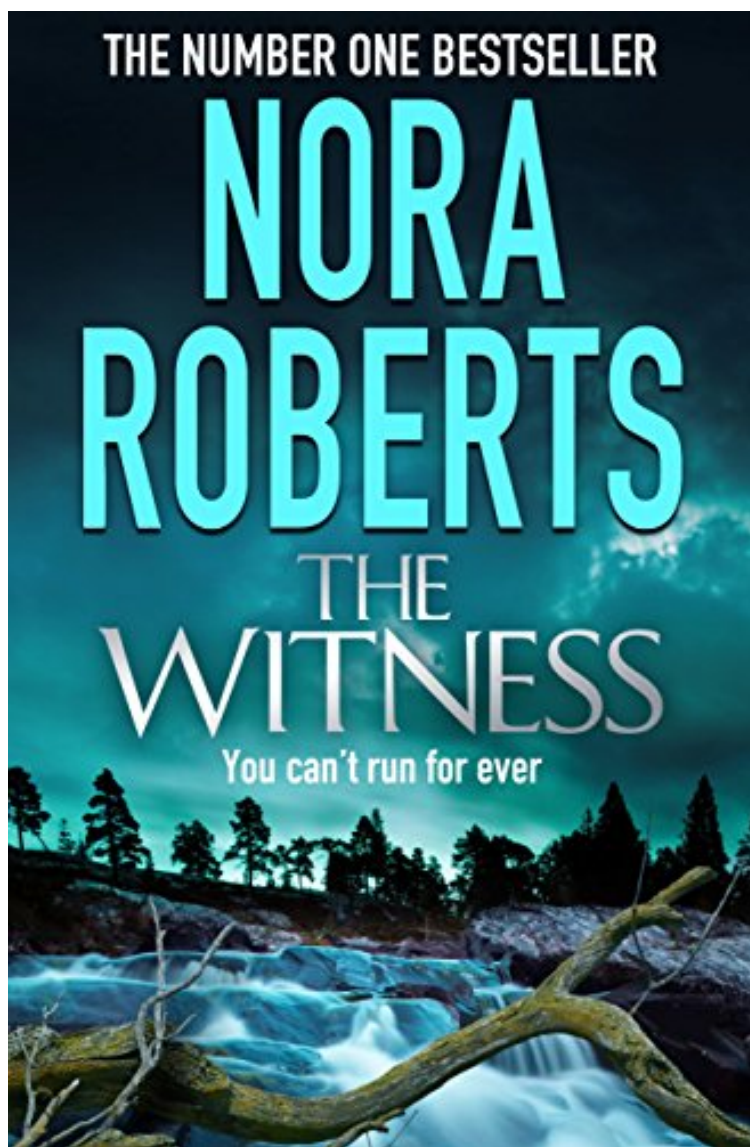


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The Witness (English Edition)



Par Nora Roberts
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur Nora Roberts - the world's greatest storyteller. Abigail Lowery has a dark and terrifying secret. Aged just sixteen, she witnessed a shocking mafia murder. Narrowly escaping with her life, she was forced to leave her old identity - even her real name - behind for good. Fifteen years later Abigail is still hiding from the world - a semi-recluse in the quiet, rural town of Bickford, Arkansas. She has convinced herself that this is all she needs: peace, safety... and her faithful guard dog Bert. Perhaps now, at last, she can stop running. But Brooks Gleason, the local chief of police, has other ideas. Abigail intrigues him - and he'd like nothing better than to break through the walls she has built around herself. His persistence and determination to uncover the truth is unsettling, exciting - and dangerous. One way or another, it will change both their lives for ever. Extrait 1 June 2000 ELIZABETH FITCHS SHORT-LIVED TEENAGE REBELLION

BEGAN with LOral Pure Black, a pair of scissors and a fake ID. It ended in blood. For nearly the whole of her sixteen years, eight months and twenty-one days shed dutifully followed her mothers directives. Dr. Susan L. Fitch issued directives, not orders. Elizabeth had adhered to the schedules her mother created, ate the meals designed by her mothers nutritionist and prepared by her mothers cook, wore the clothes selected by her mothers personal shopper. Dr. Susan L. Fitch dressed conservatively, as suited in her opinion her position as chief of surgery of Chicagos Silva Memorial Hospital. She expected, and directed, her daughter to do the same. Elizabeth studied diligently, accepting and excelling in the academic programs her mother outlined. In the fall, shed return to Harvard in pursuit of her medical degree. So she could become a doctor, like her mother a surgeon, like her mother. Elizabeth never Liz or Lizzie or Beth spoke fluent Spanish, French, Italian, passable Russian and rudimentary Japanese. She played both piano and violin. Shed traveled to Europe, to Africa. She could name all the bones, nerves and muscles in the human body and play Chopins Piano Concerto both Nos. 1 and 2, by rote. Shed never been on a date or kissed a boy. Shed never roamed the mall with a pack of girls, attended a slumber party or giggled with friends over pizza or hot fudge sundaes. She was, at sixteen years, eight months and twenty-one days, a product of her mothers meticulous and detailed agenda. That was about to change. She watched her mother pack. Susan, her rich brown hair already coiled in her signature French twist, neatly hung another suit in the organized garment bag, then checked off the printout with each day of the weeks medical conference broken into subgroups. The printout included a spreadsheet listing every event, appointment, meeting and meal, scheduled with the selected outfit, with shoes, bag and accessories. Designer suits; Italian shoes, of course, Elizabeth thought. One must wear good cuts, good cloth. But not one rich or bright color among the blacks, grays, taupes. She wondered how her mother could be so beautiful and deliberately wear the dull. After two accelerated semesters of college, Elizabeth thought shed begun maybe to develop her own fashion sense. She had, in fact, bought jeans and a hoodie and some chunky-heeled boots in Cambridge. With cash, so the receipt wouldnt show up on her credit card bill, in case her mother or their accountant checked and questioned the items, which were currently hidden in her room. Shed felt like a different person wearing them, so different shed walked straight into a McDonalds and ordered her first Big Mac with large fries and a chocolate shake. The pleasure had been so huge, shed had to go into the bathroom, close herself in a stall and cry a little. The seeds of the rebellion had been planted that day, she supposed, or maybe theyd always been there, dormant, and the fat and salt had awakened them. But she could feel them, actually feel them, sprouting in her belly now. Your plans changed, Mother. It doesnt follow that mine have to change with them. Susan took a moment to precisely place a shoe bag in the Pullman, tucking it just so with her beautiful and clever surgeons hands, the nails perfectly manicured. A French manicure, as always no color there, either. Elizabeth. Her voice was as polished and calm as her wardrobe. It took considerable effort to reschedule and have you admitted to the summer program this term. Youll complete the requirements for your admission into Harvard Medical School a full semester ahead of schedule. Even the thought made Elizabeths stomach hurt. I was promised a three-week break, including this next week in New York. And sometimes promises must be broken. If I hadnt had this coming week off, I couldnt fill in for Dr. Dusecki at the conference. You could have said no. That would have been selfish and shortsighted. Susan brushed at the jacket shed hung, stepped back to check her list. Youre certainly mature enough to understand the demands of work overtake pleasure and leisure. If Im mature enough to understand that, why arent I mature enough to make my own decisions? I want this break. I need it. Susan barely spared her daughter a glance. A girl of your age, physical condition and mental acumen hardly needs a break from her studies and activities. In addition, Mrs. Laine has already left for her two-week cruise, and I could hardly ask her to postpone her vacation. Theres no one to fix your meals or tend to the house. I can fix my own meals and tend the house. Elizabeth. The tone managed to merge clipped with long-suffering. Its settled. And I have no say in it? What about developing my independence, being responsible? Independence comes in degrees, as does responsibility and freedom of choice. You still require guidance and direction. Now, Ive e-mailed you an updated schedule for the coming week, and your packet with all the information on the program is on your desk. Be sure to thank Dr. Frisco personally for making room for you in the summer term. As she spoke, Susan closed the garment bag, then her small Pullman. She stepped to her bureau to check her hair, her lipstick. You dont listen to anything I say. In the mirror, Susans gaze shifted to her daughter. The first time, Elizabeth thought, her mother had bothered to actually look at her since shed come into the bedroom. Of course I do. I heard everything you said, very clearly. Listening is different than hearing. That may be true, Elizabeth, but weve already had this discussion. Its not a discussion, its a decree. Susans mouth tightened briefly, the only sign of annoyance. When she turned, her eyes were

