FOR BENJAMIN
ONE

I’M COLD.

I’m freezing, actualy.

Waves are crashing against the backs of my legs, and the water, which this afternoon had been

a warm turquoise, has turned an icy black. The rocks to which I’m clinging are cutting into my fingertips and the bottoms of my feet. They’re slippery as a glacier, but I can’t let go or I’ll fal into that frigid water, in which—no exaggeration—sharks are swarming beneath me.

And since I’m wearing nothing but an extremely smal white bikini and a thigh holder for the
dagger I’ve got clenched between my teeth, I haven’t got anything to protect me from their
razorsharp teeth. I just have to hang on, or else face possible limb amputation or, at the very least, excruciating pain—worse than the pain I’m already experiencing, even. I’ve got to
complete my mission, deliver the package to the mansion perched on the cliff above me…

Or I’ll have to listen to André, the bitchy art director, go on about it al night.

“No, no, no,” André yeled from the boat where he was directing the shoot. “Viv, adjust the
gel on that spot over there. No, that one over there.”

Seriously. I should have just falen backward, into the water, and let the sharks eat me. I was fairly certain the sharks wanted to eat me, despite what Dom, the guy Stark Enterprises rented the boat from, told us. He said they were nurse sharks, perfectly harmless, and more scared of us than we were of them. He kept insisting they were attracted to the bright lights Francesco
the photographer had set up, and weren’t hanging around because they wanted me for a
midnight snack.

But really, how did he know? They’ve probably never tasted supermodel before. I’m betting
they’d find me delicious.

“Nik?” Brandon Stark called from the boat. “How you doing?”

Like he even cared. Well, I mean, I guess he cared.

But it wasn’t as if he was here for any reason other than that he wanted to snag a
ride on the corporate jet so he could spend the day cruising around the island of St. John on a Jet Ski. He was solicitous now entirely because it was expected of him.

Or because he thought it was going to help him get into my pants later. Like that’s ever
worked.

Lately, anyway.

“Oh, I’m great,” I called back. Only you couldn’t tell what I was saying, because of the dagger
stuck in my mouth. Which I couldn’t remove, because my hands were clinging to the rocks,
keeping me from becoming a shark snack. There was spit pooling at the sides of my lips. Nice.

“We just need a few more shots, Nikki,” André called. “You’re doing great.”

Someone said
something, and he added, “Can you try to stop trembling?”

“I’m not trembling,” I pointed out. “I’m shaking. With cold.”
“What did she say?” André asked Brandon. No one could understand a word coming out of 
my mouth, because of the dagger.

“How should I know?” Brandon said to André. “Nikki,” he caled to me. “What did you say?”

“I said I’m cold,” I yeled. The waves were getting bigger, wetting the bottom of 
my suit now.

My butt was numb. Great. I couldn’t feel my butt.

Why was I doing this again? Was it for a Stark brand perfume? Or a cel phone? I couldn’t 
even remember anymore.

And Lulu had said how lucky I was, getting to go to the Virgin Islands in December, when 
every other New Yorker would be—to quote her directly—freezing their butts off.

If only she knew the truth. I was freezing my butt off. Literaly.

“I don’t know what she said,” I heard Brandon teling André.

“Never mind, just shoot, Francesco,” André said to the photographer. “Nikki, we’re shooting 
again!”

I couldn’t tel what was happening, because the boat was behind me. But flashes started going 
off. I strained my neck, looking up the side of the cliff, trying to stay in my part. I tried not to think about the fact that I was in a way too skimpy white bikini. Instead, I pictured myself in body armor. I wasn’t me, Em Watts, at al. I was Lenneth Valkyrie, recruiting souls of falen
warriors and leading them to Valhala. I could do it. I could do anything.

Except that it wasn’t Valhala at the top of the cliff, just a road that tourists took on their way to the airport, with some scruffy weeds growing along it.

And I had no body armor. It made no sense, really, that a trained assassin—which is what I was apparently supposed to be—would climb a cliff barefoot in a bikini, without even a pocket where she’d be able to keep a cell phone. Except possibly in her knife holder. Maybe that’s why I was holding the knife in my mouth instead of where it would make sense, in the holder?

But then, I’d noticed that role-playing-game designers—or art directors—never considered practicality when outfitting their characters and models.

You know what else would have made sense? Photographing me in a nice warm studio back in New York and then computer-imposing the image of the cliff and the waves and the moonlight around me.

But Francesco wanted to inject realism into his shots. That’s why Stark hired him. Only the best for Stark Enterprises.

The sharks that were swarming below me, waiting to eat me when I fell off the stupid cliff face, were superrealistic.

“You’re doing great, Nikki,” Francesco called, clicking away. “I can really see the
grim
determination on your face—”

I vowed that when I got off this cliff, I was going to take the knife and plunge it into one of Francesco’s eyebals.

Except that the knife blade was made of plastic.

But I bet it’d stil do the job just fine.

“—the sheer desperation of a girl reduced by circumstances to her most fundamental self,”

Francesco went on, “as she struggles for survival in a world where everyone and everything seems to be pitted against her—”

The funny thing was, Francesco had basicaly just described my daily existence.

“I think she’s supposed to be happy, actualy,” André said, sounding concerned. “Because she

knows she’s wearing Stark brand deodorant, and that gives girls the confidence they need to

get the job done.”

Oh. So this was a deodorant ad.

“Happy, Nikki,” André caled. “Be happy! We’re in the islands! You should be having a good
time with this!”

I knew André was right. I should have been having a good time with this. What did I have to

be so unhappy about, anyway? I had everything a girl my age could want: I had a great career
as the Face of Stark Enterprises, for which I was more than well compensated. I had my own
two-bedroom loft in a landmark building in downtown Manhattan, which I shared with the
most adorable miniature poodle in the history of time, plus a hilarious—though I’m not sure she meant to be—celebutante roommate who routinely got us into all the best party spots in town.

I was rich. I had a designer wardrobe in my overstuffed closets, and Frette sheets on my king-
size bed, an en suite master bath with a Jacuzzi tub, a gourmet chef’s kitchen with black granite counters and all Sub-Zero appliances, and a full-time housekeeper slash masseuse who also, I recently discovered, knew how to give (almost) painless waxes.

I was even still doing pretty well in school (despite the late nights and oh-so-painful early
mornings, thanks to that celebutante roommate).

And, okay, my straight-A average was pretty much shot due to the fact that my employer kept
ripping me out of class to send me to some tropical island to wave my butt over a bunch of
sharks so he could have my picture taken in the dark.

