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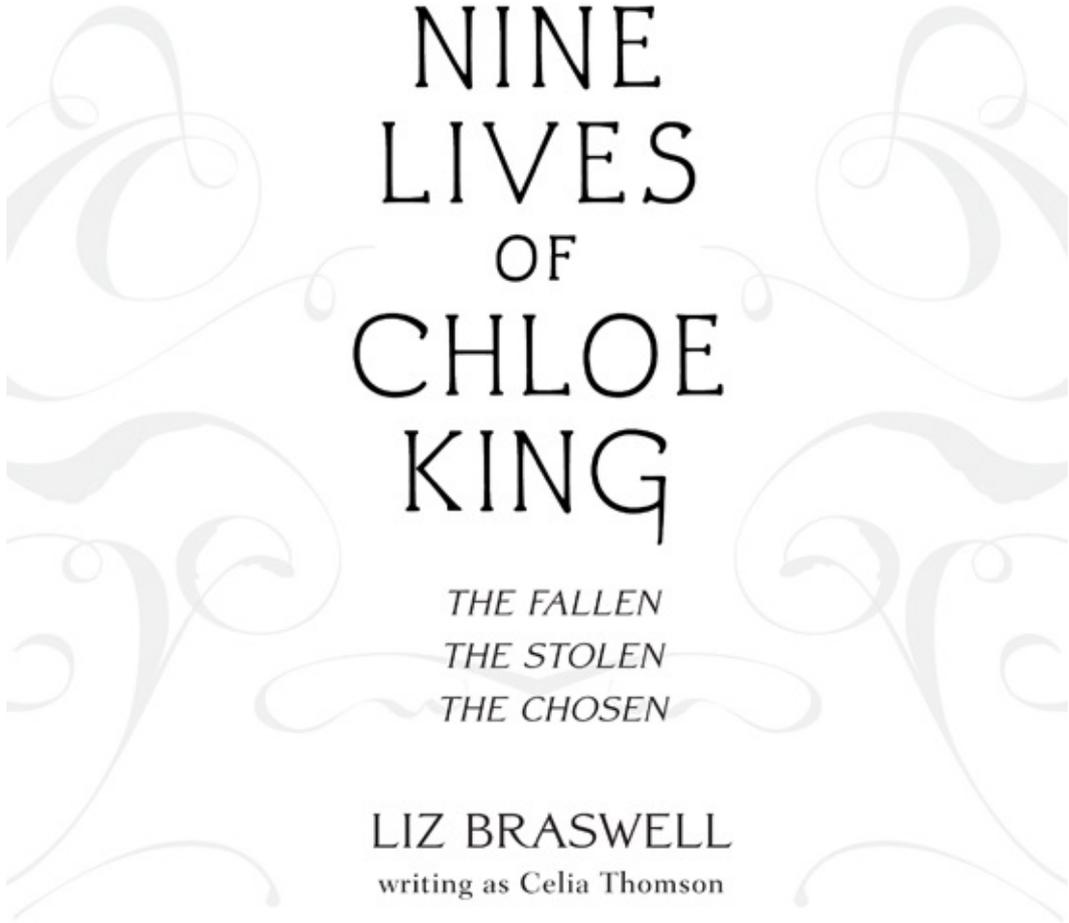
Even curiosity can't kill her.

LIZ BRASWELL

writing as Celia Thomson

INCLUDES *THE FALLEN*,
THE STOLEN, AND *THE CHOSEN*

THE
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OF
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KING

The cover features elegant, light grey decorative flourishes that frame the central text. These flourishes consist of flowing, curved lines and loops, reminiscent of calligraphic scrollwork, positioned on either side of the title and author information.

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THE FALLEN
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Simon Pulse
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

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THE FALLEN

*For John Ordober and Dave Mack, good friends
and the sine qua nons of my career and marriage*

He never tired or lost her trail.

Not since she'd first seen him an hour ago in the bar, when his sleeve had fallen back and revealed an ornate black brand. Scrolls and curlicues of ink and scar tissue spelled out the familiar words: *Sodalitas Gladii Decimi*.

And so she ran.

She took a deep breath and looked ahead, leaping over piles of garbage and puddles with the precision of an acrobat, propelled by her terror. Which street did this alley connect to? Was there a public place close by—even a twenty-four-hour gas station—where she would be safe?

Finally the smell of open, wet air told her an exit was ahead: a barbedwire-topped gate blocked the far end of the alley.

She prepared to leap, triumph and freedom singing in her ears.

Then something burned into her left leg, ripping through muscle.

She clung to the gate, her leg dangling uselessly below her. She reached to pull herself up, hand over hand, but a near-silent whir announced a second attack. In an instant, she fell.

“Trapped, I’m afraid,” said an irritatingly calm voice.

She desperately tried to push herself along the ground, away from him—but there was nowhere to go.

“Please ... no ...,” she whimpered, pushing herself back up against a wall. “I’m not what you think I’m not *bad*. ...”

“I’m sure you don’t believe you are.”

She heard a blade, fine and small like a dagger, being whisked out of its sheath.

“I’ve never—I would never hurt *anyone*! Please!”

He cut her throat.

“*Id tibi facio, Deus*,” he whispered, putting the side of his left hand to his heart, thumb in the middle of his chest, pointing up. A gentle sigh escaped the dying girl; a thin ribbon of blood trickled down her neck. Tiny marks of an expert assassin. He bowed his head. “In allegiance to the Order of the Tenth Blade. *Pater noster, rex gentius*.”

He adjusted her head so that she looked more comfortable and closed her eyes. Then he wiped the tiny silver blade on a handkerchief, sat back on his heels, and waited.

When she woke up, he would kill her again.

As soon as she opened her eyes that morning, Chloe decided that she would go to Coit Tower instead of Parker S. Shannon High, her usual destination on a Tuesday.

She was turning sixteen in less than twenty-four hours, with no real celebration in sight: Paul spent Wednesdays at his dad's house in Oakland, and—far worse—her mom had said something about “maybe going to a nice restaurant.” What was a “nice” restaurant, anyway? A place where they serve blowfish and foie gras? Where the wine list was thicker than her American civilization textbook? No thank you.

