Candace had explained this job to me before, but each time I heard her explain it to someone else I understood the concept a little better. It was interesting but slightly unbelievable at the same time. "I'll be like a doctor, except I'll use vitamins and natural remedies to help my patients instead of the kind of medicine everyone thinks of as 'normal.'" She made quote marks in the air. "Instead of having X-rays taken or blood samples drawn or other *typical* medical tests,

the patient puts his or her right hand on a hand cradle, which is attached to a computer. The hand cradle is like a large computer mouse, but it has a spot for each of the fingers and the thumb. The best thing to compare it all to is a lie detector test, in which the lie detector picks up on the energy in your body to decide whether you're telling the truth or not. In bioenergetic testing, the computer program figures out the weak areas in your body by sending electrical signals to the body through the hand cradle. It's like it's asking the body questions about its health, and then the energy in your body answers those questions.”

I looked at Rhonda out of the corner of my eye and could tell that she was trying hard to pay attention but that she really hadn't expected to get such an in-depth response to her polite question.

“The program sorts through the information your body gives it and lists the areas that are of the most concern to your body at that moment,” Candace continued. “For example, maybe you have a bacterial infection in your throat—if that was one of the worst problems in your body at that moment, your throat would be listed among the top problems. The practitioner then uses the program and his or her knowledge of nutritional supplements to suggest the best vitamins and herbal remedies that the patient could take to clear out the illness.

“The more you cleanse out the different viruses, bacteria, parasites, and other stuff, you move down through the layers in the body. You come up with new stuff to get rid of that was hidden before because it wasn't one of the things that your body felt it needed to fight off right away—your body had other, more important problems. So, the more frequently you're tested, the more often you can change your homeopathy or herbs or whatever to match what's wrong in your body, and you can get healthier quicker. I won't be a *real* doctor, so I can't actually *diagnose*, but I can highly recommend.”

“There’s a big market for that sort of thing?” Rhonda asked skeptically, whirling pen momentarily suspended between middle and ring fingers.

“You’d be surprised,” Candace answered. “I just found out about it a couple of years ago, and the bioenergetic practitioner I’ve been going to is always booked at least five weeks in advance. I think it’s way more interesting than anything in Comm. Arts. So that’s what I’m going to do.” She shrugged.

I wondered how it would feel to be so sure of myself. I would give anything to have something concrete to tell people about my future plans—as it stood, I wasn’t about to get married like tons of my friends were, I had no idea what I was going to do for a job other than a standing offer from Applebee’s to return to my waitressing job from the previous summer, and I hadn’t applied to grad school. I didn’t even have an apartment lined up or own a car.

“Hmmm,” Rhonda said. She started twirling the pen again and became a little too interested in her paper.

I was proud of Candace for being willing to do something so strange. I was afraid to tell my parents that I didn’t want to be a journalist, now that I’d put so much time and money into becoming one. I couldn’t imagine what they’d say if I randomly told them that I wanted to do something crazy that they’d never heard of, like Candace’s bioenergetic practitioner job.

“Anyway, I stopped by to see if you wanted to go to dinner with me, Grace,” Candace invited, seemingly oblivious to Rhonda’s lack of enthusiasm over her career plan. “You’re welcome to come too, if you want, Rhonda.”

“Dinner sounds great,” I exclaimed, packing up my laptop and the stack of books beside it. The paper could wait an hour. “Wanna come, Rhonda?”

“I really need to get some work done,” she answered. “I might stop by in a little bit. I should try to get out another page or so first.”

“Okay.” I stood, twenty-pound book bag slung over my shoulder, and eagerly followed Candace out of the library. Exhausted students surrounded the collection of desktop computers on the main floor, battered textbooks and reference materials splayed out across the tables and carpet. A couple of students prowled around the area like hungry cougars, silently pressuring the others to desert their computers so that they could have a chance to work on their own papers. One girl, in full exam-week mode with a hoodie, sweatpants, messy bun, thick glasses, and not a trace of makeup, shot a dirty look at the guy hovering close to her shoulder, who was clearly planning to slide into her swivel chair as soon as she vacated it.

The late afternoon air was stifling, considering that it was only the first week of May in Indiana. Perspiration swelled on my upper lip just during the walk from the library to the cafeteria, and I wished that I had changed into a short-sleeved shirt when I'd been in my dorm room a few hours earlier. Candace and I passed a bench on our walk; a freshman couple occupied it, firmly entwined in each other's arms. The girlfriend's head rested on her boyfriend's shoulder while he stroked her long hair, a daydreamy expression on both of their faces. I gagged quietly, and Candace laughed, nodding in agreement. Although we attended a campus of 12,000 students, I somehow managed to come across this particular couple at least twice a week, either sitting on one of the outdoor benches or holding hands in the cafeteria and staring into each others' eyes while eating their meals.

