

THE GIRL WHO WOULD BE KING



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Kelly Thompson



PART I:
break away



Berks County, Pennsylvania

The car hits the tree going at least fifty miles an hour and I go through the windshield like I've been tossed gently by a hurricane. I land at least a hundred feet from the car on some bright soft grass, barely having missed a tree directly in my path.

Everything is black for a while.

When I open my eyes again all I can see are these vivid green leaves floating casually above me and I wonder for just a moment about their casual ways, trying to understand why certain parts of life just don't care about other parts.

And then the smell hits me.

It isn't serene like the leaves, but assaulting and violent. It fills my nostrils with the same metallic flavor you taste when you suck on your thumb after cutting it way too deep, when the blood is dark and black, not pinkish like a party. My head rolls back under me as my chest heaves up, toward the green in the sky. I turn my head to the side to throw up. Spitting into the grass and leaning up on my elbow a bit, I squeeze my eyes closed as tightly as I can, afraid of what I'm going to see when I finally have to open them again. Tears leak out, hot and wet on my cheeks. The smell of my parents' blood makes me throw up again and again until there's nothing left and I'm just coughing and breathing hard, my small ribcage ready to break from the pressure.

I stand up and look at the bodies still trapped in our new car. My mother's skull is crushed as if she had fallen from hundreds of feet in the sky and hit the ground with only her head, her bright red hair somehow still shiny where it's not matted with blood. They had both been thrown through most of the windshield, but the front of the car is so crumpled that their broken bodies are miraculously both in and out of the car at the same time. The car looks like an accordion, my mother's pale twisted arm lying right where some glossy keys might have been, her silver I.D. bracelet and the broken headlight glistening in the summer sun.

I look from my mother's no longer familiar body to my own. Some of my clothing is torn and there's blood all over both skin and clothes, but no matter how I pull at my shirt and examine my limbs I can't find any cuts in my skin. But my arm is twisted

grotesquely. I try to face it forward and it obeys me. It makes a terrible snapping sound and I cry out a little bit, but it stays put when I let go of it. I look up as three big black birds walk around in the trees above. They stare down as if expecting me to speak to them. I don't.

I start to walk away from the car, toward the road, but I turn back and reach for my mother's arm, gently sliding the silver bracelet off her crushed hand. On her pale skin are some small black marks I've never seen before. Three tiny circles and a bird. The images pull on me strangely deep inside for a just a moment before I put the bracelet in the front pocket of my shorts and walk away. The road is dusty and dry and seems extra lonely to me now. I look the way we had been driving, the way home, and then turn the other direction and start running.

I always wake up at the part where I'm running. And I don't remember where I am for whole minutes before it all comes rushing back.

I'm 17, not six. I'm in a home for girls. My parents are dead. My brother Jasper never came to get me. And my name is Bonnie Braverman.

I never scream when I remember these things because I haven't spoken in eleven years.



Washoe County, Nevada

Dragging my mother's body to the car is harder than I thought it would be. She'd never looked like much lying around in that threadbare robe on our worn-out couch all the time, so I'd imagined she'd be light, like husks of corn bound together into a person-shape. Of course she isn't dead yet, so maybe that's part of the problem.

The good news is that, although it takes me a at least half an hour to get her out the door of the trailer and into the passenger seat of the car, we live in the middle of freaking nowhere so there's nobody to witness my first stumbling attempt at murder. I try to imagine as I stir up dust and leave obvious drag marks everywhere that if I could see the first murder for any serial killer, it wouldn't look unlike my unskilled attempt today. The bad news is that the

longer it takes, the better the chance that she's going to wake up from the deadly cocktail I've fed her. I poured enough Botulinum into her daily bottle of Everclear to kill a person twice over, but Delia is not a normal person, and I can feel her struggling against me already underneath her paralysis.

Worrying that the drugs will wear off sooner than expected, I pull an old Dodgers baseball cap over her head, covering her eyes so that I don't have to look them. She has a look that can almost kill, and even under the poison it might be enough to at least murder my resolve. But there's no stopping now. If I stop now she'll kill me herself, or worse, live forever and then I'd never fulfill my destiny. I'm not sure quite when I figured it all out – that Delia has power trapped inside her and that it really belongs to me – but I did. And really? Part of me has always known it. That's how the power feels, like it belongs to me, that even if it once was hers, it's mine now. Whatever. I don't know how I know, I just know. It's taken me a while to get up the guts to actually try to take it though.

