

CHAPTER ONE

It was the smell of charred plastic that eventually woke me. I drew in a sharp breath of putrid air, and my brain throbbed against my skull. Against my better judgment, I opened my eyes. There it was—the ugly scattered remnants of the raging party the night before. The only thing was, I didn't remember going to a party. Light crept through wooden-slat shades and threw a thin grating on the trampled plastic cups and stains of questionable origin that stretched across what looked like a cramped excuse for a dance floor. As I continued to survey the damage, I wondered what was going to kill me first—my head, my stomach, or my mom.

I gently pushed myself up to a sitting position. I was alone, in a strange house, head pounding, and sitting on a navy blue leather couch. What time was it? Whose house was it anyway? Despite clear evidence of a typical high school party, I couldn't seem to remember when or how I'd gotten there. A half-melted pyramid of red Solo cups sagged on the nearby kitchen table, the likely culprit of that obnoxious smell.

I cracked my neck and looked around. There was some kind of scrawl on one of the walls, something about someone's mom and an unspeakable act with a chicken. There was a graveyard of chips, pretzels, and popcorn that extended across the entire carpeted floor. And then there was me.

One side of my neck was incredibly stiff. I chalked it up to as-of-yet-unknown activities from the previous night. Besides, the hurt in my head kind of overshadowed anything else. It was like there were a hundred little razor blades jostling around in my

brain. I'd never felt anything like it. I guessed that it was my first hangover. I prayed it would be my last.

A little confused and a lot disoriented, I pulled out my cell phone. Five missed calls from Mom.

“Great.” I pocketed the phone and forced myself to my feet. For a second I thought my stomach was going to add to the epic pattern of stains on the floor, but I pulled it together for long enough to get out the front door and down the steps. After an awesome session of upchucking on a well-manicured lawn, I wiped my face with my sleeve. My hands were shaking, and my forehead was disgustingly clammy. I wished I could remember what I did last night.

I looked at the number on the house: 1675 Karen Avenue. Uh... who did I know that lived at 1675 Karen Avenue? And where was everyone else? At least the house wasn't too far from home, just six agonizing blocks. I really hoped it was Saturday.

And so, I began my walk of shame.

Thick, cool shadows licked at the ground in front of me, cast by solid evergreens that lined the street. The shadows looked alive. With every little breeze, they quivered and shifted like some kind of dark amoeba. For a second I thought the neighborhood's old Victorian houses were leering at me with their antiquated porches, cold long windows, and pointed rooftops that seemed poised to impale. I squeezed my eyes shut and refocused on the tidy sidewalk that stretched in front of me. I thought I might lose what little was left in my stomach, but I managed to swallow back the sick, wet warmth.

The day was so bright it seemed to buzz. I felt my skin sizzling, but I'd only been outside for a whopping three minutes. If there was one thing I didn't drink last night, it was water. *Mom must be so freaked*, I thought. This was *so* not me. I'd never been that guy who parties every weekend and passes out in the street. Who was I kidding? I'd never been that guy who parties, period. I didn't even usually stay up late unless there was a test to cram for. Not that it made much difference—I was going to be grounded for eternity after this.

As I contemplated my imminent demise at the hands of my hardworking single mother, I drifted to the shady side of the street. Damn, it was hot out.

By the time I got home, my gag reflex was sort of under control, but my head still felt drilled and my hands just wouldn't quit shaking. And my skin ... my skin felt so tender, painful to the touch, and it was so ... colorless. I mean, I wasn't a tan guy to begin with, but I wasn't a porcelain doll, either. I just compared myself to a doll. *I really am dehydrated. Must. Drink. Water.*

I lingered for a minute on my front porch, bracing for the inevitable storm that waited inside. I slowly opened the door. As it always does before one can slip inside, it creaked. Loudly.

“Noah VANCE!” Mom bellowed simultaneously with the creak.