The cafeteria was half-full with students who had decided that it was a better option to spend their time studying in close proximity to food as opposed to trying to find an open cubicle or empty room in the library. Wherever I looked, students with their open textbooks, pages of

notes, and flashcards sipped at cappuccinos and Mountain Dew, massaging out headaches with ink-stained fingertips and rubbing at weary, bloodshot eyes with their palms. I tripped over a backpack on my way to survey the dinner choices, and the plastic cup of water in my hand sloshed onto the floor and the tennis shoe of a guy passing me. He swore at me, shaking his head, and I gritted my teeth, trying not to be angry with him. Everyone was stressed right now, and I had probably done several things already that week which were unnecessarily spiteful toward other people.

I ate my usual taco salad with ice cream for dessert, while Candace dutifully consumed an apple and a plate full of dry salad with grilled chicken strips. I shook my head. “Your self-discipline is amazing,” I told her. Occasionally I ate the same way, but mostly I was waiting to change my eating habits post-college. I had gained twelve pounds over my four years of college; another three days of eating junk food was not going to drastically affect anything.

“I’m trying to eat extra healthy because I’m planning to do a cleanse next week,” she explained. “Hopefully the better I take care of myself now, the less sick I’ll be while I detox.”

I nodded as if I understood. I had no idea what she was talking about. A cleanse? Getting sick from it? Didn’t sound like anything I wanted to talk about while eating taco salad, which already looked kind of pre-digested, what with all the salsa and nacho cheese and suspicious-looking ground beef mixed together over stringy iceberg lettuce and crumpled-up chips. My glob of sour cream rolled down the messy hill and onto the edge of my plate. Half of it fell onto the table, but I just left it, figuring that I would probably spill something else and may as well clean it all up at once when I was finished with my supper.

“So what should we do when you come visit me in a few weeks?” Candace asked brightly.

One of the things getting me through exam week was the exciting idea that Candace and I would get to hang out together soon, without all the worry and stress of homework. We lived three hours apart, and I'd never been to her house before. With summer open before us, we hadn't even planned how long I would stay with her, just that I was coming over. At this point I wasn't sure how I was going to have the money to do that, but I would worry about that later. My job at Applebee's was looking better and better every minute.

## Chapter Two

Later that night, while I was eking out a sixth page of my paper, I decided to take a break and visit Candace. The resident director had made us pull all of our hall decorations down at the beginning of exam week, exposing the pockmarks and leftover shreds of poster putty and tape from years past. It was fairly dark in the hall this time of night, but I still knew where the stain was and stepped carefully over it. Earlier in the year, there had been a “mouse incident,” in which a girl named Andrea was cleaning her room and a furry little creature ran out from her room into the hall. Because Andrea couldn’t think of anything else to do, she threw one of her roommate’s shoes at the mouse, somehow managing to actually hit it and smashing the rodent into the carpet. The cleaning ladies had brought in a Rug Doctor the next day to try to get the nasty mouse-gut stain out of the carpet, but to this day there was still a faint spot that they had never been able to fully remove. We had a girl in our hall who considered that stain to be a good luck charm and purposely walked on it whenever she had to take an exam; I avoided the stain at all costs.

The hall smelled of just-microwaved Ramen noodles and hot chocolate mixed with Lysol and laundry detergent. Kanye West drifted out from the closed bathroom door, accompanied by the echo of poorly-performed shower rapping. I found Candace in her usual spot, exiled there by her sleeping roommate. Since Candace didn’t have any homework left to do, she was apparently reading for fun, although when I glanced at the titles of the books surrounding her, I had a difficult time understanding why this was pleasure reading. She grinned when I asked her why she was reading a book about parasites and their effect on the colon.

“It’s really interesting, Grace. I need to learn all about this stuff if I’m going to start my training next month. Here, read this one. I was looking through it earlier today.” Candace handed

over a thick book about alternative treatments for diabetes. I settled in against the wall next to her and opened it up.

I lost three hours' worth of work on my paper that night to her stupid book, and I was shocked when I realized it was 3:30. I reluctantly set the book aside and returned to my room, growling to myself over the disgraceful state of my last paper and how much I didn't want to work on it.

