

THE GIRL WHO WOULD BE KING

by

Kelly Thompson

PART I:
break away



Berks County, Pennsylvania

The car hits the tree going at least forty miles an hour and I go through the windshield like I've been tossed gently by a hurricane. I land thirty yards away from the car on some bright green grass, barely missing the tree directly in my path.

Everything is black for a while.

When I open my eyes again all I 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 the other parts.

And then the smell hits me.

It isn't gentle like the leaves, but assaulting and violent. It fills my nostrils with the same metallic flavor that fills your mouth 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 leaves above me, and I turn my head to the side to throw up. Spitting into the grass and leaning up on my elbow 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. Tears leak out the sides of my eyes, 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 with 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 has 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 have both been thrown through most of the windshield, but the front of the car is so crumpled that their

broken bodies are 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 my clothes and skin, but no matter how I pull at my clothing and check my limbs I can't find any cuts. My left arm hurts though, and it's twisted strangely. 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 and moves like any normal arm. I look up as three big black birds walk around awkwardly in the trees above me. They stare at me 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. Under the bracelet there are some small black marks on her wrist that I've never seen before, some tiny circles and a bird. The image pulls on me deep in my belly, twisting and aching for 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 east, the way we had been driving, the way home, and then turn west and start running.

I always wake up at the part when I'm running, and I never remember where I am for whole minutes before it all comes rushing back.

I'm seventeen, 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.

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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. I guess I'd always 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, though it takes me a good half 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 bumbling attempt at murder. I try to imagine that if I could see the first murder for any would be serial killer it wouldn't look unlike my attempt today, stirring up dust and leaving obvious drag marks everywhere. The bad news is that the longer it takes, the more likely it becomes that she's going to wake up from the deadly cocktail I've fed her. I've given her enough botulinum in her daily bottle of Jack to kill a person twice over, but Delia is not a normal person, and I can feel her struggling against me already underneath the 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 kill my resolve. But there's no stopping now. If I stop now she'll kill me herself, or worse, live forever, and then I'll never fulfill my destiny. I'm not quite sure 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 feels like I've 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 the way things are working out I don't 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 for it to look like she was driving as nobody is really going 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 curlyish dark blonde 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 have 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 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 swinging fist 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 that I can kiss her on her sweaty forehead. I toss the cap onto the seat next to her before shifting the car into gear. I 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, waiting 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 explosions my body is filled with an incredible fire. A burning, rotting, then cleansing fire that makes me gasp for air, clutching my chest. But when the agonizing pain passes, a strange warmth takes its place, a warmth that I know I will never have to be without again. A warmth I know I'm right to have killed my mother to get.

I had every intention of burning our old 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 would 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, maybe not. Certainly nobody will be wondering where my mother is anytime soon. She 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 off of the dusty ground. I tie the bag to the back of my motorcycle and I 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 on her own and coming to get it.

The world doesn't stand a chance.



I run.

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

I run as close to the fence at 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 never 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 in the enclosure, 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've worn into mine, and suddenly I was a bit 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's very important to me. I can't really understand it yet, but I hope I will someday.

Even though I know in some way my running is like that tiger and his pacing, it's 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. They're never mean to me, rather they just don't seem to understand me, and they just seem to kind of wish I'd stay away from them, 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 want to say anything 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 yet another reason for 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 at the sky. 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, but I know I'll be called in immediately. Sure enough, before I can even 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, and she almost always lets me get another lap in. I hold up my pointer finger as if to indicate *'just one more lap'*. Even from this distance I can see her roll her eyes, but she smiles 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. Some of those runners in the Olympics I've seen on TV run really fast.

I can run much faster than any of them.

But I never go that fast, how fast I know I can go deep inside.

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 now that I really feel how different I am from everyone else. It's times like now that I feel like maybe I survived the car accident for a reason. That maybe my destiny is for something great. How someone can simultaneously wish to be extraordinary and also wish to blend in and never be seen is something I don't quite understand yet, its 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, while the other hopes to disappear into the wallpaper, to be the same as everyone else and never have to say a word. Because if I'm the same then the car accident can't be my fault, then it can just be one of those horrible things that happen everyday.