Delia has more control over her limbs than I'd like by the time I get in the car with her, but she doesn't have much more time if she's going to do anything about anything, so I'm pretty sure it's all going to work out.

But when we get to the spot I'd picked out, I realize I don't have time for my full speech. I'd planned to take a moment at the edge of the cliff, a moment to remind myself that I'm doing the right thing, a moment of introspection if you will, followed by a long speech. I've seen it in some movies and it always seems pretty cool, but Delia's too awake and I'm too nervous to have time for anything like introspection. Instead, I immediately head to the other side of the car and start shoving her over toward the driver's seat. I'm not sure it matters if it looks like she was driving or not since I don't expect anybody to come looking for her, but I figure it might be a good idea, just in case. I grab a big handful of her robe and push with all my might, shoving her toward the left side of the car. She manages to wrap a couple fingers around a chunk of my hair and I scream and pull away from her violently. She takes a little piece of me with her though.

Her breathing is labored. I go to the driver's side so I can look down on her. I put my hands on my hips defiantly. I'll just give her the cliff notes of my speech. "Delia. You are a total failure. As a mother, as a provider, as a girlfriend, as an employee,

as a human, and more importantly, as a god. You've been a really crappy example for me, and I only hope that I can go on to the greatness I expect of myself despite the pathetic standards you've set for me," I breathe out a heavy sigh. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?" There's silence except for her ragged breathing. "Good." I say, after a long pause. I've always thought the best speeches are the ones that have no interruptions or counterpoints so I'm pleased with this result.

It could also be that her tongue is too swollen to speak, which is okay too. I dodge Delia's last wildly inaccurate swing as it comes through the open window, and then lock her arms down with a click of the seatbelt. I jam a piece of wood between the seat and the gas pedal and slam the driver's side door, which has a lovely final sound. I lean through the open window and take the hat off her head so I can kiss her on her sweaty forehead. She tastes like salt. I toss the hat onto the seat next to her before shifting the car into gear, and barely get my arm clear of it as it takes off for the edge of the cliff.

I stand, hands on my hips, watching the car careen off the cliff and wait for the inevitable sound of the crash, or the explosion; I'm not sure which I'll hear first. Strangely, I don't hear either, because before I have a chance to notice any crashing explosions I'm filled with an incredible fire through my whole body. A burning, rotting roar of fire that makes me gasp for air. It's agonizing pain for too long but then a strange warmth takes its place, a warmth I know I'll never have to be without again. A warmth I know I'm right to have killed my mother for.

I had every intention of burning the trailer to the ground but when it comes time to pour the gasoline and light the match, it all seems overly-dramatic and less interesting than I'd imagined it to be. Plus, if I leave everything alone, who knows how long it will be before anything is discovered? Maybe someone will see the flames from the car or maybe they won't. Certainly nobody will be wondering where my mother is anytime soon. She's left such a small mark on the world; I doubt she'll be missed by anyone at all.

Maybe I'll miss her. Sometimes.

I'm only 16; it's okay to maybe miss your mother sometimes, I think.

I stash the gasoline back inside the trailer, lock it up tight and grab my duffel bag from the dusty ground. I tie the bag to the

back of my motorcycle and put on the helmet, not because I think I need it but because I don't actually have a license and I figure the fewer flames I throw up the better off I am, at least for now. Besides, it's a badass helmet and I look cool in it.

With my helmet on, my long legs straddling the machine, and my new power humming through my veins, I take off into the sunset. This part does feel like the movie, like what I've imagined. I feel like screaming at the sky, telling the world to watch out, giving it fair warning that Lola LeFever is finally coming to get it.

The world doesn't stand a chance.



I run.

I run any time the world will let me. If I had my choice I'd just run through everything, I suppose.

I run as close to the boundary fence of the home as I can. Over the years I've worn a pretty impressive path into the yard. Until two months ago I'd actually taken pride in it, my running path. I hadn't realized there was anything weird about running by a fence, the same path, the same way, day in and day out.

