HIDE

CHAPTER ONE

My father explained it to me the first time when I was seven years old: The world is a system. School is a system. Neighborhoods are a system. Towns, governments, any large group of people. For that matter, the human body is a system, enabled by smaller, biological subsystems.

Criminal justice, definitely a system. The Catholic Church–don't get him started. Then there's organized sports, the United Nations, and of course, the Miss America Pageant.

"You don't have to like the system," he lectured me. "You don't have to believe in it or agree with it. But you must understand it. If you can understand the system, you will survive."

A family is a system.

I'd come home from school that afternoon to discover both of my parents standing in our front room. My father, a professor of mathematics at MIT, was rarely home before seven. Now, however, he stood next to my mother's prized floral sofa, with five suitcases stacked neatly by his feet. My mother was crying. When I opened the front door, she turned away as if to shield her face, but I could still see her shoulders shaking.

Both of my parents were wearing heavy wool coats, which seemed odd, given the relatively warm October afternoon.

My father spoke first: "You need to go into your room. Pick two things. Any two things you want. But hurry, Annabelle; we don't have much time."

My mother's shoulders shook harder. I set down my backpack. I retreated to my room, where I stared at my little pink-and-green painted space.

Of all the moments in my past, this is the one I would most like to have back. Three

minutes in the bedroom of my youth. Fingers skimming over my sticker-plastered desk, skipping over framed photos of my grandparents, hopscotching past my engraved silver-plated brush and oversize hand mirror. I bypassed my books. Didn't even consider my marble collection or stash of kindergarten art. I remember making a positively agonizing choice between my favorite stuffed dog and my newest treasure, a bridal-dressed Barbie. I went with my dog, Boomer, then grabbed my cherished baby blankie, dark pink flannel with a light pink satin trim.

Not my diary. Not my stash of silly, doodle-covered notes from my best friend, Dori Petracelli. Not even my baby album, which would've at least given me photos of my mother for all the years to come. I was a young, frightened child, and I behaved childishly.

I think my father knew what I would choose. I think he saw it all coming, even back then.

I returned to our family room. My father was outside, loading the car. My mom had her hands wrapped around the pillar that divided the family room from the eat-in kitchen. For a minute, I didn't think she'd let go. She would take a stand, demand that my father stop this foolishness.

Instead, she reached out and stroked my long dark hair. "I love you so much." She grabbed me, hugging me fiercely, cheeks wet against the top of my head. The next moment, she pushed me away, wiping briskly at her face.

"Outside, honey. Your father's right–we have to be quick."

I followed my mother to the car, Boomer under my arm, blankie clutched in both hands. We took our usual places–my father in the driver's seat, my mother riding shotgun, me in the back.

My father backed our little Honda out of the drive. Yellow and orange leaves swirled down from the beech tree, dancing outside the car window. I spread my fingers against the glass as if I could touch them.

"Wave at the neighbors," my father instructed. "Pretend everything is normal."

That's the last we ever saw of our little oak-dotted cul-de-sac.

A family is a system.

We drove to Tampa. My mother had always wanted to see Florida, my father explained. Wouldn't it be nice to live amid palm trees and white sandy beaches after so many New England winters?

Since my mother had chosen our location, my father had picked our names. I would now be called Sally. My father was Anthony and my mother Claire. Isn't this fun? A new town and a new name. What a grand adventure.

I had nightmares in the beginning. Terrible, terrible dreams where I would wake up screaming, "I saw something, I saw something!"

"It's only a dream," my father would attempt to soothe me, stroking my back.

"But I'm scared!"

"Hush. You're too young to know what scared is. That's what daddies are for."

We didn't live amid palm trees and white sandy beaches. My parents never spoke of it, but as an adult looking back, I realize now that a Ph.D. in mathematics couldn't very well pick up where he left off, especially under an assumed identity. Instead, my father got a job driving taxis. I loved his new job. It meant he was home most of the day, and it seemed glamorous to be picked up from school in my own personal cab.