Usually the quiet side wins. But not today. Today I have to push down the yearning side as I step into each long stride. I bury that side in the repetitive sound of my feet on the damp ground, saying 'the same' in my head as loud as I can.

The same. The same.

I come in a minute later, soaked, my feet covered in mud from my 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 dozens of icy drops. She screams and runs away in mock terror. “Get, Bonnie!” she says. I laugh soundlessly and bound up the south stairs to the sleeping quarters.

It isn't until I'm changed into clean jeans and a new t-shirt 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 books I've been re-reading since our last trip. Without a trip to the library this week, I'll be stuck with the same three books I finished almost two weeks ago. I put the books back under the bed and head over hopelessly to the ancient pile of community books and comics in the corner bookshelf, hoping I'll find some gem that I have somehow missed in years of pouring through the pile that rarely changes. With the exception of the few comic books, I've read each book on the shelf at least half a dozen times. I frown at the comic books, something I've had little interest in over the years. A handful of *Archies* and a *Betty and Veronica Double-Digest*. I've read most of them, but get bored with the stories quickly, and with Betty and Veronica in general, who I want to like, but who both somehow seem exactly the same but with different hair color. 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 while digging through the books in desperation today I come across a handful of comics I've never seen before. It seems impossible to me that they could have been there all this time and I wouldn't have noticed. Because when I look at them there's this beating in my chest that cannot be ignored. How would I have missed the tremble in my hands where they touch the vibrant pages? Maybe someone added them to the community pile. 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.

For the first time the voice inside me changes its tune. 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 head there by way of Las Vegas since I've never seen Vegas before, but once I see Vegas there's no way I'm going to keep going. The lights get me from go – like some crazy carnival for grown ups. Coming over the hill on my bike in the dark and seeing those lights, like a bright sexy mirage, lighting up the whole sky and pounding back the blackness of the desert, I'm already hooked. It's as if the lights alone can help make me into something new and exciting. And that feeling makes it pretty easy to give up on heading 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 have 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?

I check into a cheap motel and I'm not even asked for my fake i.d., which I'd gone to a lot 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 annoyed now that nobody cares to see it. Once in my room I don't have a goddamn clue what to do. I have this new feeling coursing through my veins, and being on the motorcycle on the highway has allowed my wild mind to wander into awesome fantasies, which, when I step off the bike and into the real world, seem less likely.

Sure, I have all this new power, but what can I really do with it and still stay under the radar of the cops? The last thing I want is to land in the hands of some rent-a-cop 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 before hitting the road 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. I'm starting tonight, nerves and second guesses be damned.

I unzip my duffel and rifle through it until my hands hit the silky fabric I'm looking for. 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 consider unpacking the bag and then decide it's better not to get too comfortable and drop it on the floor, still full, and kick it under the bed.

I strip naked, pull on the skintight black suit, and zip it up from my navel all the way to my neck. The sleeves reach past my wrists and onto my hands, leaving just my thumb and fingers free. I pull on my knee-high black combat boots and lace them up, wrapping the excess lace around my calf and double knotting it at the top. I look at myself in the mirror. I look like the goddamn Catwoman. It's awesome. I pull my long dark blonde hair back into a tight ponytail and then knot it at the back of my neck 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 pocket just above my breastbone and zip it all back up. I sit in the suit on my bed 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 reach down and pull the soft paper from the pocket 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 smooth like the silky cat suit fabric under my fingers. And now, sitting in a hotel room in Vegas three days later, I have killed her. And I'd gotten her power, just as she had from *her* mother, my grandmother that 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, and wait for it to be late 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 to be alone with my thoughts, 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 room door as quietly as possible. Ironically, the lights that had seemed so appealing now seem like a horrible idea, as despite the late hour it's lit up like freaking noon outside my room. I make for the darkness of a back alley, hoping I'll blend in better there.

Once in the alley 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 and crowds.

I have no big plans, but I still want to have them.