But then we took a trip to the zoo.

The tigers had this beautiful enclosure; there was even a little lake, and I was thinking it looked pretty nice, considering, until I noticed one tiger just walking very fast back and forth through the space. After watching him for a minute I realized he wasn't just walking, but pacing the exact same route over and over again.

He'd worn a similar path into his cage that I'd worn into mine. And I was suddenly sad for both of us, but I also knew I wasn't going to do anything about it. There's something about following rules that is very important to me. I can't really understand it yet, but I hope I will someday.

Even though I know in some way it's like that tiger and his pacing, the running is still good. It makes me feel calm. And it keeps the loneliness away. Maybe it's the same for that tiger. I mean, it's lonely to run; it's a singular activity, but it's supposed to be that way, I think. And, I don't know, the way I see it, there's nothing wrong with feeling lonely when you're supposed to be alone. It's when you're standing in a crowded room and feel lonely

that it's really sad, I think. Sometimes, feeling like that makes me want to tear off all my skin.

So yeah. I run as much as I can. And running neurotically by a fence all the time hasn't made me so popular with the other girls. But it was kind of a lost cause with them anyway, I think. They're never mean to me, rather, they just don't seem to understand me, and then from there they just seem to kind of wish I'd stay away from them, and so I do. It doesn't help that I don't speak. The not speaking thing really seems to bother them. I can't blame them. It would probably bother me too. I've tried to find things to say sometimes, but nothing comes. It's just empty inside. Hollow where the words should be. It's felt like that every day since the accident.

That's really how it all started. I just didn't have anything to say for a while after the crash, and then I couldn't think of anything to say, and then I just forgot that I was supposed to be thinking of something to say. And so I was quiet all the time. But that's another reason for the running I guess. Nobody ever expects you to speak when you're running.

A big splashy drop of rain hits me on my wrist and I look up. It's crazy cloudy out of nowhere, the sky looks ready to let loose on me. More cold drops hit my skull and seep into my hair. Running in the rain is even better than regular running. I know I'll be called in immediately though, and sure enough as soon as I finish the thought I look up and see Alice motioning me in from the front door. It's good that it's Alice though, because she likes me more than most of the workers do, and she almost always lets me get another lap in. I hold up my pointer finger to indicate 'just one more lap'. Even from this distance I can see her roll her eyes, but she grins too.

She yells out across the quad. "Okay, but hurry up!" before going back inside. I smile up at the sky and stretch out my legs, really laying into my long strides. I go faster, but never too fast. Never faster than I've ever seen anybody else run. Well, not much faster. I almost laugh out loud in sheer joy at the feeling of the rain pelting my skin, and my muscles humming underneath. It's times like this that I really feel how different I am from everyone else. When I feel like maybe I survived the car accident for a reason. That maybe my destiny is for something bigger than I can imagine. How someone can wish to be extraordinary and simultaneously

wish to blend in and never be seen is something I don't quite understand yet. Like two parts of me battling it out for unknown spoils – one side yearning to be more than I am, calling to something deep inside me that I don't understand, the other side hoping to disappear into the wallpaper and never have to say a word.

Because if I'm the same then the car accident can't be my fault.

If there's nothing extraordinary about me it can just be one of those horrible things that happen. Horrible things happen everyday and I am not unique. Why is that idea so comforting?

So though I want to be the same as every other person that ever drew breath, because it means maybe I'm innocent, something eats away at me on the inside. Shaking its head and clucking its tongue at me, chiding me, reminding me that I've always known there's something very much 'not the same' about me. When that voice rises to the surface I push it down. I bury it in my running strides, repeating to myself 'the same'.

The same. The same. The same. The same. The same. The same. The same.

I come in a minute later, soaked, my feet covered in mud from my wet and quickly eroding path. Alice sighs dramatically like I have just killed her.

"Ack! Bonnie! Get upstairs and change now, before anyone sees you." I shake off the extra water next to her like a dog, splattering her with hundreds of icy drops. She screams and runs away in mock terror. "Get, Bonnie!" she says. I laugh soundlessly and bound up the stairs to the sleeping quarters.