She tore around the corner toward the front door but stopped short when she saw me. Her fury faltered for just a split second before rushing back in full. I lowered my head. This had two purposes. One, it made me look ashamed, which I was, but now my shame was clearly displayed for Mom's sake. Two, I was ridiculously tired and holding

my head up was too much effort. It worked on both counts. Her tone softened just a touch, and my neck didn't feel like it was supporting an anvil.

I met her eyes with a low glance.

Her cropped, ash-blond hair frizzed out to one side. The dark circles under her brown eyes just accentuated the gray in them and they gave off a stormy but reflective sheen. They usually looked like that after a particularly paperwork-laden shift at the hospital, or the morning after a late-night *Law & Order* marathon. She was standing up straight with arms crossed, face red, head tilted to the side, like she was figuring out what to order off a menu. "Noah." She sighed.

"Hi, Mom."

"Where on earth have you been?"

"This is going to sound really bad, but I'm not sure."

"You're not sure. That's a new one."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"No, Mom, really. Listen..."

"No, you listen. I work really hard at the hospital to make sure you have everything you need, so I expect a certain level of common courtesy, and if you think you can just disappear without letting me know where you are or if you're okay..."

“I don’t even know where I was.”

“Oh! That makes me feel so much better!”

“I’m sorry, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay.”

“Can you please back off for one second and let me explain?”

She stopped. Her nostrils flared. I hated it when she flared her nostrils. She always did it when she got pissed, and it reminded me of a bull ready to charge.

I took a breath and started carefully. “I don’t know what happened. I don’t know if I blacked out or what. I remember the end of school on Friday, and how a bunch of people were planning to go to this party. I don’t know whose party it was. I don’t even remember going. All I remember is waking up alone in someone’s house, with a wicked hangover, I think, and wandering back here. I have no idea what I did, but I’m pretty sure I drank a lot of something. I’m sorry about that.”

It was getting to me more and more that I really didn’t know what had happened, but I only had three seconds to think about it before the ringing in my ears took over and the world went dark.

Two blackouts in twenty-four hours. I wasn’t crazy about that pattern. I woke up this time to the smell of a rich, rosy perfume—my mom’s only extravagance. I’ll admit, it was a big improvement over burned plastic and pee.

As the blur filtered out of my vision, I could see my mom's worried face hovering above me. *I must be on the floor*, I thought matter-of-factly.

"Noah?" she asked.

I tried to respond. "Mehhum ... " Hmm. That didn't come out right.

I could feel her bony hands on my shoulders; she was trying to sit me up. I took another breath and tried again. "Heeeeey..." Okay, a little better.

I managed to lift my pounding head, and slowly felt the sound of air wash over the ringing. The stars in my sight were winking out as well.

"Honey, are you okay?" She was in full-on mother mode now.

"Yeah. I guess. I don't know."

"You look really pale."

"I feel like sh—" She shot me a stern look. "Sorry." I put on the worst British accent I could muster. "I mean, I feel absolutely dreadful, Mummy." My lips curled into a smile. She just shook her head.

"Always a joker."

"How long was I out?"

"About three minutes, I think. How are you feeling now?"

"Let's see ... um ... " I licked my finger and stuck it in the air, as if to test the weather.

She rolled her eyes, but I could see her fighting a smile.

“Yeah, still crappy.”

“Well, let’s see if we can get you off the floor,” she suggested.

I tried to get up ... but my legs thought that was a bad idea, so I decided to sit tight for a second. As I reached up to rub my aching neck, I ran my fingers over two little bumps. They felt like bug bites. The skin was slightly raised and tender right by the vein on the side. Mom saw my fingers lingering on the spot.

“What is it?” She pulled my hand down for a better look.

“I don’t know, a bug bite maybe?” *This day just keeps getting better.*

For a second I wondered if I’d passed out in the yard last night, practically gift-wrapped for the swarms of mosquitoes that seemed to love feeding on me. But these bites didn’t itch, and there were only two as opposed to two dozen.

“It looks swollen—did you scratch it?”

Then, of course, she had to poke the bumps.

“Ouch! Mom!” I protested.

