

# Chapter 1

Once upon a sixteenth birthday, there came three life lessons for one little tomboy: 1.) Buckle your seatbelt, 2.) Karma sucks, and 3.) I am NOT adopted.

Don't get me wrong: my parents did an outstanding job raising a stubborn, aggravating, whimsical little girl from teeny to teens. I had a happy life with my family, and by 'happy', I mean, no one was trying to kill me.

I slid my cargo pants and black tank top into the cushioned seats. I adjusted the head pillow to support my neck under my ponytail. I inhaled the new-car smell until my nose could not swell further. I put in my favorite hip-hop CD which would've made my granny's ears bleed and turned the volume all the way up. My windows thrummed with the noise. My lips quietly recited the lyrics. I checked my reflection in my rearview mirror. I plopped my cell phone into the cup holder of my car. The bass of the music vibrated through my steering wheel. Ford Saturn '09. Four doors and a surround sound. Copper-tone. Leather seats. Tinted windows. Me, Junie Jasmine. The click of metal meant I was strapped in. We were one- my car and I.

My dad reminded me of "rules," that had slipped out of my head like an old strand of hair after passing the driver's license test. I knew the basics: red is stop, green is go, and yellow is go faster.

We rounded the curves. We flew down the interstate. The Iowan roads stretched out in front of us like a black snake winding through the rolling fields of yellowed corn. I rolled down my window whenever I pulled up alongside a car, throwing fake gang-signs to emphasize certain lyrics.

I tell myself no sixteen-year-old girl would be worried when she'd just gotten her independence.

I guess that's why I didn't see it.

Another driver rammed on his brakes in front of me. The car crashed explosively into another one. I freaked and yanked a strong turn on the wheel, headlong into a ditch. I didn't remove my feet from the gas fast enough, and the car came to slamming stop. Just as my head hit the safety pillow, parts of my life came back to me. I remembered the dog chasing me down the street. I remembered salsa dancing with my father in the living room. My best friend Joe and I hanging out on our apartment steps. There were other memories I didn't know were mine- a sunlit, expansive temple with arches in its ceiling; a dank laboratory with gurgling chemicals in test tubes; a golden, red-roof palace. Perhaps one remembered movies too.

The car jerked for a moment, then silence.

I waited. I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't focus. I checked myself. I wasn't hurt visibly, but sore. I released my seatbelt and tried to open the car door. The collision crunched my car into the ditch, the roof, broken and bent. I squeezed out by dragging my

knees to my door and falling into the ditch. I stood shakily on the ground in the ditch.

Right there, I could have been killed.

Me? Dead? Unthinkable.

The cars looked as if it had collided into the side of another. Bent-shapes. Broken hoods. Totaled. Was anyone hurt? I made to move, but my sides ached. Was I hurt? My ribs were sore. I wanted to scream for help. People could be dying. I could be dying. I had to move. Why couldn't I make my feet move? When did the Earth tilt? When did the sky get so close? How could anyone survive that? How did I survive that? Oh, God. No, Junie, no. Don't cry. Move your ass. People need you.

I didn't see anyone else. The other two cars were in a broken T-shape, their front and back bent into impossible shapes, their drivers unable to be seen from where I stood. The cars were a mangled heap of metal. We were on an empty road, of nothing but yellow, rolling hills of the Midwest, USA. My ear drums pulsed silence.

"Move," I told myself and I pulled myself out of the ditch and unto the road. I couldn't even tell the model of the cars. And my Saturn, its head stuck in the ditch, its lights busted, and one of its doors bent. What just happened?

I crossed my arms around the knot in the stomach. Focus, Junie. The car pile smoked; parts of the cars littered the street. The

road was hot from the accident. *Oh, God. What if there were bodies? Oh, God.*

“Hello?”

A man appeared beside me, scaring the beejeezus out of me. I put my hand over my chest to keep my heart from popping out. I only saw him when I noticed the dimness caused by the blocking of the sun.