But if I spent every spare minute of my time studying, I could maybe pass the eleventh grade.

Not too shabby for a girl who had spent a month of this past semester in a coma.

So why was I so freaking depressed?

“Make her look happy,” I heard André say to Brandon, who obliged by calling
out, “Hey,

Nik! This is just like that time you and I were in Mustique together last year, remember? And

you were doing that shoot for British Vogue, and we had that private cabana? And we drank

al that Goldschläger? Then we went skinny-dipping? God, we had the best time…”

That was when I remembered. Why I was so depressed, I mean.

That was also when I let go of the cliff face.

It was just that, suddenly, being eaten by sharks seemed preferable to hearing the rest of

Brandon’s story.

Because I’d heard a lot of similar stories over the past month—not just from Brandon, but

from guys al over Manhattan—and I had a pretty good idea how it was going to turn out. For

a seventeen-year-old—and one who was alegendy going out with her employer’s only son—

Nikki Howard had certainly had a lot of male companions.

I heard screams from the boat. But a part of me didn’t care.

I hit the water backward. It was even colder than I’d imagined it would be. Al the breath was

sucked from my body, and the shock was so intense, for a second I wondered if a shark had

bitten me in half. I knew from a documentary Christopher and I had once watched that a
shark’s teeth were so sharp, their victims didn’t even feel that initial crunch. They often weren’t aware they’d been injured…not until they were surrounded by the warm current of their own blood.

Bone-chilling cold wasn’t the only thing I experienced as I hit the water, though. I was also plunged into darkness. At least at first. Until my vision adjusted to the murky water, and I saw that the lights from the boat had lit up the ocean around me. That was when I knew I hadn’t been bitten in half. There weren’t any swirling clouds of blood around me. Just dark blobs I realized were nurse sharks, swimming frantically to get away from me. I guess Dom had been right—they were more scared of us than we were of them. I could also see my own hair, swaying like golden seaweed around me. They’d rowed me over to the cliff so carefully in a rubber dinghy just forty-five minutes earlier so as to keep my hair—and the swimsuit—from getting wet.

And now I’d ruined everything. Vanessa, the stylist who’d worked for nearly an hour to get my blond tresses perfect, was going to be pissed when I resurfaced, wet as a mermaid.

If I resurfaced.

Except…well, the truth was, it was kind of nice down there. Cold, yeah. But peaceful. Quiet.
Mermaids had the right idea. What was Ariel thinking, wanting to live on land, anyway?

It was totaly amazing, and for a second or two, I forgot about how cold and miserable I was,

and that I couldn’t feel my butt. Oh, and that I couldn’t breathe, and was probably drowning.

But then, what did I have to live for, anyway? Sure, it was great, I guess, having access to the Stark Enterprises private plane and not having to do my own dishes and getting al the free lip gloss I could ever want.

But I’d never actualy cared about lip gloss.

The fact was, I was being forced to work for a corporation I was pretty sure was responsible

for turning America into one endless, souless strip mal.

And the guy I liked didn’t know I was alive. Literaly.

And if I told him I wasn’t dead, Stark Enterprises, who I was pretty sure was spying on me

every chance they got, were going to throw my parents in jail.

And, oh, yeah: My brain has been removed from my body and put into someone else’s.

So what was the point of living? I mean, realy?

I figured I’d just stay down there. It was less stressful, in a lot of ways, than my real life. And that was no exaggeration.

The next thing I knew, though, there was an enormous splash beside me. And suddenly

Brandon, fully clothed, was swimming toward me, and had grabbed me, and was pulling me—
gasping and choking—to the surface, and then pulling me to the boat.

I was a little angry. And also shivering uncontrollably.

Okay, I guess I didn’t really want to live on the bottom of the ocean.

But I didn’t need to be rescued, either. I wasn’t really going to stay under there until my lungs filed and I choked to death on brackish seawater.

I don’t think.

When I looked past Brandon’s taut arm muscles as he towed me back to the boat, I saw my

agent’s assistant peering at me worryingly from the bow.

“Oh, my God, Nikki, are you okay?” Shauna cried. Cosabela, whom she was clutching in her

arms, was barking hysterically. Cosabela. I’d forgotten about Cosabela. How could I have

been so selfish? Who’d have taken care of Cosabela? Lulu isn’t responsible enough. She

forgets to feed herself half the time (except for mojitos and popcorn). No way would she

remember to feed a tiny dog.

Shauna had asked a good question. Was I okay? That was something I’d been asking myself

for a while now.

Sometimes I wondered if I’d ever be okay again.

“Nikki,” I heard Francesco call out from the boat. “Thank God. It’s all right, though. I got the shot.”

Great. Not: Nikki, thank God, you’re all right. But: Nikki, thank God, it’s all right;
I got the shot.

God forbid he might not have.

Because Stark Enterprises would never have let any of us go home otherwise.

Not until we’d got the shot.
I WAS ALONE IN MY HOTEL ROOM (WELL, alone except for Cosabela, who wouldn’t stop licking the salt water from my face), attempting to defrost in my balcony’s private hot tub.

Brandon and the rest of the people from the photo shoot had gone off for another one of their thousand-dollar sashimi dinners—expensed to Brandon’s father, bilionaire Robert Stark, of course—at the hotel restaurant downstairs. I’d declined joining them in favor of the hot tub, a burger from room service, and a few rounds of Journeyquest in front of my MacBook Air.

Listening to them gossip about the Olsen twins and then dancing to technopop, which I knew would follow, didn’t seem all that appealing after what I’d been through.

Actually, it never seemed all that appealing to me…although Brandon had stood outside my door for a long time, begging me to reconsider, while I’d shivered. I’d finally convinced him to leave only by saying I’d come down later…a total lie.

Which was why, when Nikki’s cel phone played the first few bars of “Barracuda,” I was sure it was him calling.

It’s embarrassing to have “Barracuda” as a ringtone. But I’d never gotten around to changing it. Actually, since I’d never gotten over my suspicion that Nikki’s Stark brand cel phone was
bugged (her Stark brand PC had had tracking software on it—why wouldn’t Stark be listening

in on her phone cals, too?), I’d just never bothered to take the time to figure out how to work her phone beyond hitting the delete button. I simply avoided using it most of the time,

preferring instead to make my personal cals on the iPhone I’d bought with one of Nikki’s credit cards.

I checked the caler ID (I’d totally learned not to pick up unless I recognized the name.

Otherwise I’d find myself at the receiving end of a long harangue about why I hadn’t caled in

so long and how much someone with a name like Eduardo was just dying to fly to Paris with me again) and was surprised to see that it wasn’t Brandon at al, but Lulu.

