

One

I bolted up in bed, one hand clutching my pendant, the other wrapped in my sheets. I struggled to recapture wisps of the dream already fluttering away. Something about a basement . . . A little girl . . . Me? I couldn't remember ever having a basement—we'd always lived in condo apartments.

A little girl in a basement, something scary . . . Weren't basements always scary? I shivered just thinking about them, dark and damp and empty. But this one hadn't been empty. There'd been . . . I couldn't remember what. A man behind a furnace . . .?

A bang at my bedroom door made me jump.

“Chloe!” Annette shrieked. “Why hasn't your alarm gone off? I'm the housekeeper, not your nanny. If you're late again, I'm calling your father.”

As threats went, this wasn't exactly the stuff of nightmares. Even if Annette managed to get hold of my dad in Berlin, he'd just pretend to listen, eyes on his BlackBerry, attention riveted to something more important, like the weather forecast. He'd murmur a vague “Yes, I'll see to it when I get back” and forget all about me the moment he hung up.

I turned on my radio, cranked it up, and crawled out of bed.

A half-hour later, I was in my bathroom, getting ready for school. I pulled the sides of my hair back in clips, glanced in the mirror, and shuddered. The style made me look twelve years old . . . and I didn't need any help. I'd just turned fifteen and servers still handed me the kiddie menu in restaurants. I couldn't blame them. I was five foot nothing with curves that only showed if I wore tight jeans and a tighter T-shirt.

Aunt Lauren swore I'd shoot up—and out—when I finally got my period. By this point, I figured it was “if,” not “when.” Most of my friends had gotten theirs at twelve, eleven even. I tried not to think about it too much, but of course I did. I worried that there was something wrong with me, felt like a freak every time my friends talked about their periods, prayed they didn't find out I hadn't gotten mine. Aunt Lauren said I was fine, and she was a doctor, so I guess she'd know. But it still bugged me. A lot.

“Chloe!” The door shuddered under Annette's meaty fist.

“I'm on the toilet,” I shouted back. “Can I get some privacy maybe?”

I tried just one clip at the back of my head, holding the sides up. Not bad. When I turned my head for a side view, the clip slid from my baby-fine hair.

I never should have gotten it cut. But I'd been sick of having long, straight, little-girl hair. I'd decided on a shoulder-length, wispy style. On the model it looked great. On me? Not so much.

I eyed the unopened hair color tube. Kari swore red streaks would be perfect in my strawberry-blond hair. I couldn't help thinking I'd look like a candy cane. Still, it might make me look older . . .

“I'm picking up the phone, Chloe,” Annette yelled.

I grabbed the tube of dye, stuffed it in my backpack, and threw open the door.

I took the stairs, as always. The building might change, but my routine never did. The day I'd started kindergarten, my mother held my hand, my Sailor Moon backpack over her other arm as we'd stood at the top of the landing.

"Get ready, Chloe," she'd said. "One, two, three—"

And we were off, racing down the stairs until we reached the bottom, panting and giggling, the floor swaying and sliding under our unsteady feet, all the fears over my first school day gone.

We'd run down the stairs together every morning all through kindergarten and half of first grade and then . . . well, then there wasn't anyone to run down the stairs with anymore.

I paused at the bottom, touching the necklace under my T-shirt, then shook off the memories, hoisted my backpack, and walked from the stairwell.

After my mom died, we'd moved around Buffalo a lot. My dad flipped luxury apartments, meaning he bought them in buildings in the final stages of construction, then sold them when the work was complete. Since he was away on business most of the time, putting down roots wasn't important. Not for him, anyway.

This morning, the stairs hadn't been such a bright idea. My stomach was already fluttering with nerves over my Spanish midterm. I'd screwed up the last test—gone to a weekend sleepover at Beth's when I should have been studying—and barely passed. Spanish had never been my best subject, but if I didn't pull it up to a C, Dad might actually notice and start wondering whether an art school had been such a smart choice.

Milos was waiting for me in his cab at the curb. He'd been driving me for two years now, through two moves and three schools. As I got in, he adjusted the visor on my side. The morning sun still hit my eyes, but I didn't tell him that.

My stomach relaxed as I rubbed my fingers over the familiar rip in the armrest and inhaled chemical pine from the air freshener twisting above the vent.

“I saw a movie last night,” he said as he slid the cab across three lanes. “One of the kind you like.”

“A thriller?”

“No.” He frowned, lips moving as if testing out word choices. “An action-adventure. You know, lots of guns, things blowing up. A real shoot-’em-down movie.”

I hated correcting Milos’s English, but he insisted on it. “You mean, a shoot-’em-up movie.”

He cocked one dark brow. “When you shoot a man, which way does he fall? Up?”

I laughed, and we talked about movies for a while. My favorite subject.

When Milos had to take a call from his dispatcher, I glanced out the side window. A long-haired boy darted from behind a cluster of businessmen. He carried an old-fashioned plastic lunch box with a superhero on it. I was so busy trying to figure out which superhero it was, I didn’t notice where the boy was headed until he leaped off the curb, landing between us and the next car.

“Milos!” I screamed. “Watch—”

The last word was ripped from my lungs as I slammed against my shoulder belt. The driver behind us, and the one behind him, laid on their horns, a chain reaction of protest.

“What?” Milos said. “Chloe? What’s wrong?”

I looked over the hood of the car and saw . . . nothing. Just an empty lane in front and traffic veering to our left, drivers flashing Milos the finger as they passed.

“Th-th-th—” I clenched my fists, as if that could somehow force the word out. *If you get jammed, take another route*, my speech therapist always said. “I thought I saw some-wha-wha—”

Speak slowly. Consider your words first.

“I’m sorry. I thought I saw someone jump in front of us.”

Milos eased the taxi forward. “That happens to me sometimes, especially if I’m turning my head. I think I see someone, but there’s no one there.”

I nodded. My stomach hurt again.