

CONCEALED

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CHAPTER 1

THE NAME GAME

“YOUR NAME?” THE BARISTA asked, holding the paper cup in the air.

I hesitated. For a moment I couldn’t remember if my name was spelled with one *n* or two. Not that it mattered much, since by tomorrow I’d have to pick a new one.

“Joanna with two *n*’s,” I replied.

He nodded, scribbled something on the cup, and passed it down the line to a girl who began preparing the order.

My drink wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. A tall vanilla bean frappé with two pumps of cinnamon syrup, hold the whipped cream. Nothing too easy or too complicated. Something quickly forgotten.

Sort of like me.

Didn’t matter if my hair was dyed blond, red, or even its current shade of brown, I always played the part of some random homeschooled girl from nowhere in particular who usually kept to herself. I was a mix of people you might know, but could never really remember.

That had been the story for when I was called Ana, Beatriz,

Carla, Diana, Emma, Faith, Gina, Holly, and Ivette. Joanna was no different. And tomorrow it would continue, except this time with a name that began with the letter *K*.

Over the past few years it had all become a game for me. Picking a name while going through the alphabet gave me a sense of order and predictability in my highly unpredictable life. Dad had come up with the idea back when he was still the one choosing my names, but I'd decided to continue the pattern. The question was which *K* name to choose. It could last me either a couple of weeks, like Joanna, or almost a year, like when I was Carla.

I never knew.

It all depended on when my parents said it was time to move on and start over.

"Ready?" Mom asked me, glancing around the half-empty coffee shop. She'd been standing by the door looking out toward our van while I placed my order. Her hands were stuffed inside the pockets of her quilted jacket and she looked like a ball of stress. Her appearance was the direct opposite of the two women wearing yoga pants and chit-chatting behind me as they waited to order their drinks.

"Almost," I said, stepping away from the line and moving over to the pickup area. "You sure you don't want anything?"

She shook her head and got closer to me. "No, I'm fine. Just make sure you go to the bathroom. We've got about five more hours to go."

“Seriously, Mom? I’m almost thirteen. I’m pretty sure I can figure out when I need to go. Ya no soy una niña.”

Mom tilted her head, crossed her arms, and raised a single eyebrow.

“What?” I feigned ignorance, but she was onto me. My using Spanish to soften her up or prove a point was not as effective as it used to be.

“Quizás, but you aren’t grown up either.” She gave me her classic “I’m not playing” stare-down. “No se te olvide.”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Yes, I know. And don’t worry, I already went to the bathroom. Figured that the next time might involve some sort of hole in the ground.”

Mom’s shoulders relaxed and her face softened. “There will be a bathroom on board, and your father has already read up on how to dump the waste. Think of it as a fun adventure.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Real fun. Can’t wait to live out of an RV.”

“Well, it’ll be practical. We can take it with us when we want to move. Park it in another town. Have a little more continuity.” Her tone was overly positive and meant to make us both feel better.

It wasn’t working.

We both knew that, eventually, when we were forced to move again, we would have to leave everything behind. If it didn’t fit in a suitcase, it couldn’t come with us. That was another one of the rules.

Or at least it used to be. I wasn't so sure about our rules anymore, because small-town living in an RV seemed to go against all our prior moves to big cities where we could easily disappear by blending in, hiding in plain sight, and never standing out.

But an RV park in the middle of Georgia . . . that was something else completely. It felt like people there might take notice of us.

"Small-town people are friendly," Mom continued. "I still remember how it was when I was young and living in Cuba. You'll be surprised at how quickly you might be able to make a friend or two."

"Yeah, right," I muttered. Friendships took time. The only real friend I'd had was when we'd lived in Houston almost two years ago. Not too many kids like to hang out with the new kid who doesn't go to school.

"Joanna!" The girl called out my name and slid the drink forward on the counter.

Mom stuffed a handful of brown napkins into her purse and headed to the door. "All right, let's go."

I grabbed the cup and smiled as I read the name on it.

Jo Ann Nah.

So much for being accurate with my name.

"Mom. Check this out." I held up the cup as we crossed the strip mall's parking lot. "Maybe we should use this as our new last name instead of the one they assigned. I think the Nah family has a better ring to it than the Davis family."

“Hmm. The Nahs.” Mom tapped the side of her chin as if seriously considering the idea before she opened the van door. Then she looked at me, the corners of her mouth crinkled into a smile, and she shook her head. “*Nah* . . . I don’t think so.”

“Ugh! That was painfully bad.” I crawled over a couple of small suitcases, moved my sketchbook out of the way, and stretched across the third row, leaving the pile of duffel bags to occupy the two bucket seats in front of me.

“What was?” Dad turned to face me.

“Mom tried to make a joke,” I said. “And it was almost as bad as one of yours.” I showed him the cup with my name. “Seems like they thought I was part of the Nah family and Mom said ‘nah.’”

“Ha! Amateur.” His eyes twinkled under his dark-rimmed glasses. I approved of this new look. Shaved head and all. It was better than the blond toupee and blue contacts he used to wear. “I do have a new joke for you. When is it the best time to—”

“B, I think we should get going.” Mom unfolded the map and fidgeted in her seat.

“Just a sec,” he continued. “When is it the best time to go to the dentist?”