The new school was bigger than my old one. Tougher. I think I made friends, though I don't remember many specifics about our Florida days. I have more a general sense of a surreal time and place, where my afternoons were spent being drilled in self-defense for first-graders and even my parents seemed foreign to me:

My father, constantly buzzing around our one-bedroom apartment. "What'd you say, Sally? Let's decorate a palm tree for Christmas! Yes, sir, we're having fun now!" My mother, humming absently as she painted our family room a bright shade of coral, giggling as she bought a swimsuit in November, seeming genuinely intrigued as she learned to cook different kinds of flaky white fish.

I think my parents were happy in Florida. Or at least determined. My mother decorated our apartment. My father resumed his hobby of sketching. On the nights he didn't work, my mother would pose for him beside the window, and I would lie on the couch, content to watch my father's deft strokes as he captured my mother's teasing smile in a small charcoal sketch.

Until the day I came home from school to find suitcases packed, faces grim. No need to ask this time. I went into my room on my own. Grabbed Boomer. Found my blankie. Then retreated to the car and climbed in the back.

It was a long time before anyone said a word.

A family is a system.

To this day, I don't know how many cities we lived in. Or how many names I assumed. My childhood became a blur of new faces, new towns, and the same old suitcases. We would arrive, find the cheapest one-bedroom apartment. My father would set out the next day, always coming home with some kind of job–photo developer, McDonald's manager, salesclerk. My mother would unpack our meager belongings. I would be shuffled off to school.

I know I stopped talking as much. I know my mom did, too.

Only my father remained relentlessly cheerful. "Phoenix! I've always wanted to experience the desert. Cincinnati! Now, this is my kind of town. St. Louis! This will be the place for us!"

I don't remember suffering any more nightmares. They simply went away or were pushed aside by more pressing concerns. The afternoons I came home and found my mother passed out on the sofa. The crash courses in cooking because she could no longer stand up. Brewing coffee and forcing it down her throat. Raiding her purse for money so I could buy groceries before my father returned from work.

I want to believe he had to know, but to this day I'm not sure. It seemed for my mother and me at least, the more we took on other names, the more we gave away of ourselves. Until we became silent, ethereal shadows following in my father's blustery wake.

She made it until I was fourteen. Kansas City. We'd lasted nine months. My father had risen to manager in the automotive department of Sears. I was thinking of going to my first dance.

I came home. My mother–Stella, she was called then–was facedown on the sofa. This time no amount of shaking woke her up. I have a vague memory of racing across the hall. Of banging on our neighbor's door.

"My mother, my mother, my mother!" I screamed. And poor Mrs. Torres, who'd never been granted a smile or wave from any of us, threw open her door, bustled across the hall, and hands flying to her suddenly wet eyes, declared my mother dead.

Cops came. EMTs. I watched them remove her body. Saw the empty orange prescription bottle slip out of her pocket. One of the officers picked it up. He gave me a pitying look.

"Someone we should call?"

"My father will be home soon."

He left me with Mrs. Torres. We sat in her apartment, with its rich smells of jalape—o peppers and corn tamales. I admired the brightly striped curtains she had hanging on her windows and the bold floral pillows covering her worn brown sofa. I wondered what it

would be like to have a real home again.

My father arrived. Thanked Mrs. Torres profusely. Ushered me away.

"You understand we can't tell them anything?" he kept saying over and over again, once we were safely tucked back inside our apartment. "You understand we have to be very careful? I don't want you saying a word, Cindy. Not one word. This is all very, very tricky."

When the cops returned, he did the talking. I heated up chicken noodle soup in the tiny kitchenette. I wasn't really hungry. I just wanted our apartment to smell like Mrs. Torres's apartment. I wanted my mom to be back home.

I found my father crying later. Curled up on the sofa, holding my mother's tattered pink robe. He couldn't stop. He sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

That was the first night my father slept in my bed. I know what you're thinking, but it wasn't like that.

A family is a system.

We waited three months for my mother's body. The state wanted an autopsy. I never did understand it all. But one day we had my mom back. We accompanied her from the morgue's office to the funeral home. She was put in a box labeled with someone else's name, then sent into the fire.

My father purchased two small glass vials that dangled from chains. One for him. One for me.

"This way," he said, "she can always be close to our hearts."

Leslie Ann Granger. That was my mother's real name. Leslie Ann Granger. My father filled the vials with ashes, and we put them around our necks. The rest of her, we turned

loose into the wind.

Why buy a tombstone that would only cement a lie?