“Sorry, hon. I don’t know—this looks like a pretty big bug.”

“Awesome.”

“When do you think you got this?”

“I. Don’t. Know.” I was getting really tired of that phrase. “Last night?” I guessed.

“Well, let’s get you up to bed. We’ll get some liquids in you, and if that thing on your neck gets worse, maybe we can go see the doctor.”

“Whatever, it’s fine. It’s just a bite,” I said, convincing my body to get up from the floor.

When I finally made it upstairs, I curled into bed. Mom pulled the blinds down, and the dark seemed to help the pain in my head subside. A few hours later, I was tucked tightly under my covers, having sucked down three glasses of water and some green medical goo. Even the familiar comfort of my bed and the extra strength acetaminophen didn’t take the edge off of my physical agony. I started to fade in and out of consciousness. All went black for half a minute. When I came to, I watched as Mom took the thermometer out of my mouth and showed me the digital screen: 101

With that, I was out again. I know it makes me a weirdo, but I love fever dreams. They have a dark, fluid clarity, unlike anything else, so I didn’t fight it when I drifted off.

The sky was a subtle blue. There were no clouds. I was standing on a concrete foundation out of which rose the dark skeleton of a house. The sun, though diffused, was almost blinding, like a brilliant blanket. The shadows cast by the house danced languidly. At first I heard nothing but the slight hum of the wind. Surrounding the half-

made house was endless flat desert. And then I heard my name. It was just above a whisper, and it seemed to come from everywhere.

“Noah.”

I looked around. It wasn't hot or cold. The sky, the temperature, everything was shockingly neutral. I followed what I thought was a flash of red around a beam. Still nothing.

Then a low growl. I looked around and saw a yellow shape in the distance, shimmering silver from the heat rays. A bulldozer. It kicked up a steady cloud of dust behind it. Then I saw another. And another. They were slowly circling the bare-bones house.

“Noah.”

This time she just stood, waiting. She, too, shimmered like a mirage, but it was definitely her. My classmate. My friend. My dream girl.

“Paige.” My mouth formed her name, but nothing came out.

She smiled coyly.

I smiled back.

Then as suddenly as she'd appeared, ... she was gone. I heard the echo of her giggle like a ghost in the breeze. The dozers were close now, and a cloud of fine dust enveloped the house. All I could hear was the faint hiss of sand brushing against metal where there should have been a whirlwind of noise.

Then the house burst into quiet flame, and me along with it. All I felt was a shudder and a chill.

“It doesn’t make any sense.” I heard the confusion in Mom’s voice.

At first I thought Mom was talking about my dream. When I finally came to, I realized she couldn’t possibly have seen into my mind. I shook my head and rubbed my aching neck. Wow. I didn’t know how it was possible, but I actually felt worse now. Hit-by-a-semi worse. My muscles burned. My joints ached. There was a civil war going on in my head, and my whole body was pins and needles. Big needles.

“Paige,” I whispered. Her name felt clumsy and hollow on my chapped lips.

“Hmm?” Mom turned her attention toward me.

I groaned. Every breath stung. Every shred of light, noise, or movement lacerated my senses. This was worse than any hangover I’d ever heard about.

“What is it?” I asked.

Mom squeezed the thermometer between her fingers. Her lips were pressed thin.

“Mom, what?”

She showed me. The thermometer now read a hundred and four degrees, up three degrees from before my nap. As if that wasn’t bad enough, she took my hand and placed it on my own forehead, which felt shockingly cold.

I'd never heard of getting a fever with a hangover. That really didn't make any sense. I was completely confused, so Mom made a command decision.

"I'm taking you to the doctor."

Sure sounded good to me. Maybe a venomous spider had bitten me, and that creepy little sucker's poison was coursing through my veins that very second. Could you get malaria from the mosquitoes in Whitehaven? My mind raced. I hoped I wouldn't die from this. What a way to go. I could see the tombstone:

Noah M. Vance

1993 – 2011

Beloved son. Straight B+ student.

Never had the guts to ask out his crush.

