

UNTOUCHABLE

By

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PROLOGUE

He pushed the money across the table. "Are you sure you can handle this assignment? It's different from what you usually do."

"I can handle it."

"You realize you're going to have to get close."

"Yeah, I know. No shot from across the parking lot."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know, I know. This one is all about trust."

"People tend to get attached to those who trust them. I've seen entire plans ruined because someone couldn't pull the trigger."

He slowly thumbed through the money. "I've never botched a job, and I don't plan on starting now. When will I get the other two-hundred thousand?"

A cell phone slid across the table. "This is our only contact. You call me when the job is finished, and I'll tell you where to get the rest of the money."

He studied the cell phone for a moment. "So who is she really? This is a little more cloak and dagger than usual." The question was being ignored. He knew better than to repeat it.

"Did you have any problems getting the papers?"

"I never have problems with paperwork. You know that."

"Just making sure. Your associates are the best in the business, but one never knows when a tie might get cut."

"No, not even if I wanted to. It's just too lucrative to switch careers now."

"How long?"

"How long will it take? Depends on how trustworthy I look."

"You have at least six weeks. If it isn't finished by then—well, I guess I'll assume you couldn't do it. In any case, someone will finish the job—and you. No hard feelings, but with fifty-thousand dollars down, someone's gotta pay for it."

He pulled the top of the gun back to chamber a bullet, "Like I said, I can handle it."

CHAPTER ONE

I drove my little blue Volkswagen into the school parking lot then turned off the engine, but left it on accessory so I could sing a little bit longer. Jewels, the varsity cheer captain, waved furiously to me from her little Kia. She began to dance in her seat as the bass from her stereo became loud enough to pummel me through steel and glass. She motioned me to come over and join the fun.

I really didn't feel like getting my eardrums smashed this morning, but you don't turn down

Jewels when she wants something. With that, I unplugged my iPod and slipped it into the pocket of my hoodie, and gave her the signal like, “Hang on a minute, I’m getting there!”

“Hey!” I shouted as I opened the door and tried to slip into the passenger’s seat. The force of the music was so hard on my chest that it literally felt like an invisible pair of hands pushing me back, warning me not to come closer. I saw her lips move, but I couldn’t make out what she said. “Jewels, turn it down! I can’t hear you!” I yelled into the bass-polluted void.

She cocked her head slightly sideways as she wrinkled her little Barbie nose. Her hand went straight for the volume and turned it down. “Wha—What’d you say?”

“You know you are going to be deaf by the time you hit twenty,” I warned, sliding into the seat. “And, your dad would flip if he caught you playing the radio that loud.”

She threw her head back like some little demon-possessed monster and laughed, “He hasn’t got a clue! Why do you think I park next to you every day? He thinks you’re the one with the bad taste in music.”

“Ah, that’s just great, Jewels. I listen to Christian rock and he thinks I’m into K-fed. No wonder he gives me the evil eye during lunch.”

“Don’t be stupid, Leese. He’s the principal; he gives everyone the ‘evil eye,’” she said, making quotation marks in the air. “He just does that so everyone will think he’s mean and tough, and that way they won’t get out of line.”

“Yeah, I’m a real dangerous—”

“Oh, Momma!” Jewels exclaimed, cutting me off and jerking my arm.

“Ouch! Jewels—you’ve got my hair, Jewels!” But I could see by the look on her face she hadn’t heard a word. I followed her eyes to where a guy was climbing out of a black 370Z two rows over from us. With all the muscle he had, he really didn’t look like someone who should be called a student. He was dressed in blue jeans and a Hollister shirt, neither of which had an inch to spare. He reached back into the car, pulled out a folder of papers, and glanced around as if he had no clue where he was going.

“OMG!” Jewels sputtered, “He *must* be new.”

“Jewels, people don’t normally talk text language.”

She continued to ignore me.