If Mom found out about the Coit Tower expedition, Chloe would be grounded, completely eliminating any possibility of dinner out. Then Chloe would have a *right* to feel miserable on her sixteenth birthday, at home, alone, punished. The idea was strangely alluring.

She called Amy.

“Hey, want to go to the tower today instead of physics?”

“Absolutely.” There was no hesitation, no pause—no grogginess, in fact. For all of Amy's rebel post-punk posturing, Chloe's best friend was a morning person. How did she deal with the 2 A.M. poetry readings? “I'll see you there at ten. I'll bring bagels if you bring the crack.”

By “crack” Amy meant Café Eland's distinctive twenty-ounce coffee, which was brewed with caffeinated water.

“You're on.”

“You want me to call Paul?”

That was strange. Amy never volunteered to do anything, much less help with group planning.

“Nah, let me guilt him into it.”

“Your funeral. See ya.”

She dragged herself out of bed, wrapping the comforter around her. Like almost everything in the room, it was from Ikea. Her mom's taste ran toward orange, turquoise, abstract kokopelli statuettes, and blocks of sandstone—none of which fit in a crappy middle-class San Francisco ranch. And since Pateena Vintage Clothing paid a whopping \$5.50 an hour, Chloe's design budget was limited. Scandinavian blocks of color and furniture with unpronounceable names would have to do for now. *Anything* beat New Southwest.

She stood in front of the closet, wearing a short pair of boxers and a tank. Even if she still hadn't gotten her period, Chloe was finally developing a waist, as if her belly had been squeezed up to her breasts and down to her butt. Hot or not, it wasn't as though any of it really mattered: her mom grounded her if she so much as even *mentioned* a boy other than Paul.

She threw herself in front of the computer with a wide yawn and jiggled the mouse. Unless Paul was asleep or dead, he could pretty much be located at his computer 24/7. Bingo—his name popped up in bold on her buddy list.

Chloe: Ame and me are going to Coit Tower today. Wanna come?

Paul: [long pause]

Chloe: ?

Paul: You're not gonna guilt me into it 'cause I'm not gonna be around for your birthday, right?

Chloe: :)

Paul: *groan* ok I'll tell Wiggins I got a National Honor Society field trip or something.

Chloe: ILU, PAUL!!!

Paul: Yeahyeah. Cul8r.

Chloe grinned. Maybe her birthday wasn't going to suck after all.

She looked out the window—yup, fog. In a city of fog, Inner Sunset was the foggiest part of San Francisco. Amy loved it because it was all spooky and mysterious and reminded her of England (although she had never been there). But Chloe was depressed by the damp and cheerless mornings, evenings, and afternoons and liked to flee to higher, sunnier ground—like Coit Tower—at every opportunity.

She decided to play it safe and dressed as if for school, in jeans and a tee and a jean jacket from Pateena's that was authentic eighties. It even had a verse of a Styx song penned carefully in ballpoint on one of the sleeves. She emptied her messenger bag of her textbooks and hid them under her bed. Then she stumbled downstairs, trying to emulate her usual tired-grumpy-morning-Chloe routine.

"You're down early," her mother said suspiciously.

Uneager to pick a fight this morning, Chloe swallowed her sigh. *Everything* she did out of the ordinary since she'd turned twelve was greeted with suspicion. The first time she'd gotten a short haircut—paid for with her *own* money, thank you very much—her mother had demanded to know if she was a lesbian.

"I'm meeting Ame at the Beanery first," Chloe responded as politely as she could, grabbing an orange out of the fridge.

"I don't want to sound old-fashioned, but—"

"It's gonna stunt my growth?"

"It's a gateway drug." Mrs. King put her hands on her hips. In black Donna Karan capris with a silk-and-wool scoop neck and her pixie haircut, Chloe's mom didn't look like a mom. She looked like someone out of a Chardonnay ad.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Chloe couldn't keep herself from saying.

"There's an article in the *Week*." Her mother's gray eyes narrowed, her expertly lined lips pursed. "Coffee leads to cigarettes leads to cocaine and crystal methampheta-mines."

"Crystal *meth*, Mom. It's crystal *meth*." Chloe kissed her on the cheek as she walked past her to the door.

"I'm talking to you about not smoking, just like the ads say to!"

"Message received!" Chloe called back, waving without turning around.

She walked down to Irving Street, then continued walking north to the southern side of Golden Gate Park, stopping at Café Eland for the two promised coffees. Paul didn't partake; she got him a diet Coke instead. Amy was already at the bus stop, juggling a bag of bagels, her army pack, and a cell phone.

"You know, real punks don't—" Chloe put her hand to her ear and shook it, mimicking a phone.

"Bite me." Amy put down her bag and threw her phone in, pretending not to care about it. Today she wore a short plaid kiltlike skirt, a black turtleneck, fishnets, and cat-eye glasses; the overall effect was somewhere between rebellious librarian and geek-punk.

The two of them were comfortably silent on the bus, just drinking coffee and glad to have a seat. Amy might be a morning person, but Chloe needed at least another hour before she would be truly sociable. Her best friend had learned that years ago and politely accommodated her.

There wasn't much to look at out the bus window; just another black-and-white-and-gray early

morning in San Francisco, full of grumpy-faced people going to work and bums finding their street corners, Chloe's reflection in the dusty window was almost monochromatic except for her light hazel eyes. They glowed almost orange in the light when the bus got to Kearny Street and the sun broke through.

Chloe felt her spirits rise: this was the San Francisco of postcards and dreams, a city of ocean and sky and sun. It really was glorious.

Paul was already there, sitting on the steps of the tower, reading a comic book.

"Happy pre-birthday, Chlo," he said, getting up and lightly kissing her on the cheek, a surprisingly mature, touchy-feely act. He held out a brown bag.

Chloe smiled curiously and then opened it—a plastic bottle of Popov vodka was nestled within.