“What?” I said. We stopped being polite with each other the night she and Brandon

kidnapped me from the hospital after my brain transplant in a misguided attempt to “rescue” me.

“Um,” Lulu said. “There was a guy here to see you.”

“Lulu.” In the short time that I’d lived with Lulu, I’d come to love her like a sister. So I’d be the first person to admit she’s short a few brain cels. “There’s always a guy there to see me.”

It was sad, but true. The loft we shared was like guy central. The only guy who’d never
stopped by our loft to see me was the one guy I actualy longed to have there.

And he hadn’t seemed to have made up his mind about whether or not he liked me yet. At

least if the weird looks he kept throwing me in first-period Public Speaking were any

indication.

Then again, lately he was throwing McKayla Donofrio weird looks in class al the time, too, so

this might have meant nothing.

“This one was different,” Lulu said.

That piece of information caused me to sit up straighter in the hot tub.

“No kidding?” I’d gotten a bit pruny from being in the water so long. Plus my hands were wet,

so I almost dropped the cel phone. “What did he want?”

“Duh. To talk to you.”

“I know,” I said with forced patience. You needed a lot of patience when dealing with Lulu. It was like dealing with a five-year-old. “But what about? I mean, did he say what he wanted?”

Lulu was chewing gum. Loudly. In my ear. “He just said you’d know. And that it was

important and that he needed to see you and that he’d be back. He didn’t leave his name.”

My shoulders slumped with disappointment. It wasn’t Christopher. I mean, Christopher would

have left his name. He was like that.
Which meant it could only have been another one of them.

Seriously, you’d think they’d give up already. Just how long were these scam artists going to

keep at it? Really, announce on the news that a wealthy celebrity had amnesia and you

wouldn’t believe what kind of scum crawled out of the bowels of the F train tunnel, claiming to be a close friend, or even a relation. It was unbelievable how many first cousins Nikki Howard apparently had.

“He said you’d know what it was about,” Lulu informed me.

“How am I supposed to know what it’s about if I don’t even know his name?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Lulu said. “But Karl showed me what the guy looked like on the security camera. And he wasn’t like all the other ones. This one was young. And kinda hot. And he

didn’t have any visible neck tattoos.”

My heart skipped a beat. And I didn’t think it was because I’d been in the hot tub longer than the twenty minutes recommended by the sign posted beside the timer on the balcony wal.

“Young?” I didn’t want to get my hopes up. I mean, they’d already been dashed so many

times before when Christopher had glanced my way in Public Speaking, only to turn out to be

looking at the clock, or some homeless guy out the window, or McKayla Donofrio. “Wait,

Lulu…was this guy blond?”
There was a pause as Lulu appeared to be trying to remember. “Yeah. Blondish, anyway.”

Good enough. “Was he tal?” I asked.

“Uh-huh,” Lulu said.

I thought I must be having a heart attack, which the hot tub regulations explicitly warned could happen. At least in the pregnant or elderly, of which I was neither.

But I had major surgery a couple months ago, so you never know. Beside me, Cosabela was licking my cheek eagerly where some of the water from the hot tub had splashed onto my face.

I had the jets on ful, hoping to ease the cuts on my hands and feet caused by hanging on to the cliff face. Being a model, I was learning, could be painful, sometimes even life-threatening work.

“Was he built?” I asked. I’d started scrambling to get out of the hot tub. I didn’t need to die of a heart attack just when my dream was finally about to come true. And okay, I knew an hour ago I’d been seriously considering permanent residence under the sea. But not really. It had been pretty cold down there.

Also, I did kind of want to see what happened in Realms, the newest version of Journeyquest.

The only problem was, in an exclusive deal with the game’s designer, you could only get Realms if you bought Stark Quark, the new PC Stark Enterprises was unveiling for the
holidays. Journeyquest fans hadn’t been too mad about that. Much. “Like, not built-built,
but…fit?”

“It was hard to tel on the security camera,” Lulu said. “But I wouldn’t kick him out, let’s put it that way.”

“Oh, my God.” I snatched a towel off the balcony railing. My heart was racing like I’d just

 gotten off the treadmill (which was something I had to do regularly now, in order stay in shape.

But it was okay, because Nikki’s body enjoyed working out, unlike my old one, which
despised it). I couldn’t believe it. After al this time—weeks now, I’d been waiting—

Christopher was finaly coming around.

And I had to be in the Virgin Islands when it happened!

“Lulu. Lulu. That was Christopher! It had to be!” Now that I was out of the hot
tub, I’d

stopped feeling like I was going to have a heart attack. My heart was stil slamming into the

back of my ribs, but it was doing it in a happy, anticipatory way. Like Bang-bang, Christopher wants to see you! Bang-bang, Christopher finaly gets it! I had gone out of my way these past

few weeks to subtly convince him that while on the outside I might seem like the perfect face

of a souless corporation intent on sucking the lifeblood from smal businesses everywhere, on
the inside, I was stil his cool, video-game-loving, soulless-corporation-hating best friend, Em.

Without actualy saying so, of course, or I might have invoked the ful wrath of Robert Stark

and his high-powered legal team. While I was positive I could trust Christopher with the truth, and that he’d never tel—if I could even get him to believe me, which was a whole other story

—what I couldn’t do was trust that my teling him wouldn’t be overheard somehow by Stark.

Sometimes they even seemed to know what I was thinking. Don’t ask me how.

Stil, it hadn’t been easy, trying to get Christopher to see that I was Em behind Nikki

Howard’s perfect blue eyes, especialy what with McKayla Donofrio constantly trying to

interrupt me every five seconds (what was with her new crush on Christopher? He cut his hair

and suddenly even the head of Tribeca Alternative’s Business Club thought he was hot) and

my having to refer to Journeyquest almost constantly, to hold his attention.

Was that what had lured him to the loft? It had to be. Either Christopher was finaly catching

on that I was his old friend Em Watts in Nikki Howard’s body, or he was starting to think I

was stalking him. Maybe he’d stopped by to tel me he was dating McKayla and to gently

recommend I seek counseling.
Wait. No. I refused to stoop to such negative thinking.

“Can you just ask the doormen to tel him that I’m coming home?” I said to Lulu.

“Christopher, I mean? If he comes back? That I’ll be home as soon as I possibly can?”