It isn't until I'm changed into clean jeans and a sweater that I realize our trip to the library will surely be canceled because of the rain. I throw myself onto my bed, frustrated, and pull out the three books I've been re-reading since our last trip. Without a trip to the library this week, I'm stuck with the same three books I finished almost two weeks ago. I put them back under the bed and head over to the ancient stacks of community books and comics in the corner bookcase, hoping I'll find some gem that I have somehow missed in years of poring through the piles that rarely change. With the exception of the few comic books, I've read each book on the shelves at least half a dozen times. I frown at the comics,

something I've had little interest in over the years. A handful of *Archies* and a *Betty & Veronica Double-Digest*. I've read most of them, but get bored with the stories quickly, and with Betty and Veronica, who I want to like, but who both somehow seem exactly the same but with different hair colors, and also nothing like me. There are also some comics "classics" that are mostly illustrated comic versions of books, like *Moby Dick*, *Crime & Punishment*, and *Treasure Island*, but having already read the real things I can't drum up much interest in the faded pictures and word balloons.

But today, while digging through the books a bit desperately, I come across a handful of comics I've never seen before. It seems impossible that they've been here all this time and I've never noticed them, because when I look at them there's this beating in my chest that can't be ignored. How could I have missed the tremble in my hands when they touch the vibrant pages? Maybe someone recently added them to the shelves? It's possible. It happens sometimes. I can't think of an explanation and I no longer care. I grip the handful of comics to my chest and take them to my bed, face flushed, heartbeat pounding in my fingers and toes.

And my world just breaks wide open as I read the pages.
SUPERHEROES!

I read all the superhero comics one after another and then start again, feeling more unity with the brightly colored images than I ever would have imagined possible. Maybe I'm really not 'the same' and maybe that isn't so bad after all.



I don't make it to Los Angeles.

I headed there by way of Las Vegas since I'd never seen it before, but once I see Vega, there's no way I'm going to miss out on it. The lights get me from go – like some crazy carnival for grown-ups. Coming over the hill on my bike at dusk and seeing those lights, like a bright, sexy mirage illuminating the whole sky and pounding back the blackness of the desert, I'm hooked already. It's as if those colored lights alone can help make me into something new and exciting. And that feeling makes it pretty easy to give up on heading any further west, which is funny because L.A. is like all that's been in my head since the very beginning, since I'd begun to know there was anything outside of Reno, which had

basically sucked balls. But I forget L.A. the second I see those lights. Maybe it's destiny.

Starting over somewhere always sounded really intoxicating to me, and really easy, but I hate to admit that despite the power I'm holding onto inside me, I'm a little nervous when it actually comes time to make my move. I've been stealing from Delia – God knows who she'd been stealing from – for years, and I have a huge wad of cash, some of it stuffed in my bra and some buried in my bag, so I know I have plenty of time to figure things out, but I'm shocked to find myself almost afraid. I killed my own super-powered mother less than nine hours ago, what on earth is there to be afraid of?

When I cruise my bike into a random motel parking lot and take off my helmet, I'm assaulted by noise. It's like the volume on the whole world has been turned all the way to the right. Or maybe so far that the damn knob has broken off. I put my hands on my ears instinctively. No wonder our trailer was in the middle of freaking nowhere. I shake my head and close my eyes trying to block everything out. But I refuse to live in the middle of nowhere like Delia, so I'm just going to have to gut it out. I pull my hands away and cringe as the sounds tumble around my brain, fighting for dominance. After a few minutes I'm able to push enough stuff away that I can at least stand and walk. It's not like the noise gets any less really, just that my body is learning to compensate for it or something. It's still annoying, but I can live with it if I have to.

I check into the cheap motel attached to the parking lot, and I'm not even asked for my fake I.D., which I'd gone to a certain amount of trouble to get, including letting a creepy guy feel me up, pre-powers of course; there's no reason to have to let anyone do that to me ever again. I'm super irritated that nobody even cares to see it. Once in my room I don't have a goddamn clue what to do. I have this exciting, new feeling coursing through my veins, and the road trip has allowed my mind to wander into awesome fantasies, which when I step off the bike and into the real world, suddenly seem less likely.