"Hey, I figure if we're going to be truants, why not go all the way?" He grinned, his eyes squeezing into slits zipped shut by his lashes. There was a slight indentation in his short, black, and overgelled hair where his earphones had rested.

"Thanks, Paul." She pointed up. "Shall we?"

"What if you had to choose just one of these views to look at for the rest of your life," Chloe said. "Which one would it be?"

Amy and Paul looked up from each other, almost intrigued. The three of them had been sitting around for the past hour, not really doing much, with Chloe's two best friends occasionally exchanging giggly glances. That had grown old real fast.

Half of Coit Tower's windows showed spectacular, sun-drenched San Francisco scenery, the other nine looked out into a formless, gray-white abyss.

"I'd wait until the sun cleared before making my choice," Amy said, pragmatic as ever. She swirled her cup of coffee for emphasis, mixing its contents. Chloe sighed; she should have expected that answer.

Paul walked from window to window, game. "Well, the bridge is beautiful, with all the fog and clouds and sunset and dawn—"

"Bor-ing," Amy cut in.

"The Transamerica Pyramid is too sharp and weird—"

"And *phallic*."

"I guess I would choose the harbor," Paul decided. Looking over his shoulder, Chloe could see colorful little sailboats coming and going with the wind, dreamy, hazy islands in the distance. She smiled. It was a *very* Paul choice.

"Definitely *not* Russian Hill," Amy added, trying to regain control of the conversation. "Fugly sprawl with a capital *Fug*."

"Made your decision just in time, Paul ..."

As they watched, low clouds came rolling down from the hills, replacing each of the nine windows enclosing the views in a white, total darkness. What should have been a beautiful blue day with puffy white clouds, now that they were out of Inner Sunset, had rapidly given way to the same old stupid weather.

This wasn't exactly what Chloe had expected for her sixteenth-birthday-school-blow-off day.

To be fair, she always expected more than life was likely to give: in this case, a golden sunny *Star by Me/Ferris Bueller* these-are-the-best-days-of-our-lives sort of experience.

"So dude," Amy said, changing the subject. "What's up with you and Comrade Ilychovich?"

Chloe sighed and sank down against the wall, taking a last swallow from her own cup. Like Amy's it was spiked with Paul's birthday present to her. Paul had already drunk his diet Coke and was now

sipping directly from the amazingly cheesy plastic vodka flask. Chloe looked dreamily at the black-and-red onion domes on the label.

“He’s ... just ... so ... *hot*.”

“And so out of your league,” Amy pointed out.

“Alyec is steely-eyed, chisel-faced young Russian,” Paul said with a thick cold war accent.

“Possibly with modeling contract. Sources say Agent Keira Hendelson getting close to his ... *cover*.”

“Screw her.” Chloe threw her empty cup at the wall, picturing it smashing into the student council’s blond little president.

“You *could* be related, you know,” Amy pointed out. “That could be a problem. He could be a cousin or nephew or something of your biological parents.”

“The old Soviet Union’s a big place. Genetically, I think we’re okay. It’s the getting to actually *date* him that’s the problem.”

“You could just, I don’t know, go up to him and like, *talk* to him or something,” Paul suggested.

“He’s always surrounded by the Blond One and her Gang of Four,” Chloe reminded him.

“Nothing gained, nothing lost.”

Yeah, right. Like *he* had ever asked anyone out.

Amy swigged the last of her coffee and belched. “Oh, crap, I’ve got to pee.”

Paul blushed. He always got nervous when either Amy or Chloe discussed anything like bodily functions in front of him—so usually Chloe didn’t talk about that stuff when he was around.

But today she felt ... well, odd. Jumpy, impatient. Not to mention a little annoyed with both him and Amy. This was supposed to be *her* birthday thing. So far it sucked.

“Too bad you can’t do it standing up, like Paul,” she said, watching him blush out of the corner of her eye. “You could go over the edge.”

Now, what had made her say that?

She stood up. Leaning against the stone wall, Chloe peered down. All she could see was swirling whiteness and, off to her left, one water-stained red pylon of the Golden Gate Bridge.

What would happen if I dropped a penny from up here? Chloe wondered. *Would it make a tunnel through the fog? That would be cool* A tunnel two hundred feet long and half an inch across.

She climbed up into a window and dug into her jeans pocket, hunting for spare change, not bothering to put her other hand on the wall for balance.

The tower suddenly seemed to tilt forward.

“What—,” she began to say.

Chloe tried to resteady herself by leaning back into the window frame, grasping for the wall, but the fog had left it clammy and slick. She pitched forward, her left foot slipping out from beneath her.

“Chloe!”

She threw her arms back, desperately trying to rebalance herself. For a brief second she felt Paul’s warm fingers against her own. She looked into his face—a smile of relief broke across it, pink flushed across the tops of his high cheekbones. But then the moment was over: Amy was shrieking and Chloe felt nothing catch her as she slipped out of Paul’s grasp. She was falling—*falling*—out of the window and off the tower.

This is not happening, Chloe thought. *This is not the way I end.*

She heard the already-muffled screams of her friends getting fainter, farther and farther away. Something would save her, right?

Her head hit last.

The pain was unbearable, bone crushing and nauseating—the sharp shards of a hundred needles being forced through her as her body compacted itself on the ground.

Everything went black, and Chloe waited to die.

She was surrounded by darkness.

Strange noises, padding footsteps, and the occasional scream echoed and died in strange ways, like she was in a vast cavern riddled with tunnels and caves. Somewhere ahead and far below her, like she was standing at the edge of a cliff, was an indistinct halo of hazy light. It rippled unpleasantly. She started to back away from it. Then something growled behind her and shoved her hard.

Chloe pitched forward toward the light and into empty space.

This was it. This was *death*.

“Chloe? *Chloe?*”

That was odd. God sounded kind of annoying. Kind of whiny.

“Oh my God, she’s—”

“Call 911!”

“There’s no way she could have survived that fall—”

“GET OUT OF MY WAY!”

Chloe felt like she was spinning, her weight being forced back into her skin.

“You *stupid shithead!*”

That was Amy. That was *definitely* Amy.