coolly, calmly blue. Im sorry you feel that way. As your mother, I must do what I believe best for you. Whats best for me, in your opinion, is for me to do, be, say, think, act, want, become exactly what you decided for me before you inseminated yourself with precisely selected sperm. She heard the rise of her own voice but couldnt control it, felt the hot sting of tears in her eyes but couldnt stop them. Im tired of being your experiment. Im tired of having every minute of every day organized, orchestrated and choreographed to meet your expectations. I want to make my own choices, buy my own clothes, read books I want to read. I want to live my own life instead of yours. Susans eyebrows lifted in an expression of mild interest. Well. Your attitude isnt surprising, given your age, but youve picked a very inconvenient time to be defiant and argumentative. Sorry. It wasnt on the schedule. Sarcasms also typical, but its unbecoming. Susan opened her briefcase, checked the contents. Well talk about all this when I get back. Ill make an appointment with Dr. Bristoe. I dont need therapy! I need a mother who listens, who gives a shit about how I feel. That kind of language only shows a lack of maturity and intellect. Enraged, Elizabeth threw up her hands, spun in circles. If she couldnt be calm and rational like her mother, shed bewild. Shit! Shit! Shit! And repetition hardly enhances. You have the rest of the weekend to consider your behavior. Your meals are in the refrigerator or freezer, and labeled. Your pack list is on your desk. Report to Ms. Vee at the university at eight on Monday morning. Your participation in this program will ensure your place in HMS next fall. Now, take my garment bag downstairs, please. My car will be here any minute. Oh, those seeds were sprouting, cracking that fallow ground and pushing painfully through. For the first time in her life, Elizabeth looked straight into her mothers eyes and said, No. She spun around, stomped away and slammed the door of her bedroom. She threw herself down on the bed, stared at the ceiling with tear-blurred eyes. And waited. Any second, any second, she told herself. Her mother would come in, demand an apology, demand obedience. And Elizabeth wouldnt give one, either. Theyd have a fight, an actual fight, with threats of punishment and consequences. Maybe theyd yell at each other. Maybe if they yelled, her mother would finally hear her. And maybe, if they yelled, she could say all the things that had crept up inside her this past year. Things she thought now had been inside her forever. She didnt want to be a doctor. She didnt want to spend every waking hour on a schedule or hide a stupid pair of jeans because they didnt fit her mothers dress code. She wanted to have friends, not approved socialization appointments. She wanted to listen to the music girls her age listened to. She wanted to know what they whispered about and laughed about and talked about while she was shut out. She didnt want to be a genius or a prodigy. She wanted to be normal. She just wanted to be like everyone else. She swiped at the tears, curled up, stared at the door. Any second, she thought again. Any second now. Her mother had to be angry. She had to come in and assert authority. Had to. Please, Elizabeth murmured as seconds ticked into minutes. Dont make me give in again. Please, please, dont make me give up. Love me enough. Just this once. But as the minutes dragged on, Elizabeth pushed herself off the bed. Patience, she knew, was her mothers greatest weapon. That, and the unyielding sense of being right, crushed all foes. And certainly her daughter was no match for it. Defeated, she walked out of her room, toward her mothers. The garment bag, the briefcase, the small, wheeled Pullman were gone. Even as she walked downstairs, she knew her mother had gone, too. She left me. She just left. Alone, she looked around the pretty, tidy living room. Everything perfect the fabrics, the colors, the art, the arrangement. The antiques passed down through generations of Fitches all quiet elegance. Empty. Nothing had changed, she realized. And nothing would. So I will. She didnt allow herself to think, to question or second-guess. Instead, she marched back up, snagged scissors from her study area. In her bathroom, she studied her face in the mirror coloring shed gotten through paternity auburn hair, thick like her mothers but without the soft, pretty wave. Her mothers high, sharp cheekbones, her biological fathers whoever he was deep-set green eyes, pale skin, wide mouth. Physically attractive, she thought, because that was DNA and her mother would tolerate no less. But not beautiful, not striking like Susan, no. And that, she supposed, had been a disappointment even her mother couldnt fix. Freak. Elizabeth pressed a hand to the mirror, hating what she saw in the glass. Youre a freak. But as of now, youre not a coward. Taking a big breath, she yanked up a hunk of her shoulder-length hair and whacked it off. With every snap of the scissors she felt empowered. Her hair, her choice. She let the shorn hanks fall on the floor. As she snipped and hacked, an image formed in her mind. Eyes narrowed, head angled, she slowed the clipping. It was just geometry, really, she decided and physics. Action and reaction. The weight physical and metaphorical, she thought just fell away. And the girl in the glass looked lighter. Her eyes seemed bigger, her face not so thin, not so drawn. She looked new, Elizabeth decided. Carefully, she set the scissors down, and, realizing her breath was heaving in and out, made a conscious effort to slow it. So short. Testing, she lifted a hand to her exposed neck, ears, then brushed them over the bangs shed cut. Too