“Come on! We have to go show Mr. Hunk where the *office is*.” She sang out the last two words.

“No, no thanks. I’m not going to be late for class to get the latest guy you are drooling over to the office.”

She looked up quickly into her rearview mirror. “I’m not drooling—am I?” She wiped the corners of her perfectly lip-glossed lips and smiled. “You’re a stick-in-the-mud! See ya later.”

And with that, she practically skipped across the parking lot to meet Mr. Hunk, or whatever his name would turn out to be. I knew I’d meet up with them later because once Jewels sank her claws into a guy, she didn’t let go easily.

By the time I’d finished AP English, Psych II, and Macro Economics, I was starving and ready to dive into a grilled chicken salad. I had forgotten about Jewels chasing after Mr. Hunk until I stepped into the cafeteria. There she was, parading around with what’s-his-face on her arm, going to each of her friends (which amounted to the majority of the cafeteria) and making introductions. I had no desire to meet this guy before my stomach met a salad. I pulled my long brown hair from the ponytail holder and brought it around to cover the side of my face.

“Hey, Lee—”

“Shhh!” I motioned Kevin to keep quiet as I stepped into the lunch line. He looked perplexed

until I mouthed the word, “Jewels.”

“Oh,” he responded with complete understanding.

I had the first mouthful of ranch covered, mouth-watering Romaine and whatever it was that the school passed off as grilled chicken ready to put between my lips when I heard Jewels say, “There you are!”

I paused mid-bite and slowly lowered the fork. Taking a deep breath, I looked up to see her beaming a huge smile and standing beside Mr. Hunk. Oh yes, with closer inspection he was exactly that. He looked like a jock: tall, broad shoulders, muscled arms, and definitely some six-pack abs hidden under his brown and blue striped shirt. He smiled as I quickly wiped the drop of dressing that made it to my lip before the interruption.

“Evan Lewis, this is Annalisa McKinnis, but we just call her Leese. Leese, this is Evan. He’s new,” she added with a little quiver to her voice that told me she could barely keep her enthusiasm under control. “Leese is new, too,” she went on. “Not really new like you, but she started at the beginning of the school year. She moved here from...” Her voice trailed.

I realized she’d forgotten where I told her I was from. I wanted to blurt out Palm Beach, but I had to remember that subject was taboo.

“Alabama,” I said, offering my hand.

“Really?”

He took my hand into his warm, firm grip. “What part? I have family in Alabama.”

I withdrew my hand. “Nor—northern,” I stammered. “Birmingham,” I added for a pinch more credibility.

“Yeah, that’s where my uncle lives. Where in Birmingham are you from?”

“Jewels are you going to let Evan eat, or are you going to parade him around the cafeteria the whole lunch period?” I dodged.

She glanced at her watch, “Wow, we only have about ten minutes left. Are you hungry, Evan?”

“Sure. Are you getting something?”

“Yeah, I was going to get a shake.” She started to pull him toward the dwindling line, but he slipped out of her grasp and went for his wallet instead.

He flipped out a ten then flashed a devastating smile. “No sense in both of us being in line. Would you mind grabbing me a burger?”

“Oh—sure,” she fumbled, clearly unhappy with the prospect of leaving him alone, even if it was only for a few minutes.

“Unless you want me to...” he motioned toward the line.

“Oh, no, no, that’s okay. I’ll be right back.”

Evan sat across from me and continued where he left off. “You don’t talk like an Alabamian. Where in Birmingham did you say?”

“Ah, Miss McKinnis,” came a commanding voice.

I smiled at Evan because I was never quite so glad for the principal to approach. “Mr. Lykman,” I said, turning around in the chair to face him. “Did you meet—”

“Yes, I did. Jewels brought him by my office this morning.” But his tone indicated he would not be distracted by small talk.

I knew what he wanted to discuss. Bring it on, I thought. This has to be better than making up stuff about Birmingham, Alabama, which I know nothing about.