“We should call her mom. ...”

“What do we say? That Chloe is ... that Chloe’s *dead?*”

“Don’t say that! It’s not true!”

Chloe opened her eyes.

“Oh my God—Chloe ...?”

Paul and Amy were leaning over her. Tears and streaky lightning bolts of black makeup ran down Amy’s cheeks, and her light blue eyes were wide and rimmed with red.

“You’re a-alive?” Paul asked, face white with awe. “There’s no way you could have—“He put a hand behind her head, feeling her neck and skull. When he pulled it back, there was only a little blood on his finger.

“You—you didn’t—oh my God, it’s ... a ... miracle ...,” Amy said slowly.

“Can you move?” Paul asked quietly.

Chloe sat up. It was the hardest thing she could ever remember doing, like pushing herself through a million pounds of dirt. Her head swam, and for a moment there was two of everything, four flat gingerbread friends in front of her. She coughed, then began puking. She tried to lean to the side but couldn’t control her body.

After she finished heaving, Chloe noticed that Paul and Amy were touching her, holding her shoulders. She could just barely feel their hands; sensation slowly crept back over her skin.

“You *should* be dead,” said Paul. “There is no. Way. You could have survived that fall.”

She was struck by what he said; it seemed true. Yet here she was, alive. Just like that. Why was she so unsurprised?

“Help me up,” Chloe said, trying not to notice the confused and frightened looks on her friends’ faces. They helped Chloe lean forward, then slowly rise on shaky legs. She pointed her toes and bent her knees. They worked. Barely.

“Holy shit,” said Paul, unable to think of anything else to say.

“We should get you to a hospital,” Amy suggested.

“No,” Chloe answered, faster than she meant.

“Are you *insane*?” Paul demanded. “Just because you’re not dead doesn’t mean you don’t have a concussion or something. ... You can’t just fall two hundred feet and walk away without something happening.”

Chloe didn’t like the way her friends were looking at her. Shouldn’t they be overjoyed? Thrilled that she wasn’t dead? Instead they were looking at her like she was a ghost. “Yeah. We’re going. No arguments,” Amy said, stubbornly setting her pointy chin.

She and Paul helped Chloe up, one at each shoulder. *My devil and my angel*, Chloe thought ironically. *Well, my nerd and my wanna-be outsider*. Her head pounded, and she wanted nothing more than some aspirin.

And time alone to *think*.

She managed to get time to think in the emergency room, though she wasn’t exactly alone. After Amy made a big hysterical deal about her *friend* and the *accident* she’d had, the reception nurse took one look at the healthyseeming girl and relegated the three of them to the waiting room, behind a line of homeless people with visible damage: broken arms, scraped-up faces, oozing sores.

Paul took over filling out the contact information and paperwork, but after an hour of playing Guess the Symptom in her head, Chloe finally lost it.

“Look, why don’t we just get out of here,” she hissed. “I’m *fine*.”

“As if,” Paul said, reaching for a three-month-old *Vogue*.

“Don’t touch that,” Amy said, smacking his hand down. “Germs.” Then she turned to Chloe. “You fell like a million feet onto your *head* Chlo.”

Another half hour passed. They watched the muted news flitting by incomprehensibly overhead, stories about Iraq and Wall Street and some girl’s body found in an alley.

Finally, at four o’clock, the staff was ready to let in the girl with no visible injuries. The reception nurse put up her hand when Amy and Paul tried to follow.

“Only family,” she said.

Amy turned to Chloe, wrinkling her freckled nose and smiling. It was a “cute” look that Chloe knew she had practiced in front of the mirror for hours, but it just didn’t work with her friend’s regal nose. “You’ll be okay, I promise.”

I know. I am okay.

“Thanks. For everything.” Chloe gave her a lopsided smile, then went through the big, double-swinging metal door.

“If you and your friends are lying about your ‘accident,’” she heard the nurse saying to Amy and Paul, “her parents are going to owe their insurance company a *whopper*. ...”

As soon as the door swung shut behind her, Chloe scanned the hall for the exit.

She wished she had money for a cab, but she had to take the bus instead. As soon as she was inside her house, Chloe ran into the bathroom, tore off her clothes, and turned on the water. After a long soak she finally began to feel normal again, as if a few minutes of downtime by herself were all she really needed. *To recover from a two-hundred-foot fall*. She wrapped the towel around herself when she got out and looked in the mirror. There was a slight bruise on her temple and some dried blood on her scalp that was kind of fun to pick at. That was all.

Chloe wandered out and sat in front of her computer, where her day had begun just a few strange hours before. She called up Google and then paused, her normally super-speed fingers hesitating over the keyboard. *How do you research “chances of surviving a crazy long fall onto pavement”?* A few minutes of surfing unearthed the interesting but useless fact that *defenestration* meant “the act of

“pushing someone out a window” and that almost no one besides Jackie Chan had easily survived a fall of much more than fifty feet.

Chloe got into bed and contemplated the ceiling. There was no way around it: she should not have survived her plummet from Coit Tower. Maybe this was the afterlife, and she was being eased into it slowly with familiar people and places?

She dismissed that quickly, though, picking some more blood out of her hair. *Heaven would be cleaner*, she thought decisively. But something strange had definitely happened. She should not be alive.

It was really a miracle.

Thinking in the autumnal afternoon light, Chloe drifted off to sleep.

She dreamed:

She lay in a comfortable hollow that was soft but did not move the way a mattress should when she shifted position. It was hot but not unpleasant; the sun's rays were tangible on her skin, caressing her back into sleep. Something licked the side of her face, rough and quick: *Get up*.

Chloe rose from the sand, dusted herself off. She shielded her eyes and looked to the horizon. This was no beach: it was a desert, empty and vast—but familiar and not frightening. The dunes were golden and the sky a dark empty blue, foreshadowing a chilly night when the sun finally set, half a day from now. They were heading to the north, down the river.