even, she decided. She hunted up manicure scissors, tried her hand at styling. Not bad. Not really good, she admitted, but different. That was the whole point. She looked, and felt, different. But not finished. Leaving the hair where it lay on the floor, she went into her bedroom, changed into her secret cache of clothes. She needed product that's what the girls called it. Hair product. And makeup. And more clothes. She needed the mall. Riding on the thrill, she went into her mother's home office, took the spare car keys. And her heart hammered with excitement as she hurried to the garage. She got behind the wheel, shut her eyes a moment. Here we go, she said quietly, then hit the garage-door opener and backed out. SHE GOT HER EARS PIERCED. It seemed a bold if mildly painful move, and suited the hair dye she'd taken from the shelf after a long, careful study and debate. She bought hair wax, as she'd seen one of the girls at college use it and thought she could duplicate the look. More or less. She bought two hundred dollars worth of makeup because she wasn't sure what was right. Then she had to sit down because her knees shook. But she wasn't done, Elizabeth reminded herself, as she watched the packs of teenagers, groups of women, teams of families, wander by. She just needed to regroup. She needed clothes, but she didn't have a plan, a list, an agenda. Impulse buying was exhilarating, and exhausting. The temper that had driven her this far left her with a dull headache, and her earlobes throbbed a little. The logical, sensible thing to do was go home, lie down for a while. Then plan, make that list of items to be purchased. But that was the old Elizabeth. This one was just going to catch her breath. The problem facing her now was that she wasn't precisely sure which store or stores she should go to. There were so many of them, and all the windows full of things. So she'd wander, watch for girls her age. She'd go where they went. She gathered her bags, pushed to her feet and bumped into someone. Excuse me, she began, then recognized the girl. Oh. Julie. Yeah. The blonde with the sleek, perfect hair and melted-chocolate eyes gave Elizabeth a puzzled look. Do I know you? Probably not. We went to school together. I was student teacher in your Spanish class. Elizabeth Fitch. Elizabeth, sure. The brain trust. Julie narrowed her sulky eyes. You look different. Oh. I'm embarrassed now, Elizabeth lifted a hand to her hair. I cut my hair. Cool. I thought you moved away or something. I went to college. I'm home for the summer. Oh, yeah, you graduated early. Weird. I suppose it is. Will you go to college this fall? I'm supposed to go to Brown. That's a wonderful school. Okay. Well. Are you shopping? Broke. Julie shrugged and Elizabeth took a survey of her outfit: the snug jeans, riding very low on the hipbones, the skinny, midriff-baring shirt, the oversized shoulder bag and wedge sandals. I just came to the mall to see my boyfriend my ex-boyfriend, since I broke up with him. I'm sorry. Screw him. He works at the Gap. We were supposed to go out tonight, and now he says he has to work till ten, then wants to hang out with his bros after. I've had it, so I dumped him. Elizabeth started to point out that he shouldn't be penalized for honoring his obligations, but Julie kept talking and it occurred to Elizabeth that the other girl hadn't spoken more than a dozen words to her since they'd known each other. So I'm going over to Tiffany's, see if she wants to hang, because now I've got no boyfriend for the summer. It sucks. I guess you hang out with college guys. Julie gave her a considering look. Go to frat parties, keggers, all that. I There are a lot of men at Harvard. Harvard. Julie rolled her eyes. Any of them in Chicago for the summer? I couldn't say. A college guy, that's what I need. Who wants some loser who works at the mall? I need somebody who knows how to have fun, who can take me places, buy alcohol. Good luck with that, unless you can get into the clubs. That's where they hang out. Just need to score some fake ID. I can do that. The instant the words were out, Elizabeth wondered where they'd come from. But Julie gripped her arm, smiled at her as if they were friends. No bull? No. That is, it's not very difficult to create false identification with the right tools. A template, photo, laminate, a computer with Photoshop. Brain trust. What'll it take for you to make me a driver's license that'll get me into a club? As I said, a template. No, Jesus. What do you want for it? I Bargaining, Elizabeth realized. A barter. I need to buy some clothes, but I don't know what I should buy. I need someone to help me. A shopping buddy? Yes. Someone who knows. You know. Eyes no longer sulky, voice no longer bored, Julie simply beamed. That's my brain trust. And if I help you pick out some outfits, you'll make me up the ID? Yes. And I'd also want to go with you to the club. So I'd need the right clothes for that, too. You? Clubbing? More than your hair's changed, Liz. Liz. She was Liz. I'd need a photo, and it will take a little while to construct the IDs. I could have them done tomorrow. What club would we go to? Might as well go for the hottest club in town. Warehouse 12. Brad Pitt went there when he was in town. Do you know him? I wish. Okay, let's go shopping. It made her dizzy, not just the way Julie piloted her into a store, snatched up clothes with only the most cursory study. But the idea of it all. A shopping buddy. Not someone who preselected what was deemed appropriate and expected her to assent. Someone who grabbed at random and talked about looking hot, or cool, even sexy. No one had ever suggested to Elizabeth that she might look sexy. She closed herself in the dressing room with the forest of

color, the sparkle of spangles, the glint of metallic, and had to put her head between her knees. It was all happening so fast. It was like being caught in a tsunami. The surge just swept her away. Her fingers trembled as she undressed, as she carefully folded her clothes, then stared at all the pieces hanging in the tiny room. What did she put on? What went with what? How did she know? I found the most awesome dress! Without even a knock, Julie barged right in. Instinctively, Elizabeth crossed an arm over her breasts. Haven't you tried anything on yet? I wasn't sure where to start. Start with awesome. Julie shoved the dress at her. But really, at its length it was more of a tunic, Elizabeth thought, and in a screaming red, ruched along the sides. Its razor-thin straps sparkling with silver. What do you wear with it? Killer shoes. No, lose the bra first. You can't wear a bra with that dress. You've got a really good body, Julie observed. I'm genetically predisposed, and maintain fitness and health through regular daily exercise. Get you. And the naked or nearly human body was natural, Elizabeth reminded herself. Just skin, muscle, bone, nerve. She laid her bra on her folded clothes, then shimmied into the dress. Its very short, she began. You're going to want to ditch those Mom panties and buy a thong. That is definitely club-worthy. Elizabeth took a breath, turned to the triple mirror. Oh. Who was that? Who was that girl in the short red dress? I look awesome, Julie declared, and Elizabeth watched a smile bloom on her own face. Awesome. She bought the dress, and two others. And skirts. She bought tops that rode above her waist, pants that rode below it. She bought thongs. And she rode that tsunami to shoes with silver heels she'd have to practice walking in. And she laughed, like any ordinary girl shopping with a friend at the mall. She bought a digital camera, then watched Julie make up her face in the bathroom. She took Julie's picture, and several backups against the pale gray of the stall door. That's going to work? Yes, I can make it work. How old should you be? I think it's best if we stay as close as possible to the legal age. I can use everything from your valid driver's license and just change the year. Have you done this before? I've experimented. I've read and studied identity fraud, cyber crimes. Its interesting. I'd like to like to what? I'd like to study computer crimes and prevention, investigation, more seriously. I'd like to join the FBI. No bull? Like Dana Scully. I don't know her. X-Files, Liz. Don't you watch TV? My viewing of popular and commercial television is limited to an hour a week. Julie rolled her big, chocolate eyes. What are you, six? Jesus Christ. My mother has very definite opinions. You're in college, for God's sake. Watch what you want. Anyway, I'll come to your place tomorrow night. Say nine? We'll take a cab from there. But I want you to call me when you finish the ID, okay? Yes. I tell you what, breaking up with Darryl was the best thing I ever did. Otherwise, I'd've missed all this. We're going to party, Liz. Laughing, Julie did a quick, hip-swiveling dance right there in the ladies room. Big time. I've gotta go. Nine o'clock. Don't let me down. No. I won't. Flushed from the day, Elizabeth hauled all the bags to her car. She knew what girls in the mall talked about now. Boys. Doing it. Julie and Darryl had done it. Clothes. Music. She had a mental list of artists she needed to research. Television and movie actors. Other girls. What other girls wore. Who other girls had done it with. And back to boys. She understood the discussions and topics were a societal and generational trope. But it was one she'd been shut out of until today. And she thought Julie liked her, at least a little. Maybe they'd start to hang out. Maybe she'd hang out with Julie's friend Tiffany, too, who'd done it with Mike Dauber when he'd come home on spring break. She knew Mike Dauber, or she'd had a class with him. And he'd passed her a note once. Or he'd passed her a note to pass to someone else, but that was something. It was contact. AT HOME, she laid all the bags on her bed. She'd put everything away in plain sight this time. And she'd remove everything she didn't like, which was nearly all she owned, and box it up for charity. And she'd watch The X-Files if she wanted to, and listen to Christina Aguilera and N Sync and Destiny's Child. And she'd change her major. The thought of it had her heart spearing up to her throat. She'd study what she wanted to study. And when she had her degrees in criminology, in computer science, she'd apply to the FBI. Everything had changed. Today. Determined, she dug out the hair color. In the bathroom, she arranged everything, performed the recommended spot test. While she waited, she cleaned up the shorn hair, then purged her closet, her dresser, neatly hung or folded her new clothes. Hungry, she went down to the kitchen, heated one of the pre-labeled meals and ate while studying an article on falsifying IDs on her laptop. After she'd done the dishes, she went back upstairs. With a mix of trepidation and excitement she followed the directions for the hair color, set the timer. While it set, she arranged everything she needed for the identification. She opened the Britney Spears CD Julie had recommended, slid it into her laptop's CD player. She turned up the volume so she could hear as she got in the shower to wash the color out of her hair. It ran so black! She rinsed and rinsed and rinsed, finally bracing her hands on the shower wall as her stomach began to churn in anticipation and not a little dread. When the water ran clear, she toweled off, wrapped a second towel around her hair. Women had altered their hair color for centuries, Elizabeth

reminded herself. Using berries, herbs, roots. It was a rite of passage, she decided. It was a personal choice. In her robe, she faced the mirror. My choice, she said, and pulled the towel off her hair. She stared at the girl with pale skin and wide green eyes, the girl with short, spiky raven-black hair that framed her narrow, sharp-boned face. Lifting a hand, she scratched her fingers through it, feeling the texture, watching it move. Then she stood straighter, and she smiled. Hi. Im Liz.