“I also heard your stereo this morning *all the way from the parking lot to the main office*. You do know there is a noise ordinance in the city limits, right?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I accidentally turned the volume the wrong direction, and before I could turn it down, I saw Jewels rocking out to my music and—”

He let a sound escape similar to someone blowing an annoying fly away from their mouth. “Don’t make a habit of it. You might find Officer Martin in the parking lot one morning.”

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled. I finally placed my forkful of salad into my mouth. The bell would ring in a few minutes, and I was still starving. Cute guy and principal watching or not, I was going to eat. Besides, how many questions can someone throw at you when you are stuffing your face?

“Hey, Dad,” Jewels interrupted, as she placed the foil wrapped burger in front of Evan. “Is it too late for Evan to try out for spring football?”

“No, that’s okay Jewels. I really don’t—” Evan started to say.

Principal Lykman began to smile because other than intimidating students, football was his focus. “You certainly look like you could do some damage on the field, Mr. Lewis. Did you play ball for Dawson High School?”

“Ah—no, sir. I was into weightlifting.” It was Evan’s turn to look uncomfortable.

I couldn’t figure out why. Could he possibly be the one guy on the planet who didn’t like football? Surely he had played some rough sports. He had a scar above his right eyebrow and another across his sculpted chin. I glanced at his hands; his knuckles had taken a beating, or more likely, given a beating a few times. Surely this guy had played some kind of contact sport.

“Well, you should try out anyway,” Mr. Lykman continued. “You have the right build for it.” He slapped Evan on the shoulder. “I’ll talk to Coach Cleveland. We’ll look over your grades from Dawson.”

“Ah, I really—”

“Great!” Jewels chimed in. “Now, Daddy, leave us alone so we can eat before the bell.” Then she gave her ‘I like getting everything I want’ smile and said, “Unless you want to give us late lunch passes?”

Mr. Lykman’s face hardened, “No. Eat. You have two minutes left.” He looked briefly at his watch then walked away.

“Thanks Jewels,” I whispered as soon as her dad was out of earshot. “I’ve been basically told that the resource officer will be waiting for *my* music to get too loud in the parking lot.”

“That was you?” Evan asked with genuine surprise.

I gave a fake smile, “No, it was Jewels. I’m just the scapegoat.”

“Leese is the Christian rock singer. I’m the rapper girl,” she said with a wink and a peace-out hand sign.

“You sing?”

I simply nodded.

Jewels continued, “Yeah, Leese is really good. I got to listen to her at one of her Wednesday night Christian jam sessions.”

“It’s called youth group, Jewels,” I corrected.

“Well, anyway, I told her she should like try out for American Idol, but she won’t do it.”

“Why not?”

I smiled at him and shrugged, “I guess because I don’t like attention; I’m an introvert at heart.” This was a straight-faced lie because I actually used to like the lime-light before my life went nuts.

“So why did you take the blame for Jewels?” The whole concept of taking blame for someone else seemed to confuse him.

"It doesn't matter," I shrugged. "One of these days she isn't going to have me to park beside, and she'll be busted."

"Why? Are you leaving?"

I looked into those dark green eyes and wondered why the seriousness to the question. He was handsome, but I was sworn to secrecy, and I wasn't about to babble things to this guy I barely knew.

"No. I mean, you know, like I might be absent one day."

The ear-splitting bell rang above the cafeteria noise. Hopefully, it would end my uncomfortable conversation.

"What class are you going to?" he asked me as Jewels grabbed his left arm and started pulling him toward the door.

"French," I smiled, completely confident it was a class that anyone looking as tough as Evan would never be enrolled in.

"Me, too," he grinned, and laced his free arm through mine.

Jewels wasn't happy when she had to turn loose of him as we rounded the bend to the foreign language wing. "Well," she sighed, "I have to go to English. What's your schedule like for tomorrow?"