Below her hand was the lion that had woken her; it nuzzled at her fingers. They were all lions around her, female and maneless, the real power of the pride. Four of them. She was upright and awkward; when they finally started moving, the great cats had to slow their normal pace so she could keep up. Their beautiful shoulders rose and fell in a languid, powerful rhythm.

A vulture circled in the sky, hoping to feast on whatever they left.

When Chloe woke up, she was ravenous.

In the first moment of wakefulness after opening her eyes, before remembering her fall or being brought home, Chloe thought about what might be in the fridge. The rest came back to her as she got up. She was stiff, but even the bruise on her forehead was already fading.

She was surprised to see that the clock on the microwave read six; she had napped for over four hours. *Doesn't feel like it*. She opened the fridge and surveyed its contents, most of which were ingredients for whatever complicated gourmet dinner her mother was planning next. She pulled out a couple of yogurts, a pint of macaroni salad, and an old carton of lo mein. If falling two hundred feet didn't kill her, this probably wouldn't, either.

Chloe sat at the table and ate, still not fully awake, still not fully thinking, just enjoying the feeling of the food hitting her stomach and filling it.

The door slammed open and Mrs. King threw herself in. She opened her mouth to say something, then noticed the demolished feast on their table.

“I fell off Coit Tower today,” Chloe said without thinking.

She hadn't planned on telling her mother immediately. She'd wanted to think it over first, plan the right approach—but she hadn't come up with one. Apparently her subconscious had.

“I know,” her mother said in a low, angry tone. “I just came from the *hospital*, where you were supposed to be waiting for me. But no, you decided not to stay there, just like you *apparently* decided not to go to school today.”

Daughter and mother looked into each other's eyes, not saying anything for a moment.

“*What* has gotten into you?” Chloe's mother finally yelled. “Is this the week you decided to get al

of your teenage rebelling out at once?"

"Mom!" Chloe shouted back. "~~I fell off Coit Tower. Doesn't that mean anything to you?~~"

"Besides the fact that you were acting like an irresponsible idiot?"

But Mrs. King's eyes flitted to the light marks on her daughter's face, the uncomfortable way she was sitting, the black blood on her scalp.

"Are you okay?" she finally asked.

Chloe shrugged.

"That's why I left," she mumbled. "There wasn't anything wrong. They wouldn't listen to me."

"I'm glad Amy and Paul had the good sense to ignore you and bring you in." Mrs. King sighed.

"Though I could kill them for encouraging your 'day off.'"

"Paul wasn't going to be around for my birthday," Chloe said, feeling like an idiotic, self-pitying brat as she said it. "I wanted to celebrate it with my friends."

Her mother opened her mouth to say something about that, but closed it again.

"You could have been killed," she said. She was quiet for a moment. "It's a miracle you weren't."

"I know."

There was another moment of silence. Chloe stared at her empty plate, and her mother stared at her. Mrs. King readjusted her black-rimmed glasses. Chloe could almost see her mom's thoughts tumbling around in logical lawyer circles: *She should be dead. She's not. I should be grateful. I'm angry with her. She's not dead. Therefore she must be punished.*

"We're going to have to talk about this. About your behavior and your punishment."

"Obviously," Chloe said with heavy irony, suddenly irked. "Mom, I should be *dead*."

"So? You're not. Be grateful. I have some steaks. ... I'll make them in an hour, after I do some paperwork."

"Did you *hear* me? I could—I *should* have been killed!!!"

Her mother opened her mouth to say something but didn't. She ran her fingers through the wispy bangs that framed her face, pushing it out of her eyes. Her hair was thick and blond, as far from the color and texture of Chloe's own hair as it was possible to get.

Chloe turned and stomped up to her room.

Maybe *she* was the one on drugs.

It was the only explanation Chloe could think of to explain such a blasé reaction. Maybe it was shock? Maybe she really didn't care. Chloe bitterly considered how easily her mom could have been rid of her. She would be free to throw dinner parties, go to gallery openings, and maybe pick up a really cool boyfriend. The kind who stayed away from complicated situations like *daughters*. Especially adopted ones.

She thought about the father she could barely remember, gone when she was four. *He* would have cared. He would have rushed her *back* to the hospital, no matter how much she protested.

Chloe sat on her bed and carefully opened the middle drawer of her bureau. It was the only old piece of furniture in the room, ancient, solid, and oak. Perfect for hiding the only real secret from her mom.

A little gray mouse sat up on his hind legs and looked up at her expectantly.

Squeak!

Chloe smiled and put her hand down next to him, letting the mouse run up it. Her mother absolute forbade all furred pets—supposedly because of her allergies. But back when her mom had gone on a rampant extermination phase, convinced that the house was overrun with vermin from their less cleanly neighbors next door, Chloe had come home from school one day and found the baby gray

mouse in a live trap. With Amy and Paul's help she'd installed a light in her bureau. Now Mus-mus had a water dropper, a feeder, and an exercise wheel. This was a whole little world her mother knew nothing about.

She took a Cheerio out of the sandwich bag she kept under her bed and carefully held it out to him; the little mouse grabbed it with its front paws and sat back, nibbling as if it was a giant bagel.

"What should I do?" she whispered. The little mouse never stopped eating, ignoring her. "My mom is such a bitch."

Calling Amy was the only thing to do, really—Chloe could apologize for acting so weird after she and Paul had taken her to the hospital, thank her for it, then get into the nitty-gritty of how bizarre it was to be alive and discuss why she had survived. Amy would probably offer some explanation involving the supernatural or angels—useless but entertaining. Chloe smiled and picked up the phone, dropping Mus-mus carefully back into his cage.

Seven long rings ... Amy's cell phone was on, but she wasn't picking up. Chloe tried three more times in case the phone was buried at the bottom of Amy's bag and she couldn't hear it. On the fourth try Chloe left a message.

"Hey, Ame, call me. I'm—uh—feeling better. Sorry about the total rudeness today. I guess I was in shock or something."

She tried her at home.

"Oh, hello, Chlo-ee!" Mrs. Scotkin answered. There was a pause; she must have looked at a clock. "Happy sixteenth birthday in six hours!"