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I borrowed one of my parents' cars to drive to Candace's house several weeks later. Halfway there, the air conditioning broke, and a few minutes after that, I realized that I was lost. I tried to call Candace but could only reach her voicemail, so I ended up stopping at four different businesses before someone could give me directions that made sense. I arrived at Candace's front door sweaty and overheated with a resolve to get the car fixed before making the trek home.

Candace lived with her parents in a three-story house surrounded by twenty-five acres of land, the majority of which was thickly-wooded with pines. A pole barn, its siding tan to match the house, rested thirty yards away. The driveway forked off to lead up to the door of the barn. A red maple guarded each side of the house, the two leafy shadows overlapping.

I was confused at the worried look on Candace's face when she opened the door. After a brief hug, she apologized profusely. "Grace, I can't believe it's worked out this way, but I have to start my training tomorrow. I have class from ten to two, four days a week. I thought the start of the new semester was still a couple of weeks away, but I guess I looked at the schedule wrong. I just found out a couple of hours ago."

“Oh.” Perhaps my response should have been disappointment and a little bit of anger that I had driven all this way for nothing. However, all I could think about was whether I might be able to attend class with her.

“So I don’t know how much hanging out we’re going to be able to do since I’ll have class and homework,” Candace continued, “but you’re welcome to stay as long as you like. I am so sorry about this.”

I had spent the past month thinking a lot about what I wanted to do for my career now that college was over. I had temporarily taken the waitressing job at Applebee’s, but the occupational possibility that consumed my thoughts the most was that of bioenergetic practitioner. I had no idea if I would actually like it, but I hadn’t been this excited about something in a long time, and I was seriously considering giving it a try. “May I come to class with you?”

She looked startled. “I guess they probably wouldn’t mind if you came for one day or something. Really? You want to do that?”

“I do.” I didn’t realize it at the time, but that typical marriage phrase ended up being my long-term commitment to the career of bioenergetic practitioner. I went to class with Candace the first day, loved every minute of it, and ended up taking out yet another loan to pay for more education. For some reason, science and medicine fascinated me in a way those subjects never before had. I felt like I had found what I was born to do, not just a job to pass the time and pay my bills. I was going to help people get well, and I was excited about it. I spent the whole summer at Candace’s house, keeping my phone calls to my parents concise and far-between so as to hear the least resistance from them toward my newest aspiration.

One day halfway through the summer, I was hurriedly blow-drying my hair while brushing my teeth, trying to regain the time I had lost by accidentally sleeping in. I wrinkled my sun-burnt nose at the reflection in the mirror, blue toothbrush clenched between teeth that should have had braces years ago. It was already 9:40, and I had a fifteen-minute drive to class. Candace had left earlier in order to run a couple of errands, and her parents both had to be at their jobs by 7 a.m., so I never saw them in the mornings. In my rush, I became a little too preoccupied with getting myself ready in as short a time as possible and slammed the hairdryer into my head. I had flicked the warm appliance off and was rubbing my skull when the doorbell rang.

Startled, I pondered whether or not to answer the door. After a few short days of staying at the McCormicks', I had realized that it was just best for me not to look outside unless absolutely necessary. All of the shadows and trees shifting in the wind creeped me out.

The doorbell rang again, followed by some knocking. I walked quickly into the guest bedroom that the McCormicks had given me and looked out one of the windows, trying to see who could be standing at the door one floor below. I could tell it was a man, but he definitely did not look familiar. Of course, I could only see the top of his head and what he was wearing, so he could have been one of my relatives, and I wouldn't have known the difference. His grungy appearance concerned me, though. Even from above I could easily pick out splotches of mud on his T-shirt and battered tennis shoes that looked as though they had been through a war. There was no car in the driveway, which had to mean that he had walked up (extra creepy), and his body language translated into anger and frustration.

I shuddered and backed away from the window, returning to the bathroom to put on my makeup. I would just ignore him, and he would go away eventually, right? I was already going to be late to class without this interruption, anyway. What were a few more minutes?

I was smearing foundation across my forehead when I heard the front door unlock and swing open; I set down the small plastic tube and grabbed my cell phone from off the counter. I ducked quickly into the guest bedroom again and noted with rising panic that the man who had been standing at the front door was no longer there. There still weren't any vehicles in the driveway, which unfortunately meant that neither Candace nor one of her parents had returned to the house. The person who I could now hear walking around in the kitchen had to be the strange man.