Undone by excess booze and an eight-legged freak.

I knew I was being dramatic, but I sure felt like death; it wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine it coming for me.

Mom dragged my pathetic six-foot mass out to the car. I could kind of walk, but my legs were jelly. The ride to the doctor's office was a wash of green and flickers of light. At this point I started to really lose track of time. I rested my heavy head against the window. My eyes fluttered.

Before I knew it, I was out of the car, arm slung around my mother's shoulder, "walking" to the clinic entrance. And then I was sitting in the waiting area, in a scratchy

chair. I think it was olive green. On the wall, there was a Monet poster of a girl with a parasol. I swear I saw her wink.

Next, I was on the examination table. The crinkling of the sanitary paper was startlingly loud.

The nurse came in. She looked bored. Took my temperature.

A hundred and five.

Checked my eyes.

Super responsive. Damn that hurt. A lot.

Checked my ears.

Normal. I could hear her digging around in there. It was cacophonous.

Took my blood pressure.

Low. So low it didn't register. The nurse checked the device and tried again.

She still couldn't get a reading.

Checked my heartbeat.

Nothing.

Checked my heartbeat again.

Nothing.

She twisted her plump little mouth into a frown and pressed two fingers against my wrist.

“Um, you don’t have a pulse,” she said. “I mean, I can’t find it for some reason. Must be something wrong with our equipment ... or it’s just very faint.”

“Is that bad?” Mom asked.

I laughed dryly. It seemed like a funny question for someone who works in a hospital to ask.

“She just said I have no pulse. That can’t be good, right?”

Involuntarily, I slid my chilly hand over my chest. There was a distinct lack of anything. Despite what the nurse had said, this took me by surprise. I tried to find my heartbeat without success. How had I not noticed it was gone?

Then the doctor came in, and he tried to find my pulse. He didn’t.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mom pleaded.

She was starting to worry me. I hadn’t seen her so on edge since I accidentally ran my Buick Century into a ditch. I felt so bad, seeing her so anxious. I knew it hadn’t been easy for her as a single mother. I could barely even remember my father. Then the doctor spoke, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Well, he’s running a very high fever, and it appears he is intensely dehydrated. It’s most likely a nasty version of this flu that’s going around. I don’t want to prescribe any antibiotics if it is in fact a virus. I would say take him home, get him in an ice bath to

bring down the fever, and if it doesn't break in two hours, or if it continues to rise, take him to an emergency room. And try to get some fluids in him."

"What about the bumps on his neck?"

The doctor paused for a second, then looked down the bridge of his nose at the slightly inflamed tissue on my neck. He grunted.

"It doesn't look like a spider bite, possibly a scratch, or a puncture?" He turned to me. "Do you remember how you got this?"

"Not a clue," I slurred.

"Hmm. Well, just monitor it. It doesn't appear to be infected. I don't think it's anything to worry about just yet."

With that, the doctor was done with me and on to the next case. Even though I had no heartbeat.

When we got home, Mom drew a cold bath to bring down my temperature. Can't say I was thrilled about it. My arms braced on the edge of the tub. I tried a few quick breaths to quell the rising tension. It didn't work.

I need this, I thought. I'm going to die unless I get this fever down. I can do this.

"Come on, Noah." I took a long hard look at the water. "You can do this."

I raised my eyes and focused on the wall.

Breathe out.

Legs in.

All or nothing.

I closed my eyes. I rolled my whole body into the chilly water. My eyes shot open. An awful wail, muffled by the icy water, ripped itself out of me. The power raced through my arms and legs, shooting them outward against the walls of the old claw-footed tub, which cracked into four solid pieces. The water gushed out around me. Time was moving in such minuscule increments, I thought I was in a dream.

A sense of tingling relief engulfed my body for the length of a heartbeat, but suddenly my back arched violently upward, as if pulled by a sadistic puppeteer. I sucked in one last breath. Then, as the water surged greedily across the floor, my world went dark again.

There is no such thing as a death rattle. It's more of a hiss.