2 CONSIDERING ALL THE HELP JULIE HAD PROVIDED, IT SEEMED only fair to Elizabeth to work on Julies drivers license first. Creating the template was simple enough. Everything shed researched claimed the quality of the identification depended largely on the quality of the paper and laminate. That presented no problem, as her mother didnt believe in cutting corners on supplies. With scanner and computer she produced a decent enough replica, and through Photoshop she added the digital photo, tweaked it. The result was good but not good enough. It took several hours and three attempts before she felt shed created something that would pass the check-in at a nightclub. Actually, she thought it might very well pass a more rigorous police check. But she hoped it wouldnt come to that. She set Julies aside. It was too late to call Julie, Elizabeth noted when she checked the time and found it was nearly one in the morning. In the morning, then, she thought, and started on her own identification. Photo first, she decided, and spent the best part of an hour with her new makeup, carefully copying the steps shed watched Julie take at the mall. Darkening the eyes, brightening the lips, adding color to the cheeks. She hadnt known it would be so much fun and considerable work to play with all the colors and brushes and pencils. Liz looks older, she thought, studying the results. Liz looks pretty and confident and normal. Flushed with success, she opened the hair products. Trickier, she discovered, but she believed with practice shed learn. But she liked the careless, somewhat messy spikes. So different from her reddish brown, long and straight and uninspired hair, this short, spiky, glossy black. Liz was new. Liz could and would do things Elizabeth hadnt even imagined. Liz listened to Britney Spears and wore jeans that showed her navel. Liz went to clubs on Saturday night with a girlfriend, and danced and laughed and flirted with boys. And boys flirt back with Liz, she murmured. Because Liz is pretty, and shes fun, and shes not afraid of anything. After calculating and setting the angles, the background, she used her new camera on a timer for several shots. She worked till after three, finding the process simpler with the second document. It was nearly four by the time she put away all the tools and equipment, dutifully removed her makeup. She was certain shed never sleeper mind was so full, so busy. She went under the moment she shut her eyes. And for the first time in her life, barring illness, she slept soundly until noon. Her first act was to rush to the mirror to make certain she hadnt dreamed it all. Her second was to call Julie. Are we set? Julie asked, after shed answered on half a ring. Yes. I have everything. And its totally good, right? Itll do the job? Theyre excellent counterfeits. I dont foresee any problem. Awesome! Nine oclock. Ill get the cab, have it wait so be ready. And make sure you look the part, Liz. I tried the makeup last night. Im going to practice with it, and my hair, this afternoon. And practice walking in the heels. You do that. Ill see you later. Party time! Yes, Ill But Julie had already hung up. She spent all day on what she now thought of as Project Liz. She dressed in new cropped pants and top, made up her face, worked with her hair. She walked in the new shoes, and when she felt she had that process down, danced. She practiced in front of the mirror, after finding a pop-music station on the radio. Shed danced before like this alone in front of the mirror teaching herself the moves shed observed at dances in high school. When shed been miserably on the sidelines, too young and too plain for any boy to notice. The heels made the moves, the turns somewhat problematic, but she liked the way they kept her just a little off balance, forced her to loosen her knees, her hips. At six, she took out her labeled meal, ate it while checking her e-mail. But there was nothing, nothing at all from her mother. Shed been sure there would be some lecture, something. But Susans patience was endless, and her use of silence masterful. It wouldnt work this time, Elizabeth determined. This time Susan was in for a shock. Shed walked out on Elizabeth, but shed come home to Liz. And Liz wouldnt be taking that summer program at the university. Liz would be amending her schedule and classes for the coming term. Liz wasnt going to be a surgeon. Liz was going to work with the FBI, in cyber crimes. She gave herself thirty minutes to research universities with the highest-rated programs in her new field of study. She may have to transfer, and that might pose a problem. Though her college fund was tied to her trust and came through her grandparents they might cut her off. Theyd listen to their daughter, follow her lead. If so, shed apply for scholarships. Her academic record would hold her there. Shed lose a semester, but shed get a job. Shed go to work. Shed earn her way to her own destination. She shut everything down, reminding herself tonight was for fun, for discovery. Not for worries or plans. She went upstairs to dress for her first night out. Her first night of real freedom. BECAUSE SHED DRESSED SO EARLY, Elizabeth had too much time to think, to question, to doubt. She was overdressed,

under-made-up and her hair was wrong. No one would ask her to dance, because no one ever did. Julie was eighteen, older and experienced, and knew how to dress, how to behave in social situations, how to talk to boys. She herself was bound to do or say something inappropriate. She embarrassed Julie, then Julie would never speak to her again. That tenuous bond of friendship would be broken forever. She worked herself up into such a state of panicked excitement she felt feverish, queasy. Twice she sat down, head between her knees, to fight off anxiety attacks, and still she answered the door at Julie's buzz with sweaty palms and a thundering heart. Holy shit! It's wrong. I'm wrong. All the doubts and fears peaked into self-disgust and mortification as Julie stared at her. I'm sorry. You can just take the ID. Your hair. I don't know what I was thinking. I only wanted to try. It's awesome! You look totally awesome. I wouldn't have recognized you. Oh my God, Liz, you completely look twenty-one, and really sexy. I do? Julie cocked a hip, fisted a hand on it. You've been holding out. The pulse in her throat throbbed like a wound. Then it's all right? I look right? You look so way right. Julie circled a finger in the air, got a blank look. Do the turn, Liz. Let's see the whole package. Flushed, nearly teary, Elizabeth turned in a circle. Oh, yeah. We're going to slay tonight. You look awesome, too. You always do. That's really sweet. I like your dress. It's my sister's. Julie did a turn and posed in the halter-neck black mini. She'll kill me if she finds out I borrowed it. Is it nice? Having a sister? It doesn't suck to have an older one who wears the same size I do, even if she is a bitch half the time. Let me see the ID. Meters running, Liz. Oh. Yes. Liz opened the evening bag she'd chosen from her mother's collection, took out Julie's fake license. It looks real, Julie said after a frowning study, then stared up at Elizabeth with wide, dark eyes. I mean, you know, real real. They came out very well. I could do better, I think, with more sophisticated equipment, but for tonight, they should do. It even feels real, Julie murmured. You've got skills, girl. You could make a serious fortune. I know kids who'd pay big-time for docs like this. Panic flooded back. You can't tell anyone. It's just for tonight. It's illegal, and if anyone finds out Julie swiped a finger over her heart, then her lips. They won't find out from me. Well, except Tiffany and Amber, she thought. She shot Elizabeth a smile, certain she could convince her new BFF to make up a couple more just for close friends. Let's get this party started. After Elizabeth shut and dead-bolted the door, Julie took her hand and pulled her along in a run for the waiting cab. She slid in, gave the driver the name of the club, then swiveled in her seat. Okay, plan of action. First thing is to be chilly. Should I have brought a sweater? Julie laughed, then blinked when she realized Elizabeth was serious. No, I mean we have to be cool, act like we go to clubs all the time. Like this is no big deal for us. Just another Saturday night. You mean we stay calm and blend in. That's what I said. Once we're in, we grab a table and order Cosmos. What are they? You know, like the Sex and the City girls? I don't know who they are. Never mind. It's fashionable. We're twenty-one, Liz; we're in a hot club. We order fashionable drinks. Oh. Elizabeth slid closer, lowered her voice. Won't your parents know if you've been drinking? They split last winter. Oh. I'm sorry. Julie shrugged, looked away out the window for a moment. It happens. Anyway, I don't see my dad until Wednesday, and my mom's away for the weekend on some retreat with her boring friends. Emma's out on a date, plus she doesn't care, anyway. I can do what I want. Elizabeth nodded. They were both the same. No one at home to care. We'll have Cosmos. Now you're talking. And we scope. That's why we'll dance with each other at first; it gives us time to check out the guys and let them check us out. Is that why girls dance together? I wondered. Plus, it's fun and a lot of boys won't dance. You got your cell phone? Yes. If we get separated, we call. If a guy asks for your number, don't give him your home number. The cell's okay, unless your mother monitors your calls. No. No one calls me. The way you look, that's going to change tonight. If you don't want him to have your number, give him a fake one. Next. You're in college, anyway, so you're cool there. We'll say we're roommates. I'm a liberal arts major. What are you majoring in again? I'm supposed to go to medical school, but better stick with that. Truth when possible. You don't get as mixed up. I'll be in medical school, then, starting an internship. Even the thought of it depressed her. But I don't want to talk about school unless I have to. Boys only want to talk about themselves, anyway. Oh, God, we're like almost there. Julie opened her purse, checked her face in a little mirror, freshened her lip gloss, so Elizabeth did the same. Can you get the cab? I got a hundred out of my mother's cash stash, but otherwise I'm tapped out. Of course. I can pay you back. My dad's an easy touch. I don't mind paying. Elizabeth took out the cab fare, calculated the tip. Oh, man, I've got goose bumps. I can't believe I'm going to Warehouse 12! It's totally the bomb! What do we do now? Elizabeth asked as they climbed out of the cab. We get in line. They don't let everybody in, you know, even with ID. Why? Because it's a hot club, so they turn off the dorks and dogs. But they always let in the hot chicks. And we are so the hot chicks. It was a long line, and a warm night. Traffic grumbled by, rumbling over the conversations of others who waited. Elizabeth took in the moment—the sounds, the smells, the sights. Saturday night, she thought, and