“Sure,” Lulu said, with a yawn. “I mean, I guess. But I don’t see why you can’t just call him

and tel him yourself. Invite him to the holiday party—”

Lulu had been planning this holiday party for weeks. Apparently, she and Nikki had been

famous for it, and for their over-the-top entertaining in general. The party had been a huge

success (the two years the girls had had it so far), with paparazzi showing up and photos from it appearing on Page Six and even in Vogue, and their friends loved it. Lulu herself hadn’t been able to concentrate on anything else since December first, much to the chagrin of her agent and manager, who were trying to get her to finish her album, which was supposed to drop

sometime in the spring, if she ever got around to finishing it.

There was just one little problem with Lulu’s holiday party this year, a problem that she didn’t know about yet: I wasn’t going to be there.

I didn’t know quite how I was going to break this news to her. Basicaly, Lulu didn’t have any

family except for me (or, rather, Nikki), since her parents were divorced and seemingly

completely uninterested in her. I felt terrible leaving her alone for the holidays, especially for her big blowout party.

But what was I supposed to do? I had a previous commitment.
In reply to her question about Christopher, “I’m not supposed to know his number,” I reminded her. “Remember? I wonder how he found out where I live.”

“It’s not hard,” Lulu said. “Al anybody has to do is look for the lines of depressed-looking Eurotrash hipsters hanging around outside, wanting to know why you won’t give them the time of day…or the money they want you to think you owe them, because they’re your long-lost unemployed cousin.”

I’d towed off and was throwing on a pair of jeans and a cami over my bra and panties—no easy feat while clutching a cel phone and trying not to step on an excited miniature poodle.

But you’d be surprised how fast you learn to get dressed in all kinds of conditions when people are constantly stripping you with absolutely no privacy whatsoever.

“Lulu,” I said. “Do we have to talk about my faux relatives right now?”

“Whatever,” Lulu said. “That one dude was kind of hot, in a greasy way.”

“He was my fake cousin,” I reminded her. “Seriously, Lulu, what am I going to do? Brandon wants to take me Jet Sking tomorrow.”

“What?” Lulu sounded confused. “Brandon wants to what?”

“Take me Jet Sking,” I repeated. “He says he thinks I’m wound too tight.”

“Wound too tight?” Now Lulu sounded incredulous. “Why would he think that?
The spirit

transfer thing again?”

“Uh…” I didn’t want to tel her the truth—the part about Brandon having recently dragged me

up from the ocean floor, after my having made no attempt to save myself from drowning. It

was too weird. Plus, since we were talking over Nikki’s Stark brand phone (which I was sure

was bugged), and there was every chance someone from Brandon’s dad’s office was listening

in on our conversation, it was a bad idea to be talking about any of this—especially my “spirit transfer”—anyway. So I just said, “Yeah. I guess so.”

“But you got the shot, right?”

“Of course we got the shot,” I said.


leaves tomorrow, or else.” Stark Enterprises flew its employees, including me, around on one

of several private jets, a move that’s time efficient for them but hardly friendly toward the

environment. My carbon footprint was now huge. I’d had to donate large amounts of Nikki’s

money in an attempt to offset it.

“But technically it’s Brandon’s jet,” I reminded her. “Or his dad’s, really, but whatever. How

do I talk him into leaving early?”
“You don’t talk him into leaving early,” Lulu said. “You tell him you have to leave tomorrow, and to make sure the plane is ready. Then you do that thing you do with your tongue—”

“Oh, my God,” I interrupted quickly. This was definitely not a conversation for Stark legal, or whoever might be listening in on Nikki Howard’s phone calls—if, indeed, anyone was—to overhear. “Lulu!”

“Or you could just get back together with him,” Lulu said, sounding as if the idea had just occurred to her. “I mean, you know that’s what he wants. He’s been a wreck ever since the two of you broke up. But I don’t see how getting back together with him would work, since you like another guy…”

“Okay, Lulu,” I said. She’d obviously been eating way too much microwave popcorn again. Some days when I wasn’t around, that’s all she ate, because she couldn’t cook. “I have to go now…”

“Too bad you can’t just leave tonight,” Lulu said, with a sigh. “But that would mean flying commercial.”

She uttered the words “flying commercial” in the same revolted tone my sister, Frida, would say “wear non-designer jeans.”
“Ooooh,” Lulu squealed in my ear, having apparently just thought of something else. “I’m

getting the caterer to serve oysters Rockefeller, and you know what oysters are? An

aphrodisiac, that’s what. Once Christopher has one, he won’t be able to resist you!”

This wasn’t the time or place to break it to her that I wasn’t going to be around for the

holidays (also oysters, so not my thing), so I just said “of course” and hung up. Then I grabbed my room key and headed out to look for Brandon, Cosabela trotting along after me.

I found him—or rather, Cosabela did—sitting on one of the thickly cushioned chairs on the

empty moonlit deck outside the hotel bar with his face buried in the cleavage of the restaurant hostess.

“Excuse me,” I said, torn between mortification and amusement.

Brandon dropped the hostess in surprise. She fell off the deck chair, landing on the hard

terrazzo deck with an Oof!

I gasped and said, “Oh, I’m so sorry!” Cosy barked excitedly as the hostess—her name tag

read rhonda—rubbed her backside and glared at me from the ground.

“Nikki.” Brandon stood up and stepped over Rhonda as if she weren’t even there. “Are you

al right? What are you doing here? I thought you said you were going to bed.”

“I am,” I said. “Or at least, I’m going to soon. Are you al right?” I asked
Rhonda, since

Brandon seemed to have forgotten her existence.

“I’m fine,” Rhonda said, giving Brandon a withering glance he didn’t even notice.

“Is there something wrong?” Brandon wanted to know. Only he was asking me, not the

woman whose backside he’d nearly broken in the process of dropping her. “Can I get you

something? Dinner? Are you hungry?”

“No,” I said. “I’m fine. I just needed to ask you something—”

“Anything.” Brandon looked eager. “What is it?”

“Um,” I said, bending down and scooping Cosy up to give Rhonda a chance to escape, since

the dog kept trying to lick the hostess’s face as she attempted to climb to her feet. “It can

wait…”

“No, really.” Brandon didn’t seem to care at all about Rhonda anymore, or her efforts to

become vertical. “What?”

Behind him, Rhonda had gotten up, smoothed out her tight black skirt, and lifted the tray on

which she’d been serving Brandon his after-dinner drink when things had apparently gotten…

wel, cozy between them. As she walked away, her head held high, I got a hint of her perfume
wafting back toward us on the warm tropical breeze.

It was Nikki, currently available at a special holiday rate of forty-nine ninety-nine at any Stark Megastore. It cost Stark a couple of dollars a bottle to make (in China, of course), less than

that to ship, and smeled so cloying I wouldn’t actualy have worn it in a milion years.