We returned to the apartment, and this time my father didn't have to ask; I had packed our suitcases three months earlier. No Boomer and blankie this time. I had placed them in my mother's wooden box and sent them with her into the flames.

Once your mother is dead, it is time to be done with childish things.

I chose the name Sienna. My father would be Billy Bob, but I would allow him to use B.B. He rolled his eyes but played along. Since I'd done the honors with the names, he chose the city. We headed for Seattle; my father had always wanted to see the West Coast.

We did better in Seattle, each in our own way. My father returned to Sears and, without ever disclosing that he'd worked at one before, was taken to be a complete natural who flew up the managerial ranks. I enrolled in yet another overcrowded, underfunded public school, where I disappeared into the nameless, faceless B-average masses.

I also committed my first act of rebellion: I joined a church.

The small Congregational church one block from our home. I walked by it every day to and from school. One day, I poked my head in. The second day, I took a seat. The third day, I found myself talking to the reverend.

Will God let you into Heaven, I wanted to know, if you were buried under the wrong name?

I talked to the reverend for a long time that afternoon. He had bottle-thick glasses. Sparse gray hair. A kind smile. When I got home, it was after six, my father was waiting, and there was no food on the table.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"I got held late–"

"Do you know how worried I've been?"

"I missed the bus. I was talking to a teacher about a homework assignment. I'm . . . I had to walk all the way home. I didn't want to bother you at work." I was babbling, my cheeks flushed, not sounding anything like myself.

My father frowned at me for a long time. "You can always call me," he said abruptly. "We're in this together, kiddo."

He ruffled my hair.

I missed my mother.

Then I walked into the kitchen and started the tuna casserole.

Lying, I've discovered, is as addictive as any drug. Next thing I knew, I'd told my father I'd joined the debate team. This, of course, gave me any number of afternoons I could spend at the church, listening to the choir practice, talking to the reverend, simply absorbing the space.

I'd always had long dark hair. My mother used to braid it for me when I was a child. As an adolescent, however, I had relegated it to an impenetrable curtain I let hang over my face. One day, I decided my hair was blocking the true beauty of the stained glass, so I walked to the corner barbershop and had it chopped off.

My father didn't speak to me for a week.

And I discovered, sitting in my church, watching my neighbors come and go, that my oversize sweatshirts were too drab, my baggy jeans ill-fitting. I liked people in bright colors. I liked the way it brought attention to their faces and made you notice their smiles. These people looked happy. Normal. Loving. I bet there wasn't a three-second

delay every time someone asked them their name.

So I bought new clothes. For the debate team. And I started spending every Monday night at the soup kitchen–school requirement, I told my father. Everyone's got to fulfill so many hours of community service. There happened to be a nice young man who also volunteered there. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Matt Fisher.

Matt took me to the movies. I don't remember what was playing. I was aware of his hand on my shoulder, the sweaty feel of my own palms, the hitch to my breath. After the movies, we went for ice cream. It was raining. He held his coat over my head.

And then, tucked inside his cologne-scented jacket, he gave me my first kiss.

I floated home. Arms wrapped around my waist. Dreamy smile upon my face.

My father greeted me at the front door. Five suitcases loomed behind him.

"I know what you've been doing!" he declared.

"Shhhh," I said, and put a finger to his lips. "Shhhh."

I danced past my stunned father. I drifted into my tiny, windowless room. And for eight hours I lay on my bed and let myself be happy.

I still wonder about Matt Fisher sometimes. Is he married now? Has two-point-two kids? Does he ever tell stories about the craziest girl he ever knew? Kissed her one night. Never saw her again.

My father was gone when I got up in the morning. He returned around twelve, slapping the fake ID into my hand.

"And I don't want to hear it about the names," he said as I arched a brow at my new identity as Tanya Nelson, daughter of Jeremy. "Trying to get paperwork at a moment's notice already set me back two grand."

"But you picked the names."

"They were all the guy could give me."

"But you brought home the names," I insisted.

"Fine, fine, whatever."

He already had a suitcase in each hand. I stood firm, arms crossed, face implacable.
"You picked the names, I pick the city."

"Once we're in the car."

"Boston," I said.

His eyes went wide. I could tell he wanted to argue. But rules are rules.

A family is a system.