He fumbled in his pocket for the pink paper then handed it to her. "You tell me. The schedule here is crazy."

"It's not that hard to get used to," I replied, glancing over at his classes. "You have even and odd days, but every day you have first period. Today is even: one, two, four and six. Tomorrow is odd: one, three, five and seven."

"All right! We have P.E. together tomorrow," Jewels responded, never getting the point that he was as confused about the even/odd days as I was when I started. She smiled at him, "If I don't see you after school today, I'll catch you in Government tomorrow morning. Bye!" And she took off down the hall, grabbing the arm of one of the football players as she went.

Evan raised his eyebrows, "So, does Jewels have a boyfriend?"

I couldn't help but to laugh, "Well, I guess she has several. You just happen to be the FOTM right now."

"FOTM?" he questioned as he held open the door for me to French class.

"Yeah, you know, the 'flavor of the month.'"

"Oh, okay, I get it. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to have some pissed off guy waiting for me in the parking lot."

"No, I don't think that's going to happen, but if it did," I paused, checking out the biceps as he handed the teacher his schedule. "I think you could handle yourself."

"Damn right," he responded, and then became aware he was standing in front of a teacher.

My mouth gapped open. I felt the flush of embarrassment color my cheeks.

Mrs. Knoosh's eyebrows knitted together in a scowl. "I'll not have any of that talk in my classroom, Mr. Lewis. I suppose you'll be starting your first day with a referral."

"Je suis désolé, Madame," he replied in French.

"Ah," she sighed, breaking out in a big smile and clapping her hands together. "Parlez-vous français?"

"Oui, Madame—depuis que je suis un garçon," he smiled.

"Avez vous habité en France?" By this point she was glowing, evidently forgetting altogether his verbal blunder when he came into the classroom.

"Non. Je suis de la Nouvelle-Orléans."

“Ah, oui—Nouvelle-Orléans. Je suis heureuse de vous rencontrer, Monsieur Lewis.”

“Merci,” he responded in his flawlessly executed and accented French.

“Annalisa,” she said turning to me, “Since Mr. Lewis is new perhaps you would be a good influence.” Her eyes cut quickly back to Evan, “Asseyez-vous dans le fauteuil à côté de Annalisa.”

With that, Evan suddenly seemed very pleased. “Merci beaucoup.”

I was a third year French student, so I understood most of what they were saying, but I was still in shock that Evan was apparently so good at it.

“Wow!” I whispered as we took our seats, and the majority of the heads began turning back to face the teacher. “You certainly surprised me.”

“Why? Don’t I look like someone who can speak another language?”

“No, because she didn’t write you up for cussing.” I couldn’t help but snicker just a little because I really didn’t think he looked like someone who could speak another language, but I wasn’t going to let him off so easy, especially since he was evidently off the hook for his slip of the tongue.

He gave me a really sexy smile and raised one eyebrow, “They don’t call it the language of love for nothing.”

“Ah!” I smacked him lightly on the shoulder with the textbook. “Page 148, s’il vous plaît, Monsieur.”

We spent the rest of class conjugating verbs, but I have to admit he did most the conjugating before I could open my mouth. It seemed to please him that he could run circles around me in French.

Ten minutes before the bell, Mrs. Knoosh announced that we were allowed free time to talk quietly.

“So what do you do after school?” Evan asked, turning in his chair to face me. I stared at him for a minute just taking in the handsome lines of his face; his dark brown hair had that hand-tousled look like instead of combing it, he just ran his fingers through it. His green eyes sparkled from beneath long black lashes, set against a creamy, but not quite tan face. I still wanted to ask about the two scars, but figured it wasn’t very polite. For just a moment, I forgot all my troubles and secrets; I was just a high school girl talking with a cute guy.

“Hello? Earth to Leese,” he said, waving a hand in front of my eyes.

“Umm—sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. What did you say?”