“It’s just that I know you mentioned wanting to leave the day after tomorrow,” I said. “But I

was wondering if we could leave a little earlier instead.”

“Earlier?” Brandon seemed confused. Whatever it was he’d apparently been expecting me to

ask, it wasn’t this. I had a suspicion Lulu had been right, and that he’d been hoping I was

going to ask him if he wanted to get back together. It was a hope he’d been harboring for

some time. Sadly, it was never going to come true…Brandon might have been Nikki’s type,

but he just wasn’t mine. At least, not while there was stil hope that Christopher would

someday come around. “How much earlier?”

“Oh, not too much,” I said. “I was thinking, say, tomorrow morning, around nine.”

“But that’s when Dad had us origanaly scheduled to leave,” Brandon said, looking astonished.

“I was going to blow that off and take you on a Jet Ski tour of the island instead.”
During which, I was sure, he’d been hoping I’d fall head over heels in love with him.

“Yeah,” I said. “And that’s so sweet of you. But something’s come up, and I really need to get back to town—”

“And snorkeling,” Brandon said. “I was thinking we could go snorkeling tomorrow after lunch.”

Well, I couldn’t really blame him for this. I had shown a certain affinity for liking it underwater.

“That sounds so fun,” I said. “But I really need to get home.”

“Why?” Brandon asked. His dark eyebrows had lowered in a manner that, if I hadn’t known better, I might have described as menacing. Except that Brandon didn’t have a menacing bone in his body.

“It’s personal,” I said. I wasn’t about to elaborate further. At least, not to a guy who had, I was pretty sure, never read an entire book in his life. Not counting the Jet Ski operational manual.

“But… I don’t want to leave early.” Brandon flopped back down into the deck chair he’d popped out of, and reached for his drink. It was clear from his attitude that he was ready to argue. And that, unless I was ready to be his girlfriend, he wasn’t going anywhere.
Great. I should have known it would come to this.

No way, however, was I doing the thing with my tongue. Whatever it was.

I slipped onto the deck chair beside Brandon’s and leaned forward, even though I knew my cami gapped in the front when I did this. I was wearing a bra, of course, so it wasn’t like he was seeing anything he hadn’t been seeing a few hours earlier when I was in my bikini.

Still, he couldn’t seem to make himself not look. It really was true…the power of the cami was not to be underestimated, something Frida had tried to drill into my head years before, but I would never listen, insisting that, as a feminist, I wouldn’t wear garments that objectified the female form. Lulu was the one who’d pointed out that camis don’t objectify but enhance the parts all women should be proud of, no matter what their size.

“Does your father know you’re keeping the corporate jet an extra twenty-four hours, Brandon?” I asked sweetly.

Brandon went right on looking.

“Who cares what my dad thinks?” he asked, a little sulenly. “It’s not like we don’t have other jets. He can use one of those if he needs one…”

“Don’t you feel guilty about all the money this is costing your father, when we’ve already got the shot? Especially when it’s just so you can go snorkeling and Jet Skiing?” I asked.

“No,” Brandon said, watching as I traced a little circle on his knee—a trick I’d
seen Lulu perform numerous times on guys who’d bought her drinks at the nightclub Cave. Did I feel bad performing it on Brandon? A little. Did I hope it worked? Totally. “My dad and I aren’t exactly close, you know.”

“I know,” I said sympathetically.

“My mom left years ago for that ashram, and I’ve barely seen her since,” Brandon went on, slurring his words a little. I could tell he’d had too much to drink. As usual.

“I know,” I said again. I actually didn’t know this personaly. But I’d read an article about it once in a People magazine Frida left lying around. “Look, I can’t speak for the rest of the crew, but personaly, I’d prefer it if we leave tomorrow as scheduled. If we don’t”—I took my hand away from his knee, and leaned back abruptly, taking away his pleasant view down my shirt. This was another strategy Lulu had taught me. Giveth a little, then taketh away. But you have to time it just right—“I’m going to leave on the first commercial flight I can get.”

“Commercial?” Like Lulu, Brandon seemed horrified by the idea of my flying commercial. So horrified that he caught my hand and, with a quick movement, tugged me toward him. Hard.

“Now what’s so important back in New York that you, Nikki Howard, would fly commercial?” he demanded.
Um…oops. I always seemed to forget—maybe because he so wasn’t my type, with his frat-
boy good looks and apparent lack of interest in anything but Bacardi and the latest hip-hop
artist he was promoting—that Brandon was Nikki Howard’s ex. Also that the two of them—
at least according to the tabloid clippings I’d found in Nikki’s room (she’d saved every article ever printed about her, in a drawer at the bottom of her night-stand) —had been hot and heavy
for at least a year. The last thing I needed was Brandon getting jealous that the reason I
wanted to get back to Manhattan so badly was because the guy I’m in love with might finally
be coming around.

“Nothing,” I said innocently. “I just have to get back to school. Remember? I’m still in school?
I have finals this week.”

Brandon’s grip on my hand got a little looser. Instead of clinging possessively, he started
sliding his fingers up my arm.


As soon as his fingers reached the back of my neck and curled into the heavy damp tangles of
my hair, I realized we were going to have a problem. I won’t deny it: It felt good, having his fingers there. That was the problem: Brandon knew it. This was one of the many issues I had
with what Stark Enterprises had done to me, putting my brain inside Nikki Howard’s body. I didn’t like Brandon Stark—at least, not that way.

But Nikki Howard liked Brandon Stark—or at least her body did. My eyes drifted closed—

totaly against my wil—as Brandon began to gently knead the place where my skul met my spine.

This was so wrong! Brandon knew Nikki Howard was defenseless in the face of a good neck massage. Her entire body, I’d discovered shortly after a hairstylist first tried it on me, went limp when anyone started kneading the place where her spine met the back of her neck.

Brandon obviously knew this, and was taking unfair advantage of the situation.

“It seems like school is al you ever think about anymore,” he went on. “That and this Stark-enterprises-is-ruining-the-country crap.”

“It’s not crap,” I murmured as his fingers went on kneading. “Your dad’s company is contributing to global warming as wel as to the decay of smal-town America—”

“Man, it’s sexy when you talk al revolutionary like that,” Brandon murmured back.

His voice sounded so close, I opened my eyes. I was surprised to find his face directly in front of mine, his lips just an inch from my mouth.

Oh, no. It was happening again. I could feel myself leaning toward him, my body swaying
closer to his as if pushed by some unseen force...even though kissing Brandon Stark was the

last thing I wanted to do just then. Intelectually, I mean.

The thing was, it wasn’t me. I had no control over it. It was Nikki. She was just boy crazy like that.