Sure, I have all this new power, but really what can I do with it and still stay under the radar of the authorities? The last thing I want is to land in the hands of some FBI morons, or worse, end up in some secret government lab being experimented on. I totally believe that shit happens. I've seen the movies to prove it.

So what can I do with my power, which I am literally itching to use, without drawing too much attention to myself? I figure there are plenty of things I can get myself out of, a locked police cruiser for example, maybe handcuffs, but I didn't bother to take the time to figure out what my limits might be. What will happen to me if someone shoots me with a gun? Had Delia ever been shot before? I have no idea.

Whatever. I'm not looking back anymore. I'm going to experience life like Delia never did, I'm going to eat it all up, taste everything, and spit out what I don't like, and I'm not going to wait. It starts tonight, nerves and second guesses be damned.

I unzip my duffel and rifle through it until my hands hit some silky fabric. I pull out the cat suit and hold it up in the dingy light. It glistens like a snake even under the cheap bare bulb. Instantly I feel better. I briefly consider unpacking but then decide it's better not to get too comfortable and drop the bag on the floor and kick it under the bed.

I strip naked, pull on the skintight black suit, and zip it up from my belly button all the way to my neck. The sleeves reach past my wrists and onto my hands, leaving just my thumbs and fingers free. I pull on my knee-high black combat boots and lace them up, wrapping the excess laces around my calf and double knotting them at the top. I look at myself in the mirror. I look like the goddamn Catwoman. It's awesome. I tie back my long dark blonde hair into a tight ponytail and then push it under the suit before pulling on the hood, which fits nicely and leaves only the oval of my face visible. I feel amazing. I walk around the room a couple times in front of the mirror, practicing. I even try a funny little prancy Catwoman-like walk, but it looks ridiculous and so I just go back to walking normally.

I still look awesome.

I unzip the suit a bit and put my hotel key inside a small hidden space above my breastbone and zip it all back up. I sit on the hotel bed fully decked out and wait for it to get later; it's not even midnight. I'm about to turn on the TV when I see the flimsy folded piece of paper sticking out of the back pocket of my jeans on the floor. I pull the soft paper out and read it again.

Delia,

I know you'll kill me to get it. I thought maybe I'd be angrier about it – but somehow it just makes sense. I can't really blame you – I did it too – killed my mother to get it – and she fought me, as I'm sure I'll fight you, and you'll fight your own daughter someday. But I just thought I should say, I forgive you; it's not your fault. It's the disease calling out to you like a siren – the same way it called to me more than twenty years ago. You can only resist it so long – and once it has you – well, I hope you deal with it better than I did. I love you anyway, though I suppose I was terrible at showing it. Try to forgive yourself.

Aveline

I'd found the letter three days ago, while digging through Delia's dresser looking for a push-up bra. I'd looked for push-up bras a zillion times before though and had never seen it. I don't know if she put it there for me to find, or what. Maybe she knew this thing, whatever it is, was coming and couldn't bear to write her own letter to me? That's f'ed up if it's true, but whatever the explanation, the words knocked me on my ass the first time I read them, if only because I realized with certainty, my eyes drifting over the letter, that I was planning to kill her. It didn't seem like a reality until I saw the letter though. I've read it dozens of times since then. The paper, already old and worn where Delia probably held it hundreds of times herself, is almost as smooth as the cat suit fabric. And now, I'm sitting in a hotel room in Vegas three days later, having done it, having killed her. And I've gotten her power, just as she had from her mother, a grandmother I'd never met, Aveline.

The disease, Aveline called it.

I'm not wild about that word.

I fold up the letter, which seems to absolve me, and put it on the dresser. I don't feel very absolve-y. I sit on the bed thinking about everything that's happened in my life until now, waiting for it to be late enough – dark enough – to go out. It's a long time and I'm not sure how much I like being alone with my thoughts like that. A few days ago maybe it would have been easier, but now it almost feels like I'm not alone. Certainly a lot of my thoughts seem new and strange. Next time I'll just turn on the TV.