“What do you do after school? Do you want to hang out somewhere? I haven’t seen much of the town since I got here yesterday, but I’m guessing you have a McDonalds or some kind of place like that for a quick bite.”

Reality snagged me back to the problems in my life. “I—I can’t. I have tons of home work, and I have to babysit my little sister until my—my aunt and uncle get home. But,” I added, “there are a couple McDonalds close by; one is up on Fairview, and there is another in the historic district on Cervantes.”

“You’re kidding, right? You can’t stop to get something before you go home?”

“No, afraid not. But,” and it was killing me to say this, “I’m sure Jewels would be thrilled to show you around town.” Jewels had a half dozen guys wrapped around her little pinky, and I was getting ready to add another one to her collection.

He honestly looked dejected as he closed his textbook. “Yeah, but going with Jewels doesn’t help me get to know you, does it?”

The way he said it gave me a tingle; this guy is really interested in me. I had some male

friends at PHS, but they were easy to keep just as friends. I made it a point to *never* give out the signals that would lead a boy to assume I was in the market for anything else. I was use to lavish attention from the cute guys at my old school, but then again, they knew who I was. It always left me wondering what they were really interested in. Here, I didn't have my Porsche or my designer clothes to scream out to everyone, "Hey, I'm somebody!" Instead, everything about me had been toned down so no attention would be drawn to me. Yet this guy didn't seem to care that I was wearing Wal-Mart off-the-rack, or the fact that I wasn't dripping in jewelry.

I tried a smile, but it was weak, "Jewels is more interesting, I'm sure."

"Definitely not. I spent first and third period with her. I can tell you she is extremely shallow—nice, of course, but nothing more than ankle-deep. You on the other hand, I get the feeling have a whole ocean available."

I rolled my eyes; all the while my pulse was picking up the pace. "Not me," I said, trying to sound convincing. "I'm an ankle-deeper one, too." Then, thankfully, the bell rang.

He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Liar."

In that instant, I realized he had on cologne. It was very faint, like he'd put it on yesterday and only a little remained, but it was awesome. Without a conscious thought, I closed my eyes and inhaled. What was it? Expensive and very masculine, but I couldn't think of the name. When I opened my eyes he was smiling and still just a little bit too close. I grabbed my books and made a bee-line for the door.

"Hey, wait up. Don't I even get to walk you to your car?"

I didn't slow down, but it only took him a moment to catch up with me.

"Do you always bolt for the door at the last bell?"

"You aren't going to turn out to be some kind of stalker, are you?" I asked with feigned terseness, as I struggled to keep from smiling.

He didn't answer.

We weaved through the crowded halls then headed outside. He still wasn't talking as we came out into the sun-filled mayhem of teenagers going either toward the bus line or the parking lot. I began to think I had actually hurt his feelings when I snuck a quick glance at his face. He caught me looking.

"Maybe," was all he said.

I pulled out my key as we came close to my VW. Even though it wasn't new, I had to retain just a little bit of the freedom that I once took for granted.

"Maybe what? You have a little bit of stalker in you?" I managed to put a tiny bit of a teasing edge back into my voice, but on the inside I felt like it was pointless. There was no way I was going to get involved with a guy in Pensacola when my whole life was a couple hundred miles away.

"VW Bug. Cool. Whoa, I am impressed," he added when I opened my door and toss my books to the passenger's side.

"It's five years old," I retorted, lowering myself into the driver's seat. "Nothing impressive about that, not like that gorgeous Z you have sitting over there."

He reached over me and wiggled the shifter. "No, I don't mean your car. I mean that it's a stick."

"Oh," was all I could manage as he had put himself practically in my face to reach inside. He must have sensed that I was a little uncomfortable over the lack of personal space because he backed off to an *almost* respectable distance.

He leaned toward me from the door frame, "Most chicks can't drive stick," he finished.