I grabbed a large pair of scissors from Candace's mom's sewing room, thinking that I might be able to use them as a weapon. I kept my cell phone in the other hand and forced myself to go downstairs.

I could hear the refrigerator door open and some cupboards slam shut. Had the bum broken into the house just to get something to eat? I slunk down the carpeted stairs and tripped over the man's shoes, which were lying near the front door. My scissors clattered to the wooden floor, and suddenly all was silent in the kitchen.

I held my breath and bent down to pick up my weapon.

The footsteps that came toward me were accompanied by the crackling of a bag of chips. I raised my arm up by my head and positioned the scissors in my hand so as to stab with the most force possible if necessary.

The man, who looked to be about my age, jumped when he rounded the corner and saw my hand up by my face, scissors ready to be thrust into him with a burst of adrenaline at a moment's notice. He gasped, and I thought I saw a tiny bit of fear in his eyes.

*That's right. You should be afraid, Dude.*

Now that I was up close and took a better look, the thought occurred to me that his cocoa-colored hair was too perfectly gelled and the sunglasses perched on top of his head appeared too expensive for him to be a hobo, but just because someone had money, that didn't make him any less of a threat. I didn't back off but did shiver nervously.

He reached into the bag again and carefully set a tortilla chip in his mouth, staring at me the whole time. "Did you just break in?" he asked cautiously. "Why are you in this house?"

"What are *you* doing in this house?" I flung back at his six-foot-tall self, hostility lacing my tone. Or I tried to sound tough, anyway. There was a whole lot more quavering and cracking in my voice than I had planned on.

"That's none of your business. I have every right to be here," he defended himself. "You, on the other hand, I have never seen before. I think you're the one with the explaining to do."

"Do you even know the name of the family who lives here?" I asked boldly.

"Of course. The McCormicks. Patricia and Tim are my aunt and uncle." He rolled the chip bag closed and then licked salt off a few fingers.

"Oh." I relaxed some. "They gave you a key?"

"It's still not any of your business, but I happen to know where they keep their spare key," he said. "On my way to class this morning, my car broke down. I tried to fix it—" he gestured to the dirt scattered across his body—"but I'm really not any good with cars. Since I was close to their house, I decided to stop in and wait here until I could get someone to come give me a ride.

"Wait, why am *I* doing all the talking? *I'm* the one who's allowed to be here. I have no clue who *you* are."

“I have every right to be here, too,” I responded quickly. “I’m Candace’s friend from college. I’m staying with her for the summer.”

“Is Candy here right now?” he asked eagerly. “Dude, I haven’t seen her in so long.”

“No, she has class right now.” I jumped to attention. “Shoot! Class! I have to leave!”

“What time does it start?” He looked at his watch.

“Ten.” I was already halfway up the stairs to grab my purse from the guest bedroom.

“It’s 10:15 now,” he yelled after me. “You should just ditch.”

“It’s not like it’s an hour-long class!” I called back. “I’m supposed to be there for four hours today!”

“How many times have you skipped so far?” he asked.

“Zero.”

“Then you can definitely skip today.”

I paused in my run back down the stairs, purse slung over my shoulder, shoes and car keys clenched in my hand. “Well, I guess they did say we could miss a couple of days.” But what was I going to do all day, then? Hang out with this guy?

Apparently he had already thought about this dilemma. “If you’ll help me get my car situation straightened out, I’ll buy you lunch,” he offered, crossing his arms and lifting an eyebrow in a bargaining pose. A streak of grease ran from his right elbow to his wrist, drawing my attention to the heavily-muscled biceps peeking out from the sleeves of his T-shirt.

“I don’t know anything about cars,” I replied.

“I didn’t figure you did.” He grinned. “But I’m going to need a ride to the repair shop, etcetera, etcetera.”

I thought for a minute. I wasn't supposed to take a test today or anything. "Okay. Sounds good."

"Sweet!" He turned back toward the kitchen and lifted up the chip bag. "Let me set this down, and then we can go. And, by the way..." he trailed off, staring at my forehead. "You might want to look in a mirror briefly."

Offended but curious, I raised my free hand and attempted to brush some strands of hair away from my face. They seemed to be slightly stuck. *Crap*. I still had a blob of foundation chilling on my face, junking up the ends of the hair that had swept into it in my haste to get myself together for class. I blushed. "Forgot that was there because *someone* freaked me out. I'm going to need a couple of minutes."

"Okay." He shrugged, then narrowed his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Grace."

"I'm Jake." He smiled. "I'm glad we ran into each other like this, Grace. It's nice to meet you."