

Chapter One

I learned early how to be invisible.

Not a choice. A rule. The first time I forgot, we paid.

Loose pants blur my shape. A hoodie covers my messy bun, sparing me from colouring my hair or wearing a wig. A tilt of my head and my hoodie flops forward. Shadows my face like a visor. I pop in two ear buds and bob my head. As if to music. Step onto the outside stoop.

Mom props the door open. “Mikki, stay in the open.”

“Don't I always.”

“One hour.”

“I know.” I'm not twelve.

Mom hesitates – like she isn't finished – then forces a smile. Her fingers tremble as she shuts the door.

I scan the street. Check reflections in windows. Count parked cars. Note who doesn't belong. First windows, then corners, then parked cars. Follow the rules.

All clear. Close enough to freedom now.

A steady breeze carries the odour of stale pizza. An empty beer can clatters down the road. A girl flings her bike in a heap. Runs into the house. Another early spring day in the city.

Flat grey clouds hint at rain. Hope they hold.

Shoulders squared. A longer stride. No fixed route. Some routines can be risky.

Past old student houses with peeling paint and un-mowed lawns. Rental properties like ours. The kind landlords stop caring about after the first payment.

What's it like? Attending university instead of homeschool. Crowded lecture halls, the smell of coffee, laughter, someone calling my name. A lump fills my throat. I've memorized campus maps I've never walked.

A vehicle emerges from around the corner. Crawls along the asphalt like a low lying fog. A black sedan, newer model. Through the windshield, a red glow flares. A cigarette, or maybe a cigar, dangles between the driver's lips. Can't make out his face.

The passenger, a bald man, peers out the side window. His face isn't any clearer. Neither man turns my way. They focus on the houses. Not student renters.

My neck muscles tingle. Something's off.

Drop to a crouch. Bluff an untied shoelace. Check out the licence plate. Lock the sequence of letters and numbers inside my head. Three repeats, an easy pattern.

Anyone can be a threat.

I should go back. Tell Mom about the men. She'll make me stay home.

Probably nothing, anyway. Shake it off.

Time to enjoy my freedom.

I zig-zag my way through the city streets. Wasting no time. Enter the campus and stride along a stone courtyard. Toward a grove of trees across from a lecture hall.

The parkour jam is in full practice. Perfect timing.

I slide onto an isolated bench behind a maple. Get comfortable.

Sunset is in less than an hour and Mom will expect me home before dark. Right now, this time is entirely my own. Plan to make the most of it.

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Parkour has been on my mind all week. Practiced in the backyard. Counted the days.

Grunts and squeaking sneakers carry on the wind. My skin tingles. Warmth radiates throughout my body. Even if they notice me behind the leaves, they won't care. The group is open to anyone.

I could join, if Mom wouldn't find out. But rules are rules. I don't dare break them. Made that mistake once. Not worth the risk.

I understand her reasons, even if I don't like them.

Wow! What a great squat. All the force is absorbed by her muscles. Lands softly on balls of her feet. Shoulder-width apart. Perfect technique.

That guy wastes energy on landing – I wouldn't.

If I joined in, I'd keep up. Consider the environment. Protect my joints. No problem.

Someone might offer me a hand after a jump. Call me by name.

Thickness fills my throat. My gaze drops. Wishful thinking.

One more year until eighteen. Hold on. Then, no more online classes. In person for university studies. Join any group I please.

Convincing Mom won't be easy, but I'll prepare anyway. No matter what she argues, I'll be ready. I won't give up.

Fleeting shadows pass overhead. The clouds darker now. The air thick with the threat of rain.

The parkour group has dwindled to a few diehards.

I tap my phone. Late.

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Leap from my spot. Scoot back across the campus and dash down the narrow streets. Slip into a jog and scurry toward home.

The gloom of dusk swallows my block. Houses fade behind deepening shadows. They creep up the tall brick walls. The air is cool. The sidewalks too empty. Silence hangs like a pause between breaths. Even the neighbour's dog isn't barking.

Check my phone. Only a few minutes past curfew. No big deal.

Across the street and up a way, a shadowing form looms. I slow my steps. Beneath the branches of an oak tree, a dark sedan hugs the curb, its engine idling. My heartbeat quickens.

I squint at the licence plate. Don't be the same car as earlier.

It's a match. I shudder. Goose bumps pimple my skin.

Why are those men still here?

Mom.

I should have gone back. Warned her. Not left her alone.

A heaviness chews my stomach. My ribs feel too tight. My feet itch to race to our house.

If they see me go inside – we're both exposed.

They'll follow me. Get to Mom.

The car's interior is too dark to make out shapes. Red glows from behind the windshield on the driver's side. The second man. Where is he? Could be in the house.

Next to Mom's crumpled body. Too still.

The street tilts. A roar of blood floods my head. My hands tremble. I stuff them into my

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pockets.

Mom has to be okay.

The front curtains are closely drawn. No light bleeds from the living room.

Maybe Mom noticed the men earlier. Locked the doors and set the motion cameras. Maybe she's huddled in a chair, fretting about me.

I suck in air. Control my breaths and relax my movements. I lope into a sprint. Jog past my dark house. Past the ominous sedan.

At the corner, I swivel and veer right. My sneakers rub noiselessly on the pavement. Another right, and down the darkened laneway. To the back of my house.

At the rear of our property, I stop. The garage blocks access to the yard. Unlock it? Too slow.

Over the roof instead.

Speed-walk to the garage. Step up the brick wall, onto the metal handle. Spring up. Grab hold of the lip, onto the roof. Land with a thud.

Sweat pools in the hollow of my throat.

Mom. Be alright.

I stay low and crawl across the gritty tiles.

The sudden glow of streetlights spills an amber wash. My neck bristles. With a drop, my body flattens. Roof tiles scrape my palms.

Through the gap between the houses, I peer at the street.

A low rumble groans. The black sedan pulls around the corner. Gone.

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I skitter to the edge of the roof. Jump to the ground. Race for my back door.

Chilled air fills my lungs.

Three raps.

Too long later, the lock clicks and the door opens. The chain link lifts.

Mom's face appears. "Your late."

I pull her into a hug.

"Mikki, what's wrong?"

"Two men." A suck of air. "Black sedan passed twice."

"Licence plate?"

"Got it."

"Did they notice you?"

A head shake. My hood falls to my shoulders. "Checked out the house, though."

Silent, Mom shuffles to the sink. Pours me a glass of water. I take a sip and turn my head.

Duffel bags lean against the wall. A letter is propped on the table. The landlord's name.

I bite my lip.

"Got a call from Elle right after you left."

My eyes meet Mom's. "I don't suppose I have time for a shower?"