Chloe smiled despite herself. Amy must not have told her anything. "Thanks, Mrs. Scotkin. Is Amy around?"

"No—I think she's working on the Am civ project with her group tonight. Try her cell."

I did, thanks. "Okay, I will. Thanks, Mrs. Scotkin."

Chloe frowned. She went to the computer and checked all of Amy's aliases, but none of them were on. Maybe she really was doing homework? Nah. Paul was on but afk—Chloe didn't really feel like talking to him anyway. She needed *Amy*. She had almost died. It would be her birthday in four hours. Her mom was crazy. And she was All Alone.

She wandered around her room, picking up little things—pieces of bric-a-brac, stuffed animals—and putting them back down again. Her gloom gave way to restlessness; the room suddenly seemed very small. Too small for good brooding. She moved up and down on her toes like a ballerina.

Chloe stood for a moment, indecisive, then grabbed her jacket and banged down the stairs.

"Where are you going?" her mother demanded, like someone on a TV show.

"*Out,*" Chloe responded, just as predictably. She even slammed the door behind her, just for good measure.

The night was chillier than Chloe expected. She stood for a moment in just her T-shirt, letting the moist air brush against her skin and lift the hair on her arms. It smelled surprisingly good; clean and wet as a cloud. Then the wind changed direction and she could hear and smell traffic at the same time: exhaust, acrid and dry even in the dampness, bit at her nose. Chloe sighed and put on her jacket.

Okay, Spontaneous One. Where to now?

She had set herself up for a *really* spectacular punishment later (though she hoped her near-death experience might help cut her some slack), so the night was not to be wasted. Then it came to her: *The Bank*.

Normally she would never, *ever* consider trying to get into the club without spending several hours dressing and redressing with Amy, going through everything in both their closets and sometimes even Paul's. Jeans and a tee were just embarrassing.

Chloe didn't care; she was going to do it. She was going to get into the club, by herself, dressed like the Creature from the Gap Lagoon. She just *needed* to dance right now.

It was a Tuesday, so there wasn't much of a line outside the club; its Christmas-from-hell orange and black fairy lights barely illuminated the otherwise empty street. One bored bouncer half sat on his stool, wearing tiny round black sunglasses that didn't reflect anything.

Chloe swaggered up to the velvet rope, unsure of what she was going to do. Everyone else in line was dressed in something sparkly, revealing, or all black—and was at least half a decade older.

Before she could think about it, Chloe sashayed past them and was asking the bouncer directly: "Hey, can I get in?" Just like that.

The giant man looked up at her and down, pausing at her scuffed black Converse. He cracked the barest hint of a smile. "I like your shoes. Those are *old* school, baby," he said, and unhooked the rope for Chloe.

"Thanks, man," she said in what she hoped was an equally cool voice. It was just like she'd passed a level in one of Paul's video games. Charon of Inner Sunset had just let her into the Dancing Afterworld.

The floor wasn't large, but it was surrounded by black mirrors that made it look twice as big and crowded. Clinging to the far wall and snaking around to the door was the enormous bar for which the place was famous: its surface was covered in thousands and thousands of shiny copper pennies, shellacked into permanently flowing streams that ran all the way from a vault in the wall down to the floor.

During the day, when people vacuumed and cleaned and tried to remove the eternally beery stench, normal lights probably illuminated unpleasant details on the copper river—inky blots where people declared their fleeting love with Sharpies, worn and chipped places where coins had been hacked out, a night's work for the prize of a single penny. But for now it gleamed like an ancient god of wealth had just overturned his big pot of money. Bright, harsh golden lights bounced over it without shining on the patrons surrounding the bar, keeping their faces romantic and half lit.

The music was typical house with just a touch of electronica. No Moby *or* Goa here. Paul would have threatened to walk out, ears covered, before sidling up to the DJ to check out his equipment. It *should* have been the three of them there, not just her alone. But the music throbbed loudly, and Chloe felt like she could go out and dance by herself—she had almost died today; she could do anything.

She went to the bar first, leaning against it and surveying the scene. A few people were dancing and dressed badly, but otherwise it was a pretty hot crowd. What looked like an entire fraternity was

loudly but good-naturedly arguing about sports, waving their beers, making an out-of-place businessman and his model very uncomfortable. There was one particularly hot guy across the floor, hanging around in the back, drinking quietly and people watching, just like her. He had black hair, dark skin, and light, light eyes. Exotic. She ducked her head to follow his movements as he ordered a beer, talked to a friend, and wandered into the crowd, but soon she lost him.

She waited patiently, but he didn't return. No one took his place, either; there were a few runners-up, but the hottest guy in the club had disappeared.

"Buy you a drink?"

He appeared at her side, smiling at her surprise and embarrassment. Up close he was even better looking, with full lips and a light spattering of darker brown freckles across his nose.

Chloe was just about to say No, thank you, like she did every time some twenty-something tried to pick up her fifteen-year-old self. But, "Absolutely!" was what came out instead.

"What'll it be?"

"Red Bull and vodka."

He nodded his approval and clinked her drink with his beer glass when the bartender handed it over.

"It's my birthday in two hours!" she shouted into his ear.

"Really? Cheers!" He sounded British. They toasted each other again and drank. "Happy birthday!" He kissed her delicately on her cheek. Chloe felt her stomach roll over and her mind play dead. An enormous grin spread over her face, completely destroying her cool. She had gotten into the club with no hassle, a dropdead gorgeous guy just bought her a drink—this was turning out to be a pretty great birthday after all.

After another drink they started dancing. He moved in small sways and tiny circles perfect for avoiding other dancers in the tightly packed space. For one song he just put his hands around her waist and let her move, the center of his attention. When they walked through the crowd for a drink or a break, he would very lightly touch his hand to her back or shoulder, leading her protectively but not possessively.

"I'm Chloe!" she shouted at one point.

"I'm Xavier!" he shouted back.

At twelve thirty Chloe decided she was turning into a pumpkin. Near-death experience or no, her mother was going to kill Chloe *herself* if she stayed out all night. Xavier walked her out.