I slip out of the motel as quietly as possible. Ironically, the lights that had seemed so appealing now seem like a horrible idea, since despite the late hour, it's lit up like freaking noon outside. I make for the darkness of an alley, hoping I'll blend in better. Once

there I relax a bit, but am disheartened to realize that any antics I pull will need to be in the less exciting neighborhoods of Vegas and away from all these bright lights. I have no big plans, but I still want to have them.

At first I just walk around the quiet, deserted streets trying to think of an epic idea, but nothing comes, and so after another hour with no ideas, I decide to rob the first decent-looking jewelry store I see. As luck would have it, the first good shop has a ridiculous, blingy diamond necklace on display. It has no business being left out and not covered up; even I, with my tenth grade education, know this. Someone's probably getting fired over leaving it out, because that necklace is mine now. I know it like I know my own name. I stand at the window for a few minutes making sure there's no cage that's going to trap me once I'm inside, because I've totally seen that happen in movies. I check the street like a thousand times, making sure nobody is around, and once I'm sure, I pull on the metal security gate, snapping it open with ease. Once the glass is exposed, I send my elbow through it as hard as I can. The glass comes crashing down all around me as the alarms break into the quiet night air. I reach into the opening and pull a second set of metal gates open, snapping the padlock in the process. It has taken less than ten seconds. I jump inside the window and hop out onto the store floor. I keep my head down in case any cameras are looking my way and reach out and snatch the necklace off the headless display mannequin. With my prize still dangling from my hand I dive out the window and roll onto the pavement like a freaking Olympic gymnast; I almost wish for crowds to cheer me on.

And then I hear the sirens above the security alarm.



Visions of powerful superheroes dance around behind my eyes and my imagination flies out of the room and around the whole world. But my fantasies are soon interrupted by yelling in the back yard. At first it sounds only like teenagers chatting but it ramps up and something about the tone sends a chill down my spine. I roll off my bunk and lean against the open window nearby. The only staff is far away, out of normal hearing distance, and the small cluster of girls are near the house. Now the voices have

turned to shouting. At first their grouping is so tight I can't tell who is who, or what's happening, but then a dark-haired girl named Jenny comes flying backward out of the circle and lands on her back roughly. The pack gets eerily quiet and two of the girls go to her aid, but she brushes them off and stands up on her own. Her defiance ignites a spark of admiration and respect in me. She walks back to the group, and two of her other friends are still standing there, mouths open, stunned. I think briefly of going down but am intrigued and impressed by Jenny's bravery. I want to see what she'll do next. Sharon looks to be the one that pushed her. She's new and has been making trouble since day one, but I'm glad to see someone's over it and not afraid to stand up to her. Unfortunately, Jenny is rewarded for her bravery with a slap. The slap shocks even me. It seems like the kind of thing an adult would do, not kids in a yard. Jenny is still recoiling from the impact when Sharon tears a silver chain roughly from her neck. Jenny shrieks and her friends spring into action. Watching them is the first time I've ever really longed for friends in a tangible way. There's something so passionate about their loyalty. They're no match for Sharon, though. Hannah is tiny and delicate and goes down easily with a hard shove; Margaret, a little taller and sturdier takes a punch to the abdomen and ends up catching her breath on the brown grass. The other two just get mowed over as Sharon runs from them, shoving Jenny into the side of the building. Then they're out of my sightline and so I race down the stairs barefoot to see if I can help.

Before I can get there however, Jenny comes running into the building in tears, her four girlfriends closely on her heels. She dashes past me into the sleeping room, her friends whispering as they follow. When they get to the room they're talking all at once and so fast and through so much screeching and tears that it's hard to understand what had happened. Sharon had apparently tossed the locket onto the roof of the building, which seems like some kind of backwards miracle, as the roof is quite high – very high actually. It would have had to catch some horrible, fateful gust of wind to land on the roof. My heart sinks. I know there's no chance the staff will get it back. The one ladder in the shed is far too small to make it to the roof. I sit on the bed quietly watching Jenny, wishing I had acted faster, sooner, more bravely, as she had.