At first I just walk around the quiet deserted streets away from the strip 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 shop has a ridiculous blingy diamond necklace on display. It has no business being left out and not covered up; even I know this with my tenth grade education. Someone's getting fired for 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 is going to trap me inside once I break in, 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 window comes crashing down all around me as the store alarm breaks into the quiet night air. I reach into the window and pull a second set of metal gates open, snapping the padlock in the process. It's 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 snatch the necklace off the neck of a headless mannequin. The necklace still in my hand, I dive out the window and roll onto the pavement like a freaking Olympic gymnast. I almost wish for crowds.

And then I hear the sirens above the store alarm.



While visions of powerful superheroes dance around behind my eyes, and my imagination flies out of the room and around the whole world, my thoughts are interrupted by yelling in the back

yard. At first it sounds only like teenagers chatting but it ramps up suddenly 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 hearing distance, and a small cluster of girls are near the house, shouting. At first their cluster is so tight I can't tell who is who, or what's happening, but then a dark haired girl named Jenny comes flying backwards out of the circle and lands on her back roughly. The group gets eerily quiet and two 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 even impressed by Jenny's backbone. 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, a parent, not kids in a schoolyard still working their way up to that. 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. 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 as she escapes. 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 has happened. Sharon has 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 and hard lives, or they wouldn't be here, but sitting on my bed I can't help putting my hand in my pocket and feeling my mother's silver I.D. bracelet that I'd taken the day she died, and ache 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 touching the engraving in my hand unconsciously, as if it will 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 book speak to me in the same way I imagine my mother sometimes does, whispering at my greatness, a 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. It will make it easier for me to go unnoticed with the sound of the rain, and with the cloudy sky obscuring the moon, but everything will be wet and slippery, and it will be 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 where the girls always go out when they aren't supposed to. By the time I get to the shed in the yard I'm soaked to the skin.

I try the door handle but it's locked. I rise up on my tiptoes and peek into the dusty window on the side 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 handle 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 sitting there in my hand, my mouth half open in surprise. I lay the handle 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 at least 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 then seeing multi-colored spots for a full minute afterward.

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 enormous to me now. Foreboding and dark and just, *huge*. I'd always thought of it as just some rather unimpressive stocky brick building. A little sad and run down, 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 house, 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 in the rain, slick with wet, it's impossible.

As I head back to the ladder, my mind racing as to what my options are, I notice the corner of the building, which 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 almost like the tiniest of steps on the corner of the building. The lip 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 the ladder takes two seconds and part of me wishes it took longer so that I won't have to start the hard part now. I push the flashlight deeper into my pocket and creep to the edge closest to the house corner. The ladder shifts in the mud under my feet. Damnit. I reach out with my right arm before the ladder can send me flailing into 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. It occurs to me now that 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 taking my shoes off, but no sooner do I think it than 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 be 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 all of a sudden my arms pull me and I'm going up. I'm pulling myself up! My arms do all the work as my legs dangle uselessly below me. I marvel at my arms, which 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 more to me than I've ever felt in my life...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 roof edge in no time, one hand in the metal gutter. Both my hands grasp at the gutter and pull 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 always 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 in concentric circles working towards 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 and 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 I 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 the gutter 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, further down the gutter, 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 there is no way to get out of this without raising 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 see it and am transfixed. Both because I've never seen lightning hit anything before, and also because it seems like something ridiculous out of a cartoon...lightning striking...like a light bulb suddenly appearing over my head.

I walk with to the chimney on the south side of the roof. There's a direct line between the chimney and where the shingles have crumbled and the gutter has torn. I position myself behind and slightly above the chimney. I bite my lip in horrible anticipation and strike my fist out 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 on the roof in a random falling pattern towards 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, like an idiot, 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 lip. Would I survive the jump? It's four stories. If I survive, what would I break? Everything? Nothing? I sit down in the rain on the roof and draw my knees up to my chin. I bury my head against my knees for a moment, breathing deeply, trying to be smart. After a few minutes I stand up and carefully walk around the roof edge. The south side of the building is the softest, and wettest.

I'll jump from here.

I can't decide if I should run and jump off the roof, putting distance between myself and the building, or if I should just jump from a standing position on the edge. I chew my lip and then turn to the middle and 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 the accident.