she was queuing up at a hot club with beautiful people. She was wearing a new dress a red dress and high, high heels that made her feel tall and powerful. No one looked at her as if she didn't belong. The man checking IDs at the door wore a suit and shoes with a high shine. His dark hair, slicked back in a ponytail, left his face unframed. A scar rode his left cheekbone. A stud glinted in his right earlobe. He's a bouncer, Elizabeth whispered to Julie. I did some research. He removes people who cause trouble. He looks very strong. All we have to do is get by him and get in. The clubs owned by Five Star Entertainment. That's headed by Mikhail and Sergei Volkov. It's believed they have ties to the Russian Mafia. Julie did her eye roll. The Mafia's Italian.

You know, The Sopranos? Elizabeth didn't know what singing had to do with the Mafia. Since the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union, organized crime in Russia has been on the rise. Actually, it was already very organized, and headed by the SS, but Liz. Save the history lesson. Yes. Sorry. Just pass him your ID, and keep talking to me. Julie pitched her voice up again as they wound their way to the door. Dumping that loser was the best thing I've done in months. Did I tell you he called me three times today? God, as if. A quick smile for the bouncer, and Julie held out her ID as she continued her conversation with Elizabeth. I told him forget it. He can't make time for me, somebody else will. It's best not to commit to one person, certainly not at this stage. You got that. Julie held out her hand for the club stamp. And I'm ready to check out the rest of the field. First rounds on me. She stepped around the bouncer while he performed the same check and stamp on Elizabeth, and her grin was so huge Elizabeth wondered it didn't swallow the man whole. Thank you, she said, when he stamped the back of her hand. You ladies have fun. We are the fun, Julie told him, then grabbed Elizabeth's hand and pulled her into the wall of sound. Oh my God, were in! Julie let out a squeal, mostly drowned out by the music, then bounced on her heels as she gave Elizabeth a hug. Stunned by the embrace, Elizabeth jerked stiff, but Julie only bounced again. You're a genius. Yes. Julie laughed, eyes a little wild. Okay, table, Cosmos, dance and scope. Elizabeth hoped the music covered the pounding of her heart as it had Julie's squeal. So many people. She wasn't used to being with so many people in one place. Everyone moving or talking while the music pumped, pumped, pumped, a flood saturating every breath of air. People jammed the dance floor, shaking, spinning, sweating. They crowded into booths, around tables, at the long curve of the stainless-steel bar. She was determined to be chilly, but a sweater wouldn't be necessary. Body heat pulsed everywhere. Getting through the crowd dodging, weaving, bumping bodies kicked Elizabeth's heart rate to a gallop. Anxiety clutched at her throat, pressed on her chest. Julie's death grip on her hand was the only thing that kept her from bolting. Julie finally beelined for a table the size of a dinner plate. Score! Oh my God, it's like everybody's here. We've gotta keep scoping a table closer to the dance floor. This is so completely awesome. The DJ is slamming it. She finally focused on Elizabeth's face. Hey, are you okay? It's very crowded and warm. Well, yeah. Who wants to go to an empty, cold club? Listen, we need drinks and now, so I'm going to go to the bar. I'll buy, since you paid for the cab. That'll give me time to start scoping. You do the same from here. Two Cosmos, coming up! Without Julie's hand to anchor her, Elizabeth gripped hers together. She recognized the signs anxiety, claustrophobia and deliberately focused on steadying her breathing. Liz didn't panic just because she'd been swallowed up in a crowd. She ordered herself to relax, starting with her toes and working her way up. By the time she reached her belly, she'd calmed enough to take on the role of observer. The owners and their architect had made good use of the warehouse space, utilizing an urban industrial motif with the exposed ductwork and pipes, the old brick walls. The stainless steel bar, tables, chairs, stools reflected back the flashing color of the lights another pulse, she thought, timed to the music. Open iron stairs on either side led up to a second level, open as well. People crowded the rails there, or squeezed around more tables. There was likely a second bar on that level, she thought. Drinks were profit. Down here, on a wide raised platform, under those flashing lights, the DJ worked. Another observer, Elizabeth decided. Raised in a position of authority and honor where he could see the crowd. His long, dark hair flew as he worked. He wore a graphic T-shirt. She couldn't make out the art with the distance, but it was virulent orange against the black cloth. Just beneath his perch, several women moved sinuously, rocking their hips in an invitation to mate. Calm again, she tuned in to the music. She liked it the hard, repetitive beat; the pounding of drums; the rough, metallic scream of guitar. And she liked the way different dancers chose to move to it. Arms in the air, arms cocked like a boxer's with hands fisted, elbows jabbing, feet planted, feet lifting. Wow. Just wow. Julie set martini glasses filled with pink liquid on the table before she sat. I nearly spilled these coming back, which would have bummed. They're eight dollars each. Alcoholic beverages make up the biggest profit margin in clubs and bars. I guess. But they're good. I drank a little of mine, and it's like pow! She laughed, leaned in. We should make them last until we find some guys to buy us drinks. Why would they buy us drinks? Duh. We're hot, we're available. Drink some, Liz, and let's get out there and show