Tall and pale, his figure stretched in a pin-striped suit that added to his slimness, dark like the features of his face. A scruff of a beard, his rich black hair in a low ponytail. Straight up and down, I had to crane my neck to get a good look at him. He looked somewhere in his twenties and stared down at me with gray eyes. He carried an instrument case, which was shaped like a coffin, strapped to his back. He did not look ruffled; surely he had not been a driver in either of the other two cars. How did he survive *that* so... unfazed?

“Wha-?” My brain scrambled. “Are you okay?”

The gray eyes flashed over my body; he was still so quiet.

“Look, I’m fine. Just go help those people.” I waved towards the cars. “I think I’m going to be sick.” I clutched my side and winced in pain.

Still he stood there. The instrument case looked heavy.

“Call 911, would you?” I pleaded, my cell phone still in my wrecked car. The moment I said this I heard a faraway ambulance

coming closer, its sirens getting louder. His eyes watched me as I searched for the direction of the ambulance.

I started towards the ambulance. When I stumbled, he grabbed me, around the waist, his hands so cold that the icy temperature shot through the cloth of my tanktop. His face was so close to mine, our noses practically touching, that I noticed his gray eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun and his cheekbones cut the air.

“Thank you.” I found my voice. His eyes flitted from my forehead to my lips. “I don’t know what happened. Were you driving the other car?”

He seemed to be searching my eyes for something. Recognition? His tall, black form stood out in contrast to the metal of the cars and the yellow backdrop of the Midwestern fields. He slowly removed his hands from around my waist as I waited for his answer. He made no other movement besides helping me to stand upright.

“Do I know you?” I asked him.

No answer.

I sighed. If he wanted to stare at that spot, he could, but I wasn’t standing there any longer. I began to shuffle past him.

A long, skinny hand stopped me from walking too far. His skin was so pale compared to mine. His marble- like hand felt like an armband of ice. With his other hand, he reached inside his dark

pinstriped suit and pulled out a tiny piece of paper. Gently, he offered it to me.

Maybe he really *was* deaf. Begrudgingly, I took it from him and unfolded the paper. There, scrawled in the paper was one word:

*Mina.*

My body jerked. My heart beat picked up, but I didn't know why. Was it shock? I looked down at my legs to see what was holding them up. If there were anything, it was invisible. The word meant nothing to me. *Right?* Mina? Was it a name?

“What does this mean?” I glanced up at him. “Are you Mina?”

He sat his instrument case on the ground. How such a skinny man managed to carry such a heavy instrument at a time like this was unknown. Where he came from I didn't know. What he wanted from me, I didn't know. I watched him as he dug in his pocket. A glint of metal caught the sunlight. Sharp metal. A knife!

The hold broke. I screamed and took off, hurrying down the street as fast as I could go. I ignored the pain in my ribs, in my legs. I did not stop running until I got to the ambulance.

“What's wrong? What is it?” the operator asked; the emergency personnel already coming out of the doors.

I pointed, not realizing that the guy had already left. He and his instrument had disappeared.

“Are you sure you’re okay, dear?” the woman asked, kindly again.

“There was a guy here-”

“Excuse me!” The medics wheeled the white beds towards the cars, rushing me out of the way.

There were no other witnesses besides me. Reporters asked the same questions as my parents. I told them all the same thing. A reaction. I didn’t know why that car slammed on his brakes like that. Good thing I have four-wheel drive. Had, that is. No close-ups, please. I definitely did not want to be seen on TV with my hair all sideways and stressed out.

The nurses assured my parents that I was okay. I had a swelling bump on my head which they wiped and bandaged. I thought I looked stupid with the bandage but my mom would not let me touch it.

On the ride home with my parents, I pretended I was very interested in the mundane buildings out the window as the tears fell. Happy birthday, Junie. I thought bitterly, grinding my fist in the car seat.

It was only then I noticed the note in my hand. There scrawled on the tiny piece of paper was one word, “Mina.” My stomach felt like it’d been hit by a cannon.