“My first car was...” Oops. I’d said a little too much. How many cars could a seventeen year old girl have been through? “I mean this is my first car—and, yep,” I said waving my hand over the shifter like some ditsy game show hostess, “it’s a stick.”

“Mine is a stick.” He smiled, “You could actually drive it sometime, if you’d like. If you think you can handle it.”

I tried to keep the smirk from rising to my lips. I wanted to tell him I’d been trained in an evasive driving school that specialized in survival, stunt, and anti-terrorist driving tactics. I wanted to see him plastered to his passenger’s seat when I dropped the gears and spun his car a hundred and eighty degrees then smoked his tires off as I reached speeds hardly legal for the Autobahn. I sighed as I thought about my gun-metal Porsche 911 sitting in storage on the other coast. “No, I don’t think I could handle it,” I finally replied.

“Hi, guys!” came a welcomed voice from behind Evan, and I knew I’d soon be released from this uncomfortable moment. Jewels had found us.

“Hey, Jewels,” I laughed, glad for once to have her bouncy presence. “Evan asked me where he could grab a bite.”

“Nah, that’s okay, I—” he started to say, clearly uncomfortable that he was about to be put back into her grasp.

“Nonsense,” Jewels said with a dismissive wave of her perfectly manicured hand. “I’m meeting Kevin, Carlie, Nate, and Natasha at Sonic in like ten minutes. You can follow me or...” Her eyes suddenly lit up as she considered what she watched Mr. Hunk crawl out of this morning, “I could ride with you then you could drop me back off here at school.”

“I don’t know,” he began, “do you think you can talk Leese into joining us?”

I gave him a blistering stare.

“Ah,” she sighed, “I only wish. Leese is the gotta-do-my-homework-babysitter-extraordinaire. I have a hard enough time just getting her to go out with us on the weekends.”

Ah, crap! I watched the grin spread across his face.

“So, you *do* have a life. I just have to wait for the weekend, huh?”

I had a feeling this was payback for returning him to Jewels clutches. If I could have slipped my fingers around her dainty throat, I would have choked her. All I could think was she should have waited to ask me if I had any interest in this guy *before* mentioning weekends.

“Yeah,” she continued, oblivious to the look of discomfort on my face. “There is a group of us going to the movies Friday night. Wanna come?”

“And you’re going?” he asked, looking down at me.

I wanted to say, ‘I *was*’ instead of ‘I am’ but then actually avoiding him would have been way too apparent. “Yeah,” I sighed, “unless the earth falls apart first.”

His hand slapped the roof of my car, “Great, I’m in for Friday night!”

Jewels let out a squeal of delight.

I honestly don’t think she cared so much about the fact that he only seemed interested in whether I was going or not. She was the type of person who liked to surround herself with the cool or gorgeous people from school. Yeah, he was right—she was shallow. I started my car, and told them goodbye.

I stopped by the grocery store to grab milk, bread, and cat food for Beverly, my aunt-for-show. Then I headed to the elementary school to pickup my six-year-old sister, Kimmy. The pickup line for car riders was long, as usual. I sat there inching my way forward every few moments, but the whole time I was thinking about Evan. I kept thinking about driving his car and seeing the surprise on his face. I chuckled to myself, but realized I needed a new game plan for

tomorrow. I needed to act as if I had no interest in him. I would have to be the stick-in-the-mud. Jewels called me earlier this morning. I'd have to be more than a stick-in-the-mud—I would have to be just plain old mud. I sighed as I made my decision for tomorrow; no makeup. Yeah, that should do it.

The car door opened and Kimmy jumped in with her Hello Kitty backpack in hand.

"Have a good day," Ms. Brenderson said as she prepared to shut the door. "And don't forget," she added, pulling it open again, "wear your seat belt." She did that every day, and every time Kimmy would laugh.

She buckled her seat belt as I checked my side mirror for an opening to pull out. "So did you have a good day, kiddo?"

"Oh yes." She began rattling off everything she did in her first-grade classroom.