Her grief probably seems indulgent to some, maybe even to her friends trying to comfort her; they've all had tragedy or they

wouldn't be here, but sitting on my bed I can't help putting my hand in my pocket, feeling my mother's silver I.D. bracelet, and aching for Jenny with my entire being. I feel the letters of my mother's name, which are now hard to make out from years of me tracing the engraving with my thumb unconsciously, as if it would help connect me to her. I know I have to do something for Jenny, even if it means breaking the rules. A superhero would behave this way; a hero helps whether the problem is great or small, even if it breaks the rules. And maybe some rules are different than others. Who says the rule about curfew should be more important than a rule about stealing? My mind hammers at the question and I feel deeply, alarmingly confused by it. But if I'm honest, my heart is racing, telling me there's certainly one that is more important. The women in the pages of the comic books speak to me in the same way I sometimes imagine my mother does, whispering at some greatness that I can't believe in, let alone conceive of. But today, today something has clicked and I feel different. I feel sure that I'm the only one who can help Jenny.

That it's almost my destiny.

I wait until almost three in the morning. Jenny's muffled crying had died down into an exhausted sleep hours ago, but sometimes the staff stay up well past midnight and so I lie here, eyes wide open, plotting. Finally I throw back the covers and creep to the door in my t-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. It's raining outside, which is both good and bad. The sound of the rain and the obscured moon will make it easier for me to go unnoticed, but everything will be wet and slippery, and very dark. I edge down the stairs and past the sleeping woman at the front desk. They're always asleep. I go out the side kitchen door, which is the door the girls always use when they sneak out. By the time I get to the shed at the far end of the yard I'm soaked to the skin.

I try the door but it's locked. I rise up on my tiptoes and peek through the dusty window on the side of the shed and try opening that, but it's locked as well. I look back at the building, looming over me in the rain, all the windows dark, water falling off the roof in huge sheets.

It looks big.

I jiggle the door again. And then I try something I've never tried before. I push on the handle with all my strength. The metal comes snapping off in my hand and the door swings open. I gape

at the handle, my mouth half open in surprise. I lay the piece in the grass and mud, positioning it in such a way that it could have conceivably just broken and fallen off. Inside the mildew-scented shed, I grab the ladder. If I'm lucky, it will get me to the first floor, cutting a quarter of the distance. On the way out the door, with the metal ladder tucked under my arm, I take a flashlight, checking quickly that it works by accidentally shining it in my eyes and temporarily blinding myself.

So far I'm terrible at this.

When the starbursts of light clear from my vision I stand in the rain looking back at the building. It looks bigger than big, it's foreboding and dark and just huge. I'd always thought of it as just some rather unimpressive stocky brick building. A little sad and rundown, but not overly impressive. It's only four stories tall but now it looks epic. It looks like the hardest thing to climb on Earth, and I feel tiny, wet, and powerless.

I leave the ladder on the grass and head around to the short side of the building, where there are only two windows on each of the four floors. I had thought this would be the best place to climb since people are less likely to hear or see me, but looking at it now I realize that once I run out of ladder I will have absolutely nothing to grab hold of. The brick-face is almost completely smooth, and slick with rain, it's impossible.

As I head back to where I've left the ladder, my mind racing, grasping for options, I notice the corner of the building has bricks set out slightly from the wall. I don't know what they're called or why I've never noticed them before, but they are set into the corner almost like the tiniest of steps. The lip of brick is little more than half an inch and wet like everything else, but at that moment, to me, it looks like a built-in brick ladder reaching all the way to the roof. I break into a huge smile, but rain hits me in my teeth and eyes and so I shake it off and get back to business.

I position the ladder next to the corner, along the short side, where I'm less likely to be heard, and climb up. Climbing takes two seconds and part of me wishes it took longer so that I won't have to start the hard part so soon. I push the flashlight deeper into my pocket and creep to the edge closest to the house corner. The metal shifts in the mud under my feet. Damn it. I reach out with my right arm before the ladder can send me flailing onto the yard, and position my fingers along the edge of the brick lip. I do the

same with my left hand until I'm just hanging there about fifteen feet up, my feet dangling. I try to put my feet on the brick lip, but it's far too small. I should have taken off my shoes. With my toes, perhaps I could have gotten some grip on the tiny edge. I think about trying to get back on the ladder and doing just that, but just as I think it the ladder starts to fall. I squint my eyes shut and grimace, anticipating the inevitable crash, but with everything so wet and mushy the sound is muffled, and the ladder, blissfully, doesn't close up on itself, which would surely have been loud. Instead it just lays there ineffectively on its side. I think how lucky I just got and then chide myself for celebrating while I'm hanging off the edge of a building, fifteen feet in the air, in the rain, by my fingertips.