## Chapter 2

*Mina.* The top Google search was an Italian folk singer. I researched and googled and face-stalked everything “Mina” from here to Timbuktu and wound up with nothing closer than before I began. I didn’t know anyone named Mina or anything close to it. I threw the stupid note on my bedroom floor and buried myself under my blankets. Why did I care about the name anyway?

I hid my face under covers from the dimming night light streaming through the window, wearing my stained pajamas. I lived in an apartment complex with nosy neighbors and zero privacy so I kept my bedroom curtains closed. My apartment building looked like a cheap motel inside of a larger set of apartments, doors lined in rows, and a balcony for a front yard. I decorated my bedroom with my catalogues of everything I’d want in my life, my life flow chart I’d designed myself. On my wall, the charts branched out in all directions and colors, held together by tape and haphazard nails, pointing to each of my goals and dreams. My longest running branch was “become a singer.” One flow chart was “Pass Trigonometry,” and taped to it was a note that said “Do homework.” Another chart on my wall showed my height marked with rolling tape, since I was three-years old. One bright yellow note on my wall said, “pass driver’s test.” Beside it was a piece of paper that said, “get a car,” which was connected to, “get a job for money.”

Shutting my curtains never stopped Joe from knocking on my bedroom window. My bedroom window overlooked the plain

balcony of my apartment building. He didn't break his neck from tripping over the dirty clothes I had strewn across the floor. My parents would've let him in through the front door. They dreamed of his brain cells magically falling from his head like dandruff and burying themselves in mine.

He was my best friend since middle-school. He wore glasses, sweaters, and his eyes shone like diamonds in a tunnel. He was had rich dark brown skin and an upside-side-down, heart-shaped nose. In his hands, he held a Tupperware bowl with steam rising from the lid.

"How did you know?" I mumbled when he made it in, safely.

"You were on the newsfeed. Two people in the hospital. Damn that sucks."

Yes, it did.

"I'm glad you're all right." Joe brought a tupper ware bowl with him and placed it on my nasty, cluttered desk. Remarkably, he found a seat on the floor safe from dirty clothes, smelly shoes or socks. He picked up the note I had thrown on the floor.

"Mina?" Joe arched an eyebrow.

I groaned. "Some guy gave it to me."

"At the accident?"

"He came out of nowhere and handed it to me."

"Mina's the name of the chick from *Dracula*," Joe noted.

"Any reason he gave it to you?"

Joe would see the literary connection. I shrugged. I wasn't into that woo-woo stuff. "I brought you some soup."

"Chicken noodle?"

"It's miso."

Joe moved the soup closer to my head. His fingers gently touched the Band-aid on my head. "It may be a big bump. But it's hard to tell because your head is so big. Bighead."

Joe said that the name "Mina" came from Dracula, but why would the guy with the instrument give it to me? Also, why was he at the accident? He had seemed unfazed.

That's when I remembered.

That's when I remembered seeing him, the tall, pale guy, earlier, at a corner in the shopping district, his legs as long and thin as speed-bumps along the sidewalk, his chin unshaven then, his gray eyes twinkling, his long, pale fingers playing an electric guitar. The coffin instrument case laid opened on the street, collecting cash from the pedestrians of the sidewalk. Ten years ago, I listened to the melody of guitar player on the street. He was dressed in a dark suit then too. My ma had thought him homeless since she walked past him all the time. Whenever I heard him playing, I would sprinkle whatever coin was in my pocket into his bucket. But, that was ten years ago. He looked almost exactly the same from when I remembered. But, I was six years old then... Maybe I was imagining things; my head hurt.

“Joe, do you remember this homeless guy who used to play the guitar-”

I came back to the present to see Joe grinning.

He held up my old bra that was on the floor. I snatched it from his hand so fast he laughed. “I thought you couldn’t move,” he teased.

“You can leave now. Pervert.”

“Nah, I’m cool down here.”

“Get out. It’s past your bedtime. School’s tomorrow.” I didn’t want him finding any more unmentionables.

“You should clean up your room; it’s a mess. How do you sleep in this?”