Not that there’s anything wrong with a woman who enjoys kissing guys. Kissing guys is

fantastic. In fact, I can’t believe I spent so much of my life pre-being-Nikki not kissing guys.

The problem with Nikki was that she seemed to have spent so much of her life before my

brain was inside her kissing the wrong guys. So much time, in fact, that kissing the wrong guys had become a habit too hard to break, and was now something her body did on automatic,

without my being able to stop it.

Like right then, for instance. Before I could do anything, my mouth was on Brandon’s, and we

were ful-on making out in the exact spot where just minutes before he’d been hooking up with

Rhonda the hostess.

And I could see why Rhonda had been into him, too. Brandon’s lips were so soft, his hand

cradling the back of my head as his mouth moved insistently against mine.

And I could feel that thing happening, that thing that always started happening whenever a guy started kissing Nikki, whether I liked him or not—which was how I’d almost ended up ruining
my relationship with Lulu a month or two earlier, by making out with her boyfriend. It was horrible, but I honestly couldn’t seem to stop myself—er, Nikki, rather. Her body began arching toward Brandon’s as if of its own accord, my hands reaching up until they were slipping along his strong, sinewy arms, then wrapping around his neck, clinging to him.

The thing was, I knew it was happening, that I was about to get lost, sucked under just like when I’d fallen into the water. I knew it was happening…

…and yet I couldn’t stop myself, any more than I could keep my head upright when someone was giving me a neck massage.

Because it wasn’t me. I swear it wasn’t me.

And how could I control someone else’s body, someone I wasn’t? At least, someone I wasn’t yet. Not entirely.

And then Brandon moved his hand, his fingers brushing the still sensitive raised scar along the back of my head. Little needles of pain shot though me. I jerked my face from his.

“Ow!” I cried.

“What?” Brandon’s expression had turned from one of desire to one of confusion. “What’d I do? Hey, what is that on your head? You have…Are those hair extensions?”

“It’s not…it’s…never mind.” I leaned back in my chair, my lips still throbbing a
little from

where he’d pressed them against his. I felt a myriad of emotions, but the primary one was

relief. I had never been so grateful for my scar. What was I doing? Making out with Brandon?

Oh, my God. Lulu had said to do the tongue thing, but seriously, I hadn’t meant to take her

literally. “J-just another reason why it would be better for us to leave tomorrow, as

scheduled.”

My voice wasn’t as steady as I might have hoped, considering the fact that I was in love with

someone else. The truth was, while I was grateful to Stark Enterprises for giving me the chance to live, I sometimes wished they’d found someone else’s body to slip my brain into…someone

not quite so…excitable as Nikki.

“Fine,” Brandon said, looking down at his own hand, as if he were expecting to see it covered

in blood.

Which was ridiculous. I’d had my stitches out weeks ago.

Only he didn’t know that.

“You know, Nik, I just don’t get you lately,” Brandon went on, eyeing me from his deck chair.

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry about that. I have…some issues. I’m working on them. But I

really do like you, Brandon.”
He raised one of those dark eyebrows. “Yeah?” he said. “How much? Enough to want to get back together? Because I gotta tel you…” There was no mistaking his tone. “I’d be up for it.”

I swallowed, feeling panic rise. This was so not what I needed…and exactly what I deserved for flirting with the boss’s son. Why had I ever thought I had the slightest idea what I was doing, playing with Brandon’s emotions the way I just had? I haven’t been Nikki long enough to know how to play the game the way she apparently used to.

“Um, that is so sweet of you, Brandon,” I said quickly. “But I think it’s probably better I stay single for now, while I work out those issues I mentioned.”

Of course, if things went the way I hoped they would when I got home, and Christopher and I got together, Brandon was going to be mad when he found out I was lying to him about the wanting to stay single thing.

But I’d cross that bridge when I got to it.

Brandon glared at me, almost as if he’d been reading my thoughts. “You’ve never been single a minute of your life,” he said. “Who’s the guy?”

“There’s no guy,” I assured him, with a laugh. I hoped the laugh didn’t sound as shaky to him as it did to me. “Honest. I’m just taking some me time right now.” I’d heard that on Oprah the other day. Would he fall for it? Maybe if I nagged him a little to do
the same. “You might want to try it as wel. I think there are things you could be doing to help convince your dad to make his company more globaly responsible.”

Brandon looked away. “My dad and I have some issues of our own,” he said tonelessly.

“Oh,” I said. “Right.” I remembered the conversation we’d had about his dad at a photo shoot

a month or two earlier. He doesn’t speak to the talent, Brandon had said. Or to me.

“I guess I’ll cal the pilot, then, if leaving early is al you want.” Brandon fumbled in the pocket of his shorts for his cel phone. He looked a little…there was no other way to describe it:

angry.

And why wouldn’t he be? It couldn’t be easy, growing up in a bilionaire’s shadow. Sure, he

had everything a guy could want.

Except his dad’s approval.

And Nikki Howard to make out with, apparently.

“Thanks, Bran,” I said, and cleared my throat. “You’re a great guy.”

“Yeah,” Brandon said, looking everywhere but at me. “That’s what they al say.”

It was amazing, I thought to myself as I walked back to my suite, Cosabel trotting along at

my heels. Thanks to the gigantic scar along the back of my head, I’d been saved from making

a pretty colossal mistake. Wel, probably. I doubt Brandon and I would realy have gotten it
But if it hadn’t been for the surgery, I wouldn’t have been in this situation in the first place.

Instead, I’d be dead.

Maybe, I thought, as I noticed how the full moon was shining down on the cold, dark water that, a few hours before, I’d been immersed in, it was time to stop feeling sorry for myself and start appreciating the fact that I was alive. Sure, my new life wasn’t perfect.

But things were starting to look up.

Funny how, at the time, I really did believe that.

As it turned out, however, I couldn’t have been more wrong.
THREE

THE BEST THING ABOUT TRAVELING ON private jets is that you don’t have to do the

getting-to-the-airport-two-hours-before-your-flight-is-scheduled-to-leave thing. You show up

five minutes before your flight is supposed to take off, and you don’t even have to go through security. They open a special gate and let your limo drive straight up to the plane, so you can just hop out with your bag (and dog, which you can let roam free, because it’s your plane…or

your boss’s plane, but whatever) and go right up the stairs to your seat. No one checks your

ticket, or your ID, or anything. They just go, “Good morning, Miss Howard,” and offer you a

glass of champagne (or, if you’re underage, orange juice).