I'm six blocks away and moving at a speed even I thought impossible when the police cars finally screech to a halt and I hear car doors slamming and guns being drawn. Now at a safe distance I put the necklace on and tuck it safely under my cat suit. I decide to run some more. It feels good, almost like I think flying might feel.

I fall asleep that night feeling more alive than ever before, my skin humming and my mouth smiling even when I don't want it to. I think I'm even smiling as I drift off, the necklace still around my neck even though it's frighteningly uncomfortable. My last thought is that everything is going to work out fine.

In the morning I wake very early, because Delia hated it when I did that, and throw on a sweatshirt over my cat suit before heading out for a celebratory breakfast. I realize halfway to the diner a few blocks away from my motel that I still have the diamond necklace on underneath my sweatshirt. The feel of the silver and diamonds grazing my neck is exciting and I smile like a kid with a giant lollipop. I slide into a big cushy booth and order a coffee. I've never had one before but it seems like the right thing to do – the grown up thing. I also order a juice and the “super grandest slam” breakfast. I'm not kidding, that's what it's called. Some play on *Denny's* I guess, but changed just enough to not get sued. Halfway through gorging myself, a waitress, not mine, but another one whose nametag reads *Felice*, comes by to refill my coffee. I nod even though I'd kind of hated the stuff, and as she pours it to the top I wince.

“Nice necklace,” she says casually. I look down and see that it has partially slipped out of the neck of my sweatshirt. I gulp down some pancakes.

“Uh. Thanks. It's my grandma's.”

“Uh-huh,” she says, walking away. Just as I'm getting ready to leave, the same woman, but now in street clothes, slides into the booth with me and drops a newspaper onto the table in front of me. She puts her finger on a front-page story, which appears to be an article on my robbery, complete with a small picture of my new necklace.

“I think we should talk,” she says, all steely-eyed. I try to remember I have superpowers and look right at her but say nothing. “You want to explain?” she asks.

“Not to you, bitch.” I'm happily surprised that this response shocks her.

“Bitch? You really wanna go there?” she asks, raising her voice. I decide that while I know I can kill her and maybe even everyone in the restaurant without breaking a sweat, I had warned myself just last night to be careful about these kinds of situations. It's best to stay away from the authorities as long as possible. At least until I know what I'm really capable of.

“Sorry,” I mumble, choking on the words. “I’m leaving.” I throw a ten-dollar bill on the table to cover my meal and the tip. She grabs my arm as I get up and I sling it away from her powerfully. She’s more shocked at this than my ballsy comeback of a moment ago. “Don’t freaking touch me,” I hiss and walk out the front door. A block later I have practically forgotten about her when she sidles up beside me. She’s got dark hair and eyes and now that I’m standing I can see she’s shorter than me by nearly a foot and having trouble keeping pace with my long legs.

“You got the wrong idea honey,” she says, catching her breath.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. I’m impressed. I mean not so much at your crappy choice of words and your obvious temperament issues, but you’re just a kid. Who are you working with to manage to snag that necklace...or did you just luck out and find it in the street somewhere...?” She lets her sentence dangle there in the air like a challenge and I turn on her, crossing my arms. I know the smart thing is to admit I found it, but what can I say, I’m pretty proud of my first score.

“What do you think?”

“I think maybe you’ve got some talent and I should introduce you to some friends of mine,” she says. I look at her hard, trying to read whether or not it’s a trap, but I can’t really tell. I’m not sure if it’s a good idea, but I’m also not sure I have anything to lose. I’m trying to figure out what I am, what I want to be doing, and what my life is going to be about, and if she and these friends of hers mess with me or double-cross me, I’ll just kill them and move on. As Delia always used to say, you don’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. Actually it had always annoyed the crap out of me that she said that since she never freaking cooked and I would have happily eaten an omelet, but I’m starting to understand that maybe she wasn’t talking about cooking. Felice hands me a card with the name of some Spanish restaurant I can’t pronounce on

the front. There's an address and a phone number. I raise an eyebrow at her and turn it over. On the back is her name and 10pm written in black ink.

"Just come," she says, turning and heading back to the restaurant as if she's in no hurry whatsoever. I watch her go and then crumple up the card and toss it over my shoulder.

But I've already memorized the address.