“Dad . . .” I cringed. It boggled my mind to think that my dorky dad could have ever been involved with bringing down one of the most notorious drug cartels in North America, but here we were.

“Come on,” Dad insisted.

I relented, knowing he wouldn't stop until I played along. “No idea. Tell me. What time?”

“At tooth-hurty!” Dad laughed and slapped the side of his leg. “Get it? Tooth-hurty. Two thirty.”

“Whoa . . . just when I thought they couldn't get worse . . . they do.” I took a sip of my frappé and put it in the cup holder. “That one's like a little kid joke, too. Are you recycling them from when I was six?” I teased. “I probably didn't laugh back then either.”

Dad shrugged and turned around. “Maybe,” he muttered.

I'd hit a nerve, but really hadn't meant to. It wasn't my fault that I didn't remember anything from before I was ten. The accident wiped away almost all my memories and my parents refused to talk about our lives before the accident. It was as if my lack of memories was their most vivid reminder of the danger we were in and also an assurance that I wouldn't accidentally reveal who we really were. I could only cling to the few flashes of my childhood that seemed to live somewhere in my brain. Mom giving me a toy bunny. Dad telling me stories at night. Doctor visits. Lots of doctor visits.

And yet my parents still didn't fill in the gaps.

They liked having a clean slate to start over, but I didn't.

I hated not remembering who I used to be. It was as if none of us had existed before the accident, but I knew that we had. There was a normal life in our past—I only wished

my parents would tell me about it or at least tell me our real names. I had never slipped up, not even once. Now I was old enough to be trusted. But they didn't see it that way. Which meant I had to eavesdrop and sneak together little pieces of information to learn more about who we were.

"B . . ." The concern in Mom's voice pulled me out of my thoughts. "Over there." Mom pointed to a car with dark-tinted windows parked on the corner. "It's got Virginia plates and the driver left the engine running. He's now standing by the Starbucks door, wearing sunglasses. He got out of the car and spoke to the women that were with us inside, but he hasn't gone in to get a drink. He's just looking around."

The ability to quickly notice even the smallest details was a trait that made Mom an excellent lookout. It also made her a little paranoid.

I slunk down in my seat. This wasn't the first time I'd been in this type of situation.

"It's probably nothing," Dad said, but his demeanor had changed and I could hear a bit of an edge in his voice. "X suggested the move this time only as a precaution. How could they find us here in the middle of nowhere?"

Agent X. That was the name of our contact in the Witness Protection Program. The person in charge of keeping us safe. All I knew about him was that Mom and Dad trusted him above everyone else because Dad had known him in the Before Time.

"I just don't like it," Mom insisted. "Let's get out of here."

Dad pulled out of the parking lot and headed to the main road. The van, like every car we'd ever had, was old, but it was in good enough shape to get us where we needed to go.

"All right. Which way, L?"

B and L. That's how my parents referred to each other. It was a way to simplify things and avoid messing up each other's names. It also made sense since Dad always used different names that either started with *B* like Bradley or Bernard, or a name like William or Robert whose nickname could be Bill or Bob. Mom did the same thing, except hers were usually Spanish-sounding names like Lucia or Leticia.

"Make a left on the main road." Mom studied the map in her hands. "The highway should be up ahead."

I turned around and popped my head over the top of the seat just in time to see the man jump into his car.

Mom had also been watching him through the side-view mirror. "We need to go faster. *Now.*"

"I got it." Dad's fingers were clenched tight around the steering wheel, but he remained with the flow of traffic as our van crossed the intersection and approached the on-ramp for the highway. "I'm trying to blend in."

"Dad." My voice cracked a little. I knew the story about the car accident that had almost killed my mother and me. It's what had started everything. A car had run Mom off the road in order to send a message about what happens to people who testify against the cartel. Mom hadn't been

seriously hurt, but I'd barely survived. "The guy . . . he's still back there, and I think he's going to get on the highway, too."

This time Dad floored the gas pedal and we lurched forward, passing several cars. The van seemed to shake with excitement at being pushed to its limit.

I glanced ahead at the empty highway and then back at the car that was growing ever closer to us. "He's gaining on us—go faster!"

Suddenly, Dad slammed on the brakes and I went tumbling forward, slamming my head against the back of the bucket seat.

The mysterious car quickly switched lanes and zoomed by, not even giving us a second look.

"You okay back there?" Dad called out.

"I'm okay," I said, rubbing my forehead. "Should've had my seat belt on."

"You always need to have it on." His eyes met mine for an instant through the rearview mirror. "But if you got scraped up or anything, the medicine bag is in between the seats. The blue liquid for cuts and scrapes is in there."

"I'm okay," I repeated, buckling myself up. "I don't need it."

Mom chuckled nervously as we resumed a normal speed. "Guess that was a little bit of an overreaction on my part."

Dad let out a deep breath. "Ya think?" Then he cracked a smile. "But it's good practice." He reached over and patted her hand. "You never know."

I slumped back into my seat. My heart was still racing but everything was back to normal . . . or at least our version of normal.

This was the only life I knew.

A life on the run.

Never revealing who we were. Never dropping our guard.
Never forgetting that there were people who wanted us dead.

Always wondering if this would be the day they'd find us.