Then, five minutes later, you take off. No safety demonstrations. No screaming babies. No

waiting in line to use the cramped Port-O-Let-style bathroom. Nothing like that.

Instead, you’ve got luxurious leather seats, shiny mahogany tables, Wi-Fi (oh, yes: that thing about how you can’t use Wi-Fi or cel phones in the air? Total bul. You completely can, when

you fly Stark Air), fresh-cut flowers, your own window, your own personal Stark brand DVD

player if you want one, with a vast library of newly released movies to choose from.

A girl could get used to this kind of lifestyle. And have difficulty going back to commercial
travel. Am I a huge hypocrite hating Stark Enterprises for what they did to me (and thousands
of small-business owners, not to mention the environment), yet choosing to fly on Robert
Stark’s private jet instead of flying commercially?

Yeah.

But if it was going to get me home to Christopher—and my new, happy life, when the two of
us started dating—eight hours earlier than if I took a commercial flight, I didn’t care.

Sooner than I would have thought possible, the Manhattan skyline came into view, shrouded in
dreary gray rain clouds beneath us. But somehow the sight of this island, sticking out of the
brackish black water of the Hudson and East rivers like a middle finger, thrilled me much more
than the white-beached tropical islands we’d just left.

I was straining my neck to see if I could catch a glimpse of Washington Square Park and my
family’s apartment building, when I got the first text on my non-Stark brand cel phone.

SOS, Frida wrote. Cal ASAP.

I was dialing her cel number before I even considered that it was my sister, Frida, to whom an emergency is Sephora running out of eyeliner. All I could think was, Dad. Heart attack. He

was, after all, a middle-aged white male who worked too hard, living in New
Haven most of the week so he could teach at Yale. We only saw him on weekends. I knew perfectly well what he ate most of the time. Dunkin’ Donut Munchkins and day-old coffee. I’d never once seen him exercise. Or consume a piece of fruit.

“Frida?” I said as soon as she picked up. I noticed Brandon, across the aisle, open an irritated eye at the frantic tone of my voice. He’d slept the whole way. Or pretended to sleep. He’d been treating me a little distantly all morning. I don’t think he’d quite gotten over what happened between us the night before—my turning down his offer to become boyfriend/girlfriend again, I mean.

He closed the single bloodshot eye he’d opened, as soon as he realized I was just on the phone and not speaking to him.

“What is it?” I asked Frida urgently, keeping my voice low, so as not to disturb my boss’s hungover son. “Is it Dad? Is everything all right?”

“What? No, it’s not Dad.” Frida, on the other end of the phone, sounded upset. “And no, everything’s not all right. It’s Mom.”

“What about Mom?” Mom? Mom was the epitome of good health. She swam laps every morning at the student gym. She ate nothing but salads, and chicken with the skin pulled off. It was almost disgusting how healthy she was. “Is she all right?”
“She’s fine,” Frida said. “Physicaly. Mentaly is questionable. She found out about
cheerleading, and now she’s trying to get me kicked off the squad.”

I slumped back in my leather seat. My relief was so great, I couldn’t even speak. Also, I

wanted to kil Frida for scaring me like that.

“Em,” Frida was saying. “You have to come over right away and try to reason with her. She

says I can’t go to cheerleading camp.”

“I’m on a plane right now,” I said, looking out the window at the Hudson River coldly winking

back at me. “I was just in the Virgin Islands, remember? So coming over isn’t really an

option.” Plus, I had something a little more important I needed to be doing than refereeing

fights between my mother and sister. True, the likelihood of Christopher stopping by again

wasn’t great—although it was Sunday, so it wasn’t like he had anything better to do. I knew

all Christopher ever did on Sunday was play Journeyquest, or maybe hang around the video

game stores, to see if they’d got in anything new on Saturday. Stil, I intended to sit home al day, just in case.

“And isn’t it a little precipitate to be worrying about cheerleading camp now?” I asked her.

“It’s December. You have months until summer to wear her down.” And possibly
lose interest

in cheerleading and develop an interest in something more cerebrally challenging, such as

rocket science, I thought but didn’t add aloud.

“This is a week-long cheer camp to perfect our routine over winter break,” Frida explained.

“In Florida. Everybody on the team goes. Only Mom’s saying over her dead body will she let

her daughter go to something called cheer camp.”

“Aren’t we going to Grandma’s for winter break?” I asked, as Cosabela, who loved riding in

planes almost as much as she loved riding in cars, decided the view from my lap wasn’t

exciting enough and bounded across the aisle to see what was going on outside Brandon’s

window, severely racking him and also waking him up again in a manner I would have to call

not very pleasant. I mouthed Sorry to him, but he only gave me an aggrieved look.

There was an uncomfortable silence over the phone. I thought we’d hit a patch of no-service

until Frida said, “Well, yeah. We are. Cheer camp doesn’t start until after the holidays. But,

Em—”

“Problem solved, then,” I said. “Look, I’ll give Mom a call. She should be happy you’re
making friends, staying physically fit, and doing something extracurricular that will look good

on your college apps. I guess. And okay, soccer or lacrosse might have been preferable, but

—"

“Calling her isn’t good enough,” Frida interrupted. “You have to come over. She has to hear it from you in person. Otherwise she’s never going to let me go—”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll be over after I drop off all my stuff. I have presents for you guys, anyway.”

Holiday shopping had moved to a whole new level now that I actually had money to spend.

Being able to buy my family the kind of gifts I knew they’d always longed for but were never able to afford was awesome. It truly was better to give than to receive. I couldn’t wait to see Frida’s face when she opened the tiny black velvet box I was giving her.

Frida didn’t say anything, which was a bit weird for her, since she rarely kept her mouth shut.

But it could have been that she was just so overwhelmed with gratitude that I was bearing gifts, she didn’t know what to say.

Yeah. Right.

I assumed from her unusual silence that we’d flown through some sort of cell phone dead zone, so I hung up and went to fish my dog from Nikki Howard’s ex-boyfriend’s lap.
Brandon didn’t look very grateful. I couldn’t blame him. Cosabela really needed some
obedience training.

Although it was hard being cooped up in a plane, as Cosy illustrated when the first thing she
did after we disembarked was pee all over the tarmac. She did the same thing when Karl the
doorman opened the door of the town car that let me off from Teterboro, the airport where
Robert Stark kept his jets. Cosy popped out and trotted over to the planters outside 240
Centre Street. It was embarrassing, but where else was she going to do it?

“Welcome back, Miss Howard,” Karl said as I stepped out into the freezing drizzle that was
coming down from the leaden sky overhead. It was a far cry from the balmy breezes of the
Virgin Islands, and no one was exactly rushing over to give me a piña colada like they did at
the hotel back in St. John. “I hope you had a nice time while you were away.”