I was listening, kind of. I couldn't help it though when my mind drifted back to the smell of his cologne, the way he reached into my car, and the smile on his face when he knew I was going out Friday night.

"Snap out of it, Leese," I said aloud.

"Snap out of what?" Kimmy questioned.

"Sorry, Kimmy. I was just thinking about someone from my school."

"A boy?" she asked with a funny little lilt to her voice.

"No, of course not." And here I thought she was too young to figure that out.

"I bet it's a boy. It's okay, Leese. You can like a boy if you want to. I like Michael Peters. He's in my class. I think about him all the time, too."

I looked at her, and she looked at me then we both began to giggle.

"Is he cute?" I questioned with exaggerated interest.

"Oh yes. He's seven and he's missing his front teeth, but I still want to kiss him!"

"Kimmy!" I didn't have to fake the shock. "You don't go around kissing boys."

"Sure you do, Leese. Don't you watch TV?"

"Apparently not the same shows that you do, young lady," I said as I pulled into the driveway.

"Oh, come on, Leese: Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid—they all kiss the boys they love."

I frowned for a moment, considering that even though they were cartoons, she was right; it was all about one great kiss. "I guess, but you should wait until you're older. You might not even like Mike what's-his-name next year." For that matter, I was thinking we might not even be here next year, but I didn't want to get her hopes up about going home or dash them about leaving her friends.

"Peters," she corrected me as she trudged up the front steps. "It's okay, Leese. I'm just livin' my life." She sounded like some mini-scholar dispensing wisdom to any dumb teenager who walked by. My eyes began to sting, tears filling my bottom lashes; that was mom's line. She raised us with the motto to always live your life, don't just go through it.

"Life," I recalled her saying, "is a daily experience. God gives us a fresh chance every morning to discover what's out there. I hope when you grow old, God willing, you'll look back and say, thanks for the memories, instead of saying wait, let me go back. I was just getting by. Let me go back and re-do it. This is a one-shot deal."

I put away the small amount of groceries while mopping the tears off my face. I thought I was past all the sobbing and pain, but just five little words reminded me that I wasn't living my life. I was stuck here because Mom started freaking out with the idea that someone was trying to

hurt us, or worse.

Ever since her dad took his life two years ago, she had become convinced that it wasn't suicide and that someone was after our money. She started having trouble sleeping, then, when she did sleep, she'd wake screaming from nightmares. Dad was at his wits end when she started saying Kimmy and I had to go some place safe. We had to go away until whoever was doing this to our family had been caught. The problem was, as far as I could tell, there wasn't anyone doing anything to our family—Mom was losing her sanity.

Then, last July, our yacht which was docked in the backyard in the intercoastal waterway, caught fire, and she snapped. She called Matt and Beverly. They had attended college together at Florida State University, and were still close friends. I think they were the only friends who weren't stinking rich. Somehow that equated to being safe in Mom's book. She asked if they could take us in until things got back to normal. And, of course, with a generous cash offer to cover any needs we might have, they said yes. I truly think Matt and Bev would have let us come live with them even if Mom couldn't spare a nickel, but Beverly said with the economy going the way it was, she was certainly grateful to put some extra money in the bank.

I checked on Kimmy. She sat at the dining room table working on her vocabulary words. "Need any help?" I asked, my voice still filled with sadness.

"Nope, I'm fine." She had her pencil in hand, the tip of her tongue poking out the right side of her mouth, and her feet swinging back and forth below the chair. She didn't seem to notice the tone of my voice, and I wasn't going to bring her down by crying in front of her.

"I'm going to start my homework. You can watch TV when you're done, okay?"

"Okay, Leese." She never looked up, but just kept working to write her words neatly.

Moments like today, I was glad I'd taken honors and AP courses. I had plenty of homework to keep my mind off everything, especially things like Evan. He would just complicate my life, and it certainly didn't need any more complications.