our stuff. Obediently, Elizabeth sipped. Its good. Testing, she took another sip. And its very pretty. I want to get lit and loose! Hey, I love this song. Time to shake it. Once again, Julie grabbed Elizabeths hand. When the crowd closed in around her, Elizabeth shut her eyes. Just the music, she thought. Just the music. Hey, nice moves. Cautiously, Elizabeth opened her eyes again, concentrated on Julie. What? I was afraid youd be dorky, you know. But youve got moves. You can dance, Julie elaborated. Oh. The musics tribal and designed to stimulate. Its simply a matter of coordinating legs and hips. And mimicry. Ive watched others dance a lot. Whatever you say, Liz. Elizabeth liked moving her hips. Like the heels, it made her feel powerful, and the way the dress rubbed her skin added a sexual element. The lights made everything surreal, and the music itself seemed to swallow all. Her discomfort with the crowd eased, so when Julie bumped hips with her, she laughed and meant it. They danced, and danced more. Back at their tiny table, they drank Cosmos, and when a waitress came by, Elizabeth carelessly ordered more. The dancing makes me thirsty, she said to Julie. Ive got a nice buzz going already. And that guy over there is totally checking us out. No, dont look! How can I see him if I dont look? Take my word, hes totally cute. Im going to give him the eye and the hair toss in a second, then you, like sort of really casual, turn in your chair. Hes got blond hair, kind of curly. Hes wearing a tight white T-shirt and a black jacket with jeans. Oh, yes, I saw him before, over by the bar. He was talking to a woman. She had long, blond hair and wore a bright pink dress that showed a lot of cleavage. He has a gold hoop earring in his left ear, and a gold ring on the middle finger of his right hand. Jesus, do you actually have eyes in the back of your head like my mom used to say she did? How do you know when you havent looked? I saw him, over by the bar, Elizabeth repeated. I noticed him because the blond woman seemed very angry with him. And I remember because I have an eidetic memory. Is it fatal? No, its not a disease or condition. Oh. Flushing a little, Elizabeth hunched her shoulders. You were joking. Its commonly called a photographic memory, but thats not accurate, as its more than visual. Whatever. Get ready. But Elizabeth was more interested in Julies eye, which included a tipped head, slow, secretive smile and a shift of the eyes from under the lashes. This was followed by a quick shake and toss of the head that lifted Julies hair and had it drifting down again. Was it innate? Was it learned behavior? Some combination of both? In any case, Elizabeth thought she could emulate it, though she no longer had hair to toss. Message received. Oh, hes got such an adorable smile. Oh my God, hes coming over. Hes like actually coming over. But you wanted him to. Thats why you sent the message. Yeah, but I bet hes at least twenty-four. I bet. Follow my lead. Excuse me? Elizabeth looked up as Julie did but didnt risk the smile. Shed need to practice first. I wonder if you can help me with something. Julie executed a modified hair toss. Maybe. Im worried my memory is failing because I never forget a beautiful woman, but I cant recall either of you. Tell me you havent been here before. First time. Ah, that explains it. I guess youre here a lot. Every night. Its my club that is, he said with a dazzling smile, I have an interest in it. Youre one of the Volkovs? Elizabeth spoke without thinking, then felt the heat rise as he turned sizzling blue eyes on her. Alex Gurevich. A cousin. Julie Masters. Julie offered a hand, which Alex took, kissed stylishly on the knuckles. And my friend Liz. Welcome to Warehouse 12. Youre enjoying yourselves? The musics great. When the waitress came with the drinks, Alex plucked the tab off the tray. Beautiful women who come to my club for the first time arent allowed to buy their own drinks. Under the table, Julie nudged Elizabeths foot while she beamed at Alex. Then youll have to join us. Id love to. He murmured something to the waitress. Are you visiting Chicago? Born and bred, Julie told him, taking a long swallow of her drink. Both of us. Were home for the summer. Were at Harvard. Harvard? His head cocked; his eyes dazzled. Beautiful and smart. Im half in love already. If you can dance, Im lost. Julie took another drink. Youre going to need a map. He laughed, held out his hands. Julie took one, rose. Come on, Liz. Lets show him how a couple of Harvard girls get down. Oh, but he wants to dance with you. Both. Alex kept his extended hand out. Which makes me the luckiest man in the room. She started to decline, but Julie gave her another version of the eye behind Alexs back, which involved a lot of rolling, eyebrow wiggling, grimacing. So she took his hand. He wasnt actually asking her to dance, but Elizabeth gave him credit for manners when he could have left her sitting alone at the table. She did her best to join in without getting in the way. It didnt matter, she loved dancing. She loved the music. She loved the noise rising around her, the movements, the smells. When she smiled it wasnt practiced, just a natural curve of her lips. Alex sent her a wink and a grin as he laid his hands on Julies hips. Then he lifted his chin in a signal to someone behind her. Even as she turned to look, someone took her hand, gave her a quick spin that nearly toppled her on her heels. As always, my cousin is greedy. He takes two while I have none. Russia flowed exotically through the voice. Unless you take pity and dance with me. I dont say no, pretty lady. He drew her close for a sway. Just a dance. She could only stare up at him. He was tall, his body hard and firm against her. Where Alex was

bright, he was dark the long wave of his hair, eyes that snapped nearly black against tawny skin. As he smiled at her, dimples shimmered in his cheeks. Her heart rolled over in her chest and trembled. I like your dress, he said. Thank you. Its new. His smile widened. And my favorite color. Im Ilya. Im Liz. Im Liz. Um. Priyatno poznamomitsya. Its nice to meet you, too. You speak Russian. Yes. Well, a little. Um. A beautiful girl wearing my favorite color who speaks Russian. Its my lucky night. No, Liz thought, as, still holding her close, he lifted her hand to his lips. Oh, no. It was her lucky night. It was the best night of her life. 3 THEY MOVED TO A BOOTH. IT ALL HAPPENED SO SMOOTHLY, so seamlessly, it seemed like magic. As magical as the pretty pink drink that appeared in front of her. She was Cinderella at the ball, and midnight was a lifetime away. When they sat he stayed close, kept his eyes on her face, his body angled toward hers as if the crowds and the music didnt exist. He touched her as he spoke, and every brush of his fingers over the back of her hand, her arm or shoulder was a terrible thrill. So, what is it you study at Harvard? Im in medical school. It wouldnt be true, she promised herself, but it was true enough now. A doctor. This takes many years, yes? What kind of doctor will you be? My mother wants me to follow her into neurosurgery. This is a brain surgeon? This is big, important doctor who cuts into brains. He skimmed a fingertip down her temple. You must be very smart for this. I am. Very smart. He laughed as if shed said something charming. Its good to know yourself. You say this is what your mother wants. Is it what you want? She took a sip of her drink, and thought he was very smart, too or at least astute. No, not really. Then what kind of doctor do you want to be? I dont want to be a doctor at all. No? What, then? I want to work in cyber crimes for the FBI. FBI? His dark eyes widened. Yes. I want to investigate high-tech crimes, computer fraud terrorism, sexual exploitation. Its an important field that changes every day as technology advances. The more people use and depend on computers and electronics, the more the criminal element will exploit that dependence. Thieves, scam artists, pedophiles, even terrorists. This is your passion. I I guess. Then you must follow. We must always follow our passions, yes? When his hand brushed over her knee, a slow, liquid warmth spread in her belly. I never have. Was this passion? she wondered. This slow, liquid warmth? But I want to start. You must respect your mother, but she must also respect you. A woman grown. And a mother wants her child to be happy. She doesnt want me to waste my intellect. But the intellect is yours. Im starting to believe that. Are you in college? I am finished with this. Now I work in the family business. This makes me happy. He signaled the waitress for another round before Elizabeth realized her glass was nearly empty. Because its your passion. This is so. I follow my passions like this. He was going to kiss her. She might not have been kissed before, but shed imagined it often enough. She discovered imagination wasnt her strong suit. She knew kissing imparted biological information through pheromones, that the act stimulated all the nerve endings packed in the lips, in the tongue. It triggered a chemical reaction a pleasurable one that explained why, with few exceptions, kissing was part of human culture. But to be kissed, she realized, was an entirely different matter than theorizing about it. His lips were soft and smooth, and rubbed gently over hers, with the pressure slowly, gradually increasing as his hand slid up from her hip to her rib cage. Her heart tripped above the span of his hand as his tongue slipped through her lips, lazily glided over hers. Her breath caught, then released with an involuntary sound, almost of pain and the world revolved. Sweet, he murmured, and the vibration of the words against her lips, the warmth of his breath inside her mouth, triggered a shiver down her spine. Very sweet. His teeth grazed over her bottom lip as he eased back, studied her. I like you. I like you, too. I liked kissing you. Then we must do it again, while we dance. He brought her to her feet, brushed his lips to hers again. You arent the word, the word jaded. This is the word. Not like so many women who come in to dance and drink and flirt with men. I dont have a lot of experience with any of that. Those black eyes sparkled in the pulsing lights. Then the other men arent so lucky as me. Elizabeth glanced back toward Julie as Ilya drew her to the dance floor and saw that her friend was also being kissed. Not gently, not slowly, but Julie seemed to like it in fact, was fully participating, so then Ilya drew her into his arms, swaying with her unlike all the others who rushed and shook and spun. Just swaying while his mouth came to hers again. She stopped thinking about chemical reactions and nerve endings. Instead, she did her best to participate fully. Instinct brought her arms up to lock around his neck. When she felt the change in him, the hardening pressing against her, she knew it was a normal, even involuntary, physical reaction. But she knew the wonder of it all the same. Shed caused the reaction. He wanted her, when no one ever had. What you do to me, he whispered in her ear. Your taste, your scent. Its pheromones. He looked down at her, brow knitted. Is what? Nothing. She pressed her face to his shoulder. She knew the alcohol impaired her judgment, but she didnt care. Even knowing the reason she didnt care was because of the impairment, she lifted her face again. This time she initiated the kiss. We should sit, he said after a long moment. You make my knees weak. He