"Let me be the first to wish you a happy birthday," he said, kissing her gently on the lips in the dark parking lot. His mouth was warm and moist but not wet, and he was a hell of a lot more delicate than the few guys her own age Chloe had kissed. He pulled a card out of his wallet. It was actually engraved: *Xavier Akouri, 453 Mason St., #5A, 011-30-210-567-3981*. It took her a moment to realize that it was an international cell phone number she was looking at.

"Aren't you going to ask for mine?" Chloe asked.

He smiled and lowered his head so their noses were almost touching, looking directly into her eyes. "And would you have given me your real number? *You call me* if you want."

Her stomach did another flip-flop. Before she knew what she was doing, Chloe grabbed him around the back of the neck and held his head still while she kissed him. He actually let out a little moan. It drove her wild. His hands came up around her hips. Chloe reached around up and under his shirt to feel the skin on his back, kneading his muscles and clawing him with her fingernails. He moaned again, from pleasure or pain, it was hard to tell. But he took one of her legs and wrapped it up around his waist. Chloe felt herself sliding in closer and closer—

What the hell am I doing?

She opened her eyes and saw a handsome Euro kissing her, which might have been fine, wonderful even—but she was inches from having sex with him in the middle of the parking lot.

“I’m sorry.” She disentangled herself from him and backed off, breathing heavily. She ached and throbbed with want.

Xavier looked confused. His eyes were heavy lidded, and little beads of sweat held on like silver around his brow. His hair was tousled.

“I—I can’t do this right now,” she said.

To his credit, Xavier nodded, albeit reluctantly. “Do you—do you want to come back to my place?”

Chloe opened her mouth to say something. She realized it was very close to, Yes, I do—but managed to choke out, “I’m sorry,” again, quickly turning and walking away. She ran all the way home and then once around the block for good measure, hoping to work the desire out of her body. Would her mom notice a look in her eye, a flush on her cheek? She could say it was from running.

When Chloe came in, her mother was reading on the couch, shoes off, glass of red wine on the table near her. Untouched. She was trying to make it look like she was just staying up late, not staying up for Chloe. Their eyes met.

“I’ll be up in a little while,” Mrs. King finally said. “I just want to finish this chapter.”

She’s actually going to be cool about this. Chloe couldn’t believe it. And from her tone, it was like the late night out hadn’t even happened—like maybe it would never be brought up again.

“Okay. G’night,” Chloe said as gratefully as she could.

She staggered upstairs tiredly, taking her clothes off as she went. She could smell parts of Xavier on her shirt, his hands dangerously close to her breasts when they rested on her waist, his lips on her collar when he was kissing her neck.

She put on boxers and her oversized Invader Zim T-shirt and fell into bed, holding her stuffed pig still wondering what had happened. Teenage hormones, as they always said, or had it been an up-with-life reaction to her near-death experience? She thought she had heard of such a thing. ... She clutched Wilbur more tightly and fell asleep.

It was several hours into the next day, during first-period American civilization, when it suddenly hit Chloe: what she had done—or almost done—the night before, never mind the part about not dying. She had forgotten it all for a short, happy while.

This wasn't surprising; her brain barely began working before nine. The hours between being woken by her crappy old clock radio and second bell usually passed in a painless, mindless blur. Her mother, once upon a time playing the happy single mom, used to make her pancakes with syrup smiles and ask her about what she was doing that day. Eventually she gave up trying to communicate with her justawake, mumbling daughter, filling the coffeemaker and setting the timer the night before instead. Chloe always tried to remember to grumble "bye" on her way out as Mrs. King did her morning yoga in front of the TV.

Holy crap. I almost had sex with a stranger in a parking lot last night.

Chloe felt tingles when she thought of Xavier; she could remember wanting him that badly but not the feeling itself. She idly tried to sketch his lips in the margin of her notebook. Where had she put his card?

"... the same boot, for either foot. I don't think any of you kids today with your Florsheims or your tennis shoes could possibly imagine the suffering those soldiers marched in. ..."

Neither Paul nor Amy was in this class, so it was triply boring. *What the heck is a Florsheim?* Chloe tried to cover a yawn, but it was so huge that it felt like her jaw had opened up wider than it was supposed to, like in *Alien*. Her teeth snapped back together when it was done, way too loudly. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed—no one except for Alyec, who was watching with raised eyebrows. She blushed but grinned back, actually looking him in his beautiful ice blue eyes. He smiled and made a "sleepy" gesture with his hands on the side of his face. Chloe nodded, and they each went back to note taking or doodling before Ms. Barker took notice.

When the bell rang, Chloe gathered her stuff and prepared to go to the library—it was such a bitch she had *second* period free. Last year Amy had had first period free and often slept till eight before bothering to come in. As Chloe passed by the popular lockers, she saw Alyec and waved. He was, of course, surrounded by the beautiful people.

Chloe thought about their little interaction in class and her success with the bouncer the night before and walked right up to him, ignoring the others.

"Didn't Am civ *suck* today?" Once again there she was, doing something she could not believe. First there was falling off a tower, then making out with a stranger, and now going directly up to the most-wanted guy in the junior class and talking to him. She could feel the vicious glares of his coterie impaling her backside, but somehow she wasn't the least bit nervous. Not even a heartbeat.

This is great. I should almost die every day.

"Oh, man," Alyec said in an accent that was fading but still had foreign overtones. "Watching you—how do you say—moan? Yes? That was the most exciting part of the hour."

"I wasn't moaning, I was *yawning*," Chloe said with a shy smile. "But if you find a way to make me moan, I'll let you watch all day." *Did I just say that?* She could see a whole bunch of jaws drop in her peripheral vision.

"You're hilarious, King, you know that?" He said it with a genuine laugh.

The second bell rang. "I've got to get to the library—but we should hang sometime."

Keira looked like she was actually going to growl; her lips were pulled back over her teeth.

"Absolutely," Alyec agreed. "Catch you later, King."

“See ya.” She strolled past the other girls, trying not to look too smug but unable to keep from smiling a little.