Joe was a clean-freak. He kept his house as spotless as his record. I kept my apartment as spotless as my face: home girl had acne in plagues. They were gone for now, but the zits loved to sneak up when you least expected them, like right before a date, or a study session with a cute teacher, or prom. Joe, the paragon sixteen-year old boy, surely going to Harvard on a full-ride one day and playing pattycake with Jesus the next. When I was away from him, I would get all doe-eyed and sissy. If I were around him though, he’d just annoy me, like he did now. My relationship with Joe came with rules: 1.) he is not my father, 2.) I would never admit how cute he is 3.) friends don’t like each other.

“Go home.”

“Okay. Good night, Junie.” His eyes twinkled with a smile before he climbed back out the window.

When Joe left, I could hear my parents arguing in the living room.

“Lewis, we have to tell her. What if she finds out...”

“I don’t know. We don’t know.”

“Lewis, Junie’s sixteen now. We have to tell Junie the truth. Viscount called again today. Lewis, she has to know she’s not like us. She has to know about your... She’s not...” I couldn’t catch the end of the sentences. I didn’t know nor care who Viscount was, but what was the truth my parents were arguing about?

“She’s our daughter!”

“I know she is but it’s the truth and you’re not helping her.”

Their voices dimmed when their bedroom door closed. I could only hear mumbling. Yep, I was in for it. Maybe I was getting grounded, probably no Internet privileges for a week. I embraced it though.

I loved my parents. We were a family of three. My father’s really a guy with a love for anything Latin American. Don’t get him started on salsa dancing, please. Every time I hear the word “salsa,” my listening skills devolve to toddler level. And my mom was a finalist for Miss Universe because she has the extraordinary ability of fitting into a size zero her entire life. In college, hippy guy met skinny girl with a heavy tan and they have been together ever since.

They had me, and I came out like a Wonder Woman Reject with hair that has a serious attitude. It's jet black and sticks out everywhere; I've stopped trying to make it conform. I wish the world would do the same with me.

I tried some of Joe's soup and ordered flowers to deliver to the drivers in the hospital. It was the least I could do for them. I buried myself under the blankets and thought to start up a new season of reality tv.

I threw the blankets off of me. I had to look. To see *him* again. My parents wouldn't allow me if they knew I was leaving; they didn't want me out of their sight after the accident. Joe would think I was crazy. But, I knew where he played; he had played his guitar in that same spot for years now. I pulled on my old cargo pants, a shirt, and ignored my hair. I slid open the window of my bedroom.

It would take me half an hour to get there on the bus, and school was tomorrow. But, I wanted to go so I couldn't think about my car and my almost-death and those other drivers.

I broke out into a run. I had to ask him about Mina. I had to ask him about the accident. About the people who died. I had to find out why he didn't talk. Can he talk? Why didn't I pay attention when summer camp tried to teach me sign language some summers ago? I ran after the bus I'd almost missed. I stayed close to the door so I could jump out as soon as we stopped.

I was drawn to this “Mina.” I didn’t know why it was important to me. But, every time I thought the name, I just had to know, to remember.

I got there in 15 minutes. Wild and panting, I turned in a circle in the sidewalk looking for him. There were pedestrians out and about. I pushed through them. It couldn’t be possible. I knew he was here.

The soft strokes of the guitar took me back to my childhood, a gentle, wistful tune of meadows and dandelions. I turned and saw him across the street. Towering over the pedestrians, standing in front of a small bakery, and street light, he stood alone, his coffin case instrument opened on the street, filled to the brim with money, strumming his guitar. He was captivated in his melody, his eyes fixated on the chords, his dark hair falling in his face, his pale hands fluttering.

Entranced, I made to cross the road, but his pale gaze lifted and he saw me, standing directly across the street from him.

Then he was gone.

Disappeared. Just like that. Instrument case and all.

I was alone in a crowd of pedestrians. He vanished again.

I turned around, looking for him. I looked in alleys and windows, but he was nowhere to be seen.