In a way I'm not sure what to do now, as the task I've set for myself seems impossible, but then my arms start without me. My arms do all the work as my legs dangle uselessly below me and I marvel at them, as they seem to be on autopilot, just moving me up brick by brick. The next time I look down I'm at least three floors high and passing a bank of windows. It's funny because my arms feel like they belong to me more than ever before...kind of the way my legs feel when I run, and so I just let them do it. My arms and I are at the top in no time. Both my hands grasp at the metal gutter, pulling me up and over the edge. The gutter gives a little, but holds.

I stand up on the roof as the rain bathes me and I feel like a whole new person, like a person I knew was lurking inside, but hadn't known how to talk to, until now. It's amazing.

So now I just have to find a tiny silver locket in the rainy dark. No problem. I turn on the flashlight and decide to just start circling the roof from the outside and working toward the center. But just as I begin I slip on a loose shingle. When the first one breaks free several more join it – sliding out from under me and taking me with it. I shoot off the edge of the roof toward dark oblivion.

If I hadn't spent the last eleven years not speaking I know I would have screamed.

Instead, I reach my hand out instinctively as I go over the edge, and catch a couple more crappy shingles that crumble under my grasp. The gutter is my last hope, and I manage to snag it but the weight of me falling is too much for it and it pulls away from the edge of the house with surprising speed. I think there's no way

not to go down, but my body tells me otherwise. My weight swings with the motion of the detaching gutter and when it bends back toward the building again I leverage myself up and back onto the roof, barely. Holy. Shit. That's the only thought in my head, about a thousand holy shits.

The flashlight has rolled into an intact part of the gutter and when I slide over to retrieve it I see the locket and chain, glistening in the flashlight's beam. I reach out and pocket it like a kid that just found the freaking Holy Grail. But as I stand up and survey the damage I've done I realize this is going to raise serious eyebrows. Part of the gutter is torn away from the building and at least two dozen shingles have either broken or fallen off the house entirely. The damage will be visible from the yard. I look around for a solution; there's nothing. The building is like a lonely island in the yard, the nearest tree at least a hundred feet away. As I stand there, knowing I'm screwed, lightning strikes a warehouse down the street. I watch it, transfixed. Both because I've never seen lightning hit anything before, and also because it seems like something ridiculous out of a cartoon. But it gives me an idea.

I walk to the chimney on the south side of the house; there's a direct line between it and where the shingles have crumbled and the gutter has broken. I position myself behind and slightly above the chimney. I bite my lip in horrible anticipation and strike my fist at the bricks. It hurts like hell but it does break apart. My hand is torn up and bleeding a little but I hit it a few more times anyway, trying my best to make the chimney look 'struck by lightning'. I then position some of the bricks and broken stone on the roof in a random falling pattern toward the gutter. I even jam two of the bricks into the gutter to make things look more feasible. Then I drop a few to the ground, making sure they hit the grass quietly and not the concrete loudly. Satisfied with my cover-up I head back to the side of the building where I came up, only to realize, stupidly, that I have no way down.

I look around helplessly. I don't think even my amazing 'auto-pilot' arms have the hand-strength to get me back onto that tiny stone lip. Would I survive the jump? It's four stories. If I survive, what would I break? Everything? Nothing? I sit down on the roof, drawing my legs up to my chest, and as the rain pours down I bury my head against my knees, breathing deeply, trying to be smart. After a few minutes I stand up and carefully walk around

the roof edge. The ground on the south side of the building is the softest and wettest.

I'll jump from here.

I can't decide if I should take a running start, putting distance between the building and myself or if I should just jump from a standing position on the edge. I chew my lip and walk to the middle of the roof. Before I can talk myself out of it, I start running for the edge.

When my feet leave the roof it's the most alive I've felt since before the accident.