held her hand as they walked back to the table. Julie, eyes overbright, face flushed, popped to her feet. She teetered a minute, laughed, grabbed her purse. Well be right back. Come on, Liz. Where? Where else? The ladies. Oh. Excuse me. Julie hooked arms with her as much for balance as solidarity. Oh my God. Can you believe it? We like got the hottest guys in the club. Jesus, theyre so sexy. And yours has that accent. I wish mine had the accent, but he kisses so much better than Darryl. He practically owns the club, you know, and like has this house on the lake. Were all going to get out of here and go there. To his house? Do you think we should? Oh, we should. Julie shoved open the bathroom door, took a look at the line for the stalls. Typical, and I really have to pee! Ive got such a buzz! Hows your guy does he kiss good? Whats his name again? Ilya.

Yes, hes very good. I like him, very much, but Im not sure we should go with them to Alexs house. Oh, loosen up, Liz. You cant let me down now. Im totally going to do it with Alex, and I cant go over there with him alonenot on the first date. You dont have to do it with Ilya if youre all virginal. Sex is a natural and necessary act, not only for procreation but, certainly in humans, for pleasure and the release of stress. Get you. Julie elbowed her. So you dont like think Im a slut for doing it with Alex? Its an unfortunate by-product of a patriarchal society that women are deemed sluttish or cheap for engaging in sex for pleasure while men are considered vital. Virginity shouldnt be a prize to be won, or withheld. The hymen has no rewarding properties, grants no powers. Women shouldno, mustbe allowed to pursue their own sexual gratification, whether or not procreation is the goal or the relationship a monogamous one, just as a man is free to do so. A

lanky redhead fluffed her hair, then gave Elizabeth a dazzling smile as she walked by. Sing it, sister. Elizabeth leaned close to Julie as the woman continued out. Why would I sing? she whispered. Its just an expression. You know, Liz, I figured you for a cross your legs, no touching below the waist and only over the clothes sort. A lack of experience doesnt make me a prude. Got it. You know I sort of thought Id ditch you once we were in and I hooked up, but youre fun even if you talk like a teacher half the time. So, you know, sorry for sort of thinking it. Its all right. You didnt. And I know Im not like your friends. Hey. Julie wrapped an arm around Elizabeths shoulders for a squeeze. You are my friend now, right? I hope so. Ive never Oh, thank God. On that fervent call, Julie made a staggering dash as a stall opened. So were going to Alexs, right? Elizabeth looked around the crowded restroom. All the women freshening makeup and hair, waiting in line, laughing, talking. She was probably the only virgin in the room. Virginity wasnt a prize, she reminded herself. So it wasnt a burden, either. It was hers to keep or lose. Her choice. Her life. Liz? Yes. On a steadying breath, Liz walked toward the next open stall. Yes, she said again. Closing the door, and her eyes. Well go.

Together. AT THE TABLE, Ilya lifted his beer. If these girls are twenty-one, Im sixty. Alex only laughed, shrugged. Theyre close enough. And mines in heat, believe me. Shes drunk, Alexi. So what? I didnt pour the drinks down her throat. Im up for some fresh meat, and Im fucking getting laid tonight. Dont tell me youre not planning to nail down the hot brunette, bro. Shes sweet. A smile tugged at Ilyas mouth. And just a little underripe. Shes not so drunk as yours. If shes willing, Ill take her to bed. I like her mind. Alexs lips twisted. Give me a fucking break. No, I do. It adds something. He glanced around. Too much the same, he thought of the women who passed by, too much predictable. Refreshing this is the word. The blondes setting it up so well go to my place. All of us. She said she wont go unless her friend goes. You can have the spare room. I prefer my own place. Look, its both of them or neither. I didnt put in over two hours getting her primed to have her walk her fine ass out of here because you cant close the deal with the friend. Ilyas eyes went hard over his beer. I can close the deal, dvojurodny brat. And which do you think will close it tight, cousin? The crap apartment youre still living in, or my house on the lake? Ilya jerked a shoulder. I prefer my simpler place, but all right. Well go to yours. No drugs, Alexi. Oh, for Christs sake. No drugs. Ilya leaned forward, stabbed a finger on the table. You keep it legal. We dont know them, but mine, I think, would not approve. She says she wants to be FBI. Youre shitting me. No. No drugs, Alexi, or I dont go and you dont get laid. Fine. Here they come. Stand up. Ilya kicked Alex under the table. Pretend youre a gentleman. He rose, held out a hand to Liz. Wed love to get out of here, Julie announced, wrapping herself around Alex. Wed love to see your house. Then thats what well do. Nothing beats a private party. This is okay with you? Ilya murmured as they started out. Yes. Julie really wants to, and were together, so No, I dont ask what Julie wants. I ask if you want. She looked at him, felt a sigh and a tingle. It mattered to him, what she wanted. Yes. I want to go with you. This is good. He took her hand, pressed it to his heart as they wove through the crowd. I want to be with you. And you can tell me more about Liz. I want to know everything about you. Julie said boysmenonly want to talk about themselves. He laughed, tucked his arm around her waist. Then how do they learn about fascinating women? As they got to the door, a man in a suit came up, tapped Ilya on the shoulder. One moment, Ilya said to Liz as he stepped aside. She couldnt hear much, and that was in Russian. But she could