Matt arrived home first from work. He was an environmental engineer, but there wasn't enough work to keep him with the firm that he'd been with since he graduated college seven years ago, so for the last year and a half he'd been working with a survey company. The problem was there wasn't much happening in the commercial or residential real estate business either, so the need for surveys had dropped dramatically. I could tell he was worried, but I also knew Mom's monetary gift would keep them from losing their home, and probably leave enough room to supplement their incomes for at least a year.

He walked through the door, setting his dirty work boots in the foyer. I had grabbed him a cold coke from the fridge and just popped the top when he looked up at me.

"Hey, Leese." He gave a little groan as he leaned backward with his hands on his hips trying to crack his back. "Thanks," he said, reaching for the coke.

"Tired, Matt?"

He made a nasal "Uh-huh," then slugged down the soda. Within moments, he handed me back the empty can—and let out a huge burp.

"That's gross, Matt," I yelled as he marched down the hallway.

"Can't help it, kid," he shouted back. "You give me a coke, and you know I'll burp. I'm going to jump in the shower before Bev gets in." The bedroom door closed and reopened a moment later as he peeked down the hallway. "Would you mind throwing the lasagna in the microwave, Leese? At least it will be done when Bev gets home."

I had the same idea earlier; it was thawing on the counter, so I said, "Sure," and kept working. I set the timer for 22 minutes and went to help Kimmy clean up her mess in the dining

room. Bev pulled in just as the timer went off. It didn't take long before I heard Matt Junior's little feet running into the house. I jumped out from the dining room archway just in time to scare him.

"Boo!"

He squealed with delight then turned to run back to Beverly. "Mama!" he called.

"Matt-Moo," Kimmy crooned from behind the living room couch, "come find me."

And the game began. Every afternoon she played hide-and-seek with Matt Junior. He never seemed to grow tired of looking for her, even though the living room was small and there weren't many places for her to hide.

Bev tossed a salad while I warmed a couple cans of green beans, and dinner was done. One thing I had to admit, it was nice to be around so much normalcy in life. Back in Palm Beach, we were always on the go. Dinner together was usually at a restaurant between lessons. Mom kept us involved all the time doing something. Kimmy had taken swimming lessons before she could even walk. Then there were dance, singing, and art lessons. I had taken dance, singing, piano, and baton.

Before I turned fifteen, Mom bought me a Jaguar convertible then sent me to evasive driving school. It just wasn't sporty enough, and I couldn't do some of the cool things with it that a car with a manual transmission could offer, so when I passed my restricted license test, I bought a Porsche.

My driving trainer, Tony Dix, got special permission (amazing what money can buy) to let me try out my new car on the Daytona speedway. What a thrill! I could accelerate from zero to sixty in just over four seconds, and could reach one-ninety on the straightaway.

The last lesson Tony taught me was my choice. He asked if there was anything left I'd like to learn. I remembered a move I saw on TV a couple times where the person did a quarter-spin then slid into a parallel parking space at about thirty miles per hour. He thought that was hilarious, but said sure he could teach me. I spent two days learning it and one day perfecting it. The only thing he made me promise was that I'd never try it out in downtown Palm Beach! Reluctantly, I agreed.

I had been in martial arts since the week after grandpa died. I earned a black-belt after a year, and was working toward my second black belt when Mom pulled the plug on our almost-fairy-tale life and sent us here. It was like doing two hundred miles-per-hour then slamming on the brakes full force. Here it was Normalsville, USA. I got a VW bug, a cheap cell phone, a department store wardrobe, and a new last name. My only luxury I was allowed to keep was a special pre-paid Visa with a hundred grand in the account.

The weird part was I never hated being sent here. I mean, you know, I cried a lot at first, but that was mainly because I didn't know what was going on back home. Being normal took a little getting used to, but in a way it was cool. I made friends, real friends because I had nothing else to impress them with, and that felt good.