Chloe thought about Xavier for most of her time in the library, staring out the windows and dreaming a little. She did the same during math and lunch. She thought about him more than her fall. It was kind of like her mom said—she fell, she survived, here she was. She was staring into space, pizza halfway to her mouth, when a familiarly annoying clap on her shoulder jolted her back to reality. Gobbets of bright orange oil flew across the table.

“Oh my God, is it *true*?” Amy threw herself into a seat next to her. “I mean, *happy birthday*, but ohmygod, is it really *true*, did you really flirt with Alyec right in front of Halley and Keira and—*and everyone*?”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” Chloe said with a smile.

“How are you feeling?”

Chloe shrugged. “Fine, I think. A little weird. Last night—”

“Look, we gotta talk,” Amy interrupted, leaning in close and looking her right in the eyes.

“Something *big* is going down with me. I want to discuss. Dinner?”

Bigger than a near-death and near-sex experience? But Chloe bit back a sarcastic response; Amy really did look worried. And more intense than usual.

“Okay—”

“Cool! See you in English!”

Chloe watched her friend leap up and run off, safety pins and chains jangling as she went, unkempt chestnut hair bouncing. She turned back to her pizza and wondered when life would get back to normal. The grease had congealed into little solid pools of something like orange plastic. Chloe sighed and pushed it away.

Normality seemed to reassert itself at Pateena. As much as she hated sorting the clothes when they came back from the cleaner, there was a soothing familiarity in the folding and the straightening, the random tirades of the manager, the trendy customers. Nothing sexy *or* supernatural. Just a lot of jeans and overpriced old basketball shoes.

Chloe couldn't help noticing one customer who came in, though—just when she thought she had finally beaten her hormones down. He wore black cords, a ribbed black tee, and a black leather jacket straight cut, like a regular suit jacket. But there were no hints of the über-goth about him: no tattoos or jewelry or fangs or anything. The outfit, which would have made anyone else look like a wanna-be Johnny Cash, worked perfectly on him; he had very dark brown hair, very slightly tanned, healthy skin, and deep brown eyes with beautiful long lashes.

The kicker, though, was his handmade black knitted cap with kitty cat ears.

Here was a handsome guy with a sense of humor. He thumbed through the polo shirts, frowning.

“Looking for a Halloween costume?” Lania asked him nastily. Chloe groaned, still unable to believe that the little alterna-bitch was allowed to operate the cash register and *she wasn't*. Just because the other girl was two years older. If Chloe had a dollar for every customer Lania insulted, she would finally be able to afford a new mountain bike. A *nice* one.

But he just chuckled. “No, I'm afraid it's for an actual meeting with actual executive types.” He looked pretty young to be in business, but this was San Francisco, after all. He was probably a programmer or graphics designer or something.

Chloe went back to her work, wondering what Xavier looked like in the daylight. How many drinks did she have? Just two or three. She *could* have been beer gogging. Maybe those sexy freckles were

actually bad acne. ...

“Excuse me.” The guy in the kitty hat carefully stepped around her, his purchases clutched to his chest. Apparently Lania had decided to let him pay.

“I like your hat,” Chloe said.

“Really? Thanks!” He took it off and looked at it, as if he was surprised she’d noticed.

“Did your girlfriend make it?”

He grinned. “No, I did.”

Chloe couldn’t help being impressed. Besides Amy, almost no one she knew—not counting her mother’s trend-happy friends—knitted, and those who did never really finished anything. Except for some of the stitching, it looked pretty professional.

“I found the pattern on the Web,” he continued. “If you knit, I’ll give you the URL.”

“No thanks, I can’t. My friend Amy can, but I’m a complete spaz with my hands.”

“Oh, you should totally take it up. It’s kind of fun,” he said, only a little embarrassed.

Chloe steeled herself for the usual touchy-feely sensitive guy discourse that was sure to follow, about how the movements were soothing, about how he felt in touch with people from long ago, about how some native culture or other did something spiritual with knitting needles, how he might want to open a shop someday, how it was good for teaching underprivileged kids self-esteem. ...

But he had already turned to go.

“Well, see you,” he said with a cute little half smile as he reached for the door. His eyes crinkled the upper part of his cheek, the skin pulled taut by a sexy scar that ran from the outside of his eye to just below his cheekbone.

Chloe waved and watched him go. Part of her was a little insulted; was she not a hot young girl who had attracted the notice of two hot guys in the last twenty-four hours? And Mr. Kitty Cat Man didn’t even care. It was her *birthday*, for Christ’s sake. Before her imminent grounding, didn’t fate owe her something?

Then her butt vibrated.

She had to carefully dig her phone out of the back pocket of her own vintage jeans, which were men’s and had a pre-worn white rectangle in the back where someone had once carried his wallet. Once in, her phone fit fine. Getting it out when she was any position but vertical was almost impossible.

Text message: *carluccis @ 7—a*.

Carlucci’s was the place she and Amy had first met when the Scotkins had moved into the neighborhood. Maybe she’d get some decent pizza today after all. The best part of her job was that Pateena paid her in cash under the counter at the end of every day. She’d have a whole twenty to blow on a Make Me One with Everything pie.

The rest of the afternoon passed without incident, except when Chloe had to hide a pair of faded purple velvet pants she just knew Amy would love. Usually the owner didn’t have a problem with employees “saving” items for themselves. Marisol was the coolest boss she’d ever had. She even let Chloe use the shop’s machine to hem her own jeans and stuff. But if Lania saw the pants—or liked them herself—she was bound to make trouble. Chloe stashed them under a pile of polyester bowling shirts when she left.

As she approached the restaurant in the damp fog, the windows of Carlucci’s glowed like they were lit with gas carriage lanterns, a restaurant out of time. Really, it was just a little Italian pasta place with candles set in old Chianti bottles like every other little Italian pasta place in the world, but it was hers and Amy’s, and it was cozy, and sometimes the insane old owner even remembered them.

When she opened the door, there seemed to be even more candles than usual.

“Happy birthday to you ...,” Amy sang, wisely giving up after one cracked phrase. Her eager face

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