see by her glimpse of Ilyas profile that he wasn't pleased with what he heard. But she was reasonably sure his snarled chyort vozmi was a curse. He signaled the man to wait, then guided Liz outside, where Alex and Julie waited. There's something I must take care of. I'm sorry. It's all right. I understand. Bullshit, Ilya, let somebody else handle it. It's work, Ilya said shortly. It shouldn't take long no more than an hour. You go, with Alexi and your friend. I'll come as soon as I finish. Oh, but Come on, Liz, it'll be all right. You can wait for Ilya at Alex's. He's got all kinds of music and a flat-screen TV. You wait. Ilya leaned down, kissed Elizabeth long and deep. I'll come soon. Drive carefully, Alexi. You have precious cargo. So now I have two beautiful women. Unwilling to lose the momentum, Alex took both girls by the arms. Ilya takes everything seriously. I like to party. We're too young to be serious. A dark SUV glided up to the curb. Alex signaled, then caught the keys the valet tossed him. He opened the door. Trapped by manners and obligation, Liz climbed in the back. She stared at the door of the club, craning her neck to keep it in view even when Alex drove away, with Julie singing along to the stereo. IT DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT. Without Ilya, the rush of excitement, anticipation, faded away, left everything flat and dull. Combined with the alcohol, riding in the backseat triggered a bout of motion sickness. Queasy, and suddenly brutally tired, she rested her head against the side window. They didn't need her, Elizabeth thought. Both Julie and Alex sang and laughed. He drove entirely too fast, taking corners in a way that made her stomach pitch. She would not be sick. Even as the heat flashed through her, she willed herself to breathe, slow and even. She would not humiliate herself by being sick in the backseat of Alex's SUV. She lowered her window a few inches, let the air blow over her face. She wanted to lie down, wanted to sleep. She'd had too much to drink, and this was yet another chemical reaction. And not nearly as pleasant as a kiss. She concentrated on her breathing, on the air across her face, on the houses, cars, streets. Anything but on her churning stomach and head. As he wound along Lake Shore Drive, she thought how close they were, relatively, to her home in Lincoln Park. If she could just go home, she could lie down in the quiet, sleep off the nausea and spinning head. But when Alex pulled up at a pretty old two-story traditional, she thought at least she could get out of the car, stand on solid ground. Got some great views, Alex was saying as he and Julie got out. I thought about buying a condo, but I like my privacy. Plenty of room to party here, and nobody bitches the music's too loud. Julie staggered, laughed a little wildly when Alex caught her and squeezed his hand on her ass. Elizabeth trailed behind, a miserably queasy fifth wheel. You live here by yourself, she managed. Plenty of room for company. He unlocked the front door, gestured. Ladies first. And he gave Elizabeth's ass a teasing pat as she walked in. She wanted to tell him he had a beautiful home, but the fact was everything was too bright, too new, too modern. All hard edges, shiny surfaces and glossy leather. A bright red bar, a huge black leather sofa and an enormous wall-screen TV dominated the living room, when the wide glass doors and windows leading to a terrace should have been the key point. Oh my God, I love this. Julie immediately flopped onto the sofa, stretched out. It's like decadent. That's the idea, baby. He picked up a remote, clicked, and pounding music filled the room. I'll fix you a drink. Can you make Cosmos? Julie asked him. I just love Cosmos. I'll hook you up. Maybe I could have some water? Elizabeth asked. Oh, Liz, don't be such a buzzkill. I'm a little dehydrated. And God, God, she needed more air. Is it all right if I look outside? She walked toward the terrace doors. Sure. Mi casa es su casa. I want to dance! As Julie lurched up, began to bump and grind, Elizabeth pulled open the doors and escaped. She imagined the view was wonderful, but everything blurred as she hobbled to the rail, leaned on it. What were they doing? What were they thinking? This was a mistake. A stupid, reckless mistake. They had to go. She had to convince Julie to leave. But even over the music, she could hear Julie's Cosmo-slurred laughter. Maybe if she sat down out here for a few minutes, cleared her head, waited for her stomach to settle. She could claim her mother had called. What was one more lie in an entire night of them? She'd make up some excuse a good, logical excuse to leave. Once her head cleared. There you are. She turned as Alex stepped out. One of each. Gilded in the low light, he carried a glass of water and ice in one hand, and a martini glass of that pretty pink that now made her stomach turn. Thank you. But just the water, I think. Gotta feed that high, baby. But he set the drink aside. You don't have to be out here all alone. He shifted, pressed her back against the rail. The three of us can party. I can take care of both of you. I don't think Who knows if Ilyas coming? Work, work, work, that's what he does. You caught his eye, though. Mine, too. Come back inside. We'll have a good time. I think I'll wait for Ilya. I need to use your bathroom. Your loss, baby. Though he only shrugged, she thought she caught something mean flicker in his eyes. Go left. It's off the kitchen. Thank you. If you change your mind, he called off as she ran to the door. Julie. She grabbed Julie by the arm as Julie tried to execute an unsteady dance-floor spin. I'm having such a good time. This is the best night ever. Julie, you've had too much to drink. After a pffft sound, Julie shook Elizabeth off. Not

possible. We have to go. We have to stay and partay! Alex said both of us should go to bed with him. Eeuw.

Snorting with laughter, Julie spun again. Hes just messing around, Liz. Dont get all brainiac nerd on me. Your guyll be here in a few minutes. Just have another drink, chill. I dont want any more to drink. I feel sick. I want to go home. Not going home. Nobody gives a shit there. Come on, Lizzy! Dance with me. I cant. Liz pressed a hand to her stomach as her skin went clammy. I need to. Unable to fight it, she made the dash to the left, caught a glimpse of Alex leaning on the terrace doors, grinning at her. On a half-sob, she stumbled through the kitchen and nearly fell on the tiles as she bolted for the bathroom door. She risked the half-second it took to lock the door behind her, then fell to her knees in front of the toilet. She vomited sick, slimy pink, and barely managed a breath before she vomited again. Tears streamed out of her eyes as she pulled herself up, using the sink as a lever. Half blind, she ran the water cold, scooped some into her mouth, splashed more on her face. Shuddering, she lifted her head, saw herself in the mirror white as wax, with the mascara and eyeliner smudged under her eyes like livid bruises. More of it tracked down her cheeks like black tears. Shame washed through her even as the next bout of sickness had her dropping to her knees again. Exhausted, the room spinning around her, she curled on the tiles and wept. She didnt want anyone to see her like this. She wanted to go home. She wanted to die. She lay shivering, her cheek pressed to the cool tiles until she thought she could risk sitting up. The room stank of sickness and sweat, but she couldnt go out until shed cleaned herself up. She did her best with soap and water, rubbing her face until her skin was raw, pausing every minute or so to lean over, fight off another wave of nausea. Now she looked pale and splotchy, her eyes glassy and rimmed with red. But her hands trembled, so her attempt to repair her makeup was almost worse than nothing at all. Shed have to swallow the humiliation. Shed go out on the terrace, in the fresh air, and wait until Ilya came. Shed ask him to take her home, and hoped hed understand. Hed never want to see her again. Hed never kiss her again. Cause and effect, she reminded herself. Shed lied, and lied and lied, and the result was this new mortification, and worse, this glimpse of what might be, only to have it all taken away. Lowering the lid of the toilet, she sat, clutching her purse, bracing herself for the next step. Warily, she took off her shoes. What did it matter? Her feet hurt, and Cinderellas midnight had come. She walked with as much dignity as she could muster through the kitchen with its big black appliances and blinding white counters. But when she started to make the turn into the living room, she saw Alex and Julie, both naked, having sex on the leather sofa. Stunned, fascinated, she stood frozen for a moment, watching the tattoos on Alexs back and shoulders ripple as his hips thrust. Under him, Julie made guttural groaning sounds. Ashamed of watching, Elizabeth backed up quietly and used the door off the kitchen to access the terrace.

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