“It was great,” I said automatically. I was freaking out, as always, about the dog. Karl must
have been able to tel, because he said, “Oh, I’ll clean that up, Miss Howard. You just hurry
on inside, where it’s warm. Oh, I think you should know…you have a visitor waiting in the
lobby. I wasn’t sure if…wel, you’ll see.”
My heart did that flip-floppy thing, even though I told myself it couldn’t be him. I mean,

Christopher was not the type to sit in the lobby of a girl’s apartment building and wait for her to come home.

Still, when I walked into the lobby and saw a flash of short blond hair, I couldn’t help thinking, It’s him! Oh, God, it’s him!

And then I practically started shaking, I was suddenly so nervous.

Which was ridiculous. I mean, I’d been best friends with the guy since forever. I’d had burping contests with him, for God’s sake. And okay, that was in the seventh grade, but still. Why was

I getting nervous now? I was the one in a new body, and he hadn’t even figured it out yet,

despite my once leaving him a very obvious clue. He was still so busy missing the old me—the

one he’d never even noticed until it was too late—that he hadn’t realized (until now,

apparently) that reports of my death had been greatly exaggerated.

So why was I the one turning to Jel-O?

But I couldn’t even bring myself to look his way. Instead, because I couldn’t deal with the

situation and was trying to play it cool like Lulu had once advised me to do, I pretended not to notice him, and stumbled my way to the elevator, trying to sashay like Nikki Howard but

knowing I was more likely stumbling like Em Watts, Cosabela scampering at my heels, until I

heard a masculine voice call out, “Nikki.”
I didn’t want to look too eager. Guys hate that (according to Lulu, my resident expert on all things guy). I had to let him take the lead. I had to let him think coming here was all his idea (which it was, actually). I had to—

“Nikki.”

Wait a minute. That wasn’t him.

That was not Christopher’s voice.

I looked around. There was a tall blond guy standing in the lobby of my building, it was true.

He was built, just like Lulu had said on the phone. And he was looking right at me.

But he was dressed in navy fatigues.

Christopher would never join the military, considering his father, the Commander, a political science professor at NYU, had drilled into his son a deep-rooted mistrust of all authority figures. And, seeing as how he was only in eleventh grade, like me, Christopher couldn’t join the navy even if he wanted to.

On the blond guy’s face was an expression of extreme dislike.

The dislike appeared to be for me. There was no one else around at whom it could be directed.

Great. What had I ever done to Blondie? I’d never even seen him before.

“Um,” I said, quickly stabbing the up button for the elevator. “I’m sorry. Are you
speaking to me?”

The expression of dislike on Blondie’s face deepened. He looked as if he was twenty, maybe

a little older. There were a lot of insignias on his uniform. But I was too transfixed by the
dislike on his face to drag my gaze away from his to read what they said.

“Cut the act, Nik,” he said, stalking toward me. His voice was deep. I noticed a very faint
twinge of Southern accent in it. “That amnesia thing may work on all your fashionable friends,

but it’s not going to work on me.”

I blinked at him, then glanced toward the building’s front doors. Karl was still outside, cleaning up Cosabela’s mess. Which was unfortunate, because it was his job to prevent unpleasant

scenes like this. I will admit that Blondie didn’t look like the usual ponytailed hipsters who

showed up, demanding money from me or they’d go to the Star with their story of our torrid

night in Vegas, or wherever.

But why else was he here?

“I’m sorry,” I said, mentally rehearsing the speech I’d had to say so many times over the past

few weeks when I’d run into Nikki’s so-called friends and relatives who’d confronted me in

the exact same way. “But because of my amnesia, which I can assure you really is real, I don’t
remember who you are. You’re going to have to introduce yourself. Your name is?”

Blondie’s blue eyes—they reminded me of someone’s. Only who?—which were pretty cold
to start out with, got even colder as he stared at me.

“Seriously,” he said. “That’s what you’re going to go with? The amnesia thing? You really
think that’s going to work on me? Me?”

He said “the amnesia thing” like it was some kind of lie Nikki had tried on him before. And
apparently it didn’t work the first time.

“It’s not a thing,” I said, sticking out my chin. Although, of course, it was. Considering I didn’t have amnesia. I just wasn’t Nikki Howard. Except legally. “I really don’t have any idea who
you are. If you choose not to believe that, I suggest you leave before I have to do something
we’re both going to regret.”

“Like what?” he asked. “Cal the cops?”

Since that was exactly what I was going to have Karl do—although it seemed like a shame to
have to do that to a member of the U.S. military services—I didn’t say anything. Blondie stared at me some more.

“My God,” he said after a minute, incredulity slowly dawning across his handsome, if
somewhat tired-looking face. “You’d really do it, wouldn’t you? Cal the cops on me.”
“I told you,” I said. The elevator, to my relief, had finally come. “I don’t have the slightest idea who you are. Now, if you don’t mind, I just got home from a shoot, and I’m really tired, and I still have to unpack—”

To my total surprise, he reached out and grabbed my arm. His grip was hard. There was no way I could break it if I tried. And I wasn’t about to try, because I wanted to keep all my limbs in one piece.

Now I was starting to get scared. Karl was nowhere in sight and the lobby was empty, unusual for a Sunday afternoon when the rest of the tenants of our upwardly mobile, $10,000-a-month-rent condo building tended to be running off to their workouts or to Starbucks for their latte fixes. Who was this creepy guy, with his cold-eyed stare and military uniform?

“I said to cut the act, Nik,” he said in a voice as hard as his grip. Cosabela, at my feet, was beginning to sense something was wrong, and was whining nervously. Blondie ignored her.

“You’re embarrassed to admit you know me? Fine. You always were. But how could you do what you did to her? She disappears, and you don’t even care? You know I couldn’t keep tabs on her while I was in a submarine. And now she’s gone. No one even knows where she is, not even her best friends, Leanne and Mary Beth. They haven’t heard from her. Don’t even
try to make out like any of this isn’t your fault.”

He stared at me accusingly, but I honestly had no idea what he was talking about. Everything he was saying sounded like gibberish to me. Leanne? Mary Beth? And who was gone? Who was she?

Whoever she was, she seemed very important to him. So important that his gaze no longer looked cold, but was shining with emotion.

An emotion that looked to me a lot like hate.

For me.

“Whoa,” I said, holding up a single hand—the one not attached to the arm he was cutting off all the circulation to with his death grip. “Slow down. I have no idea what you’re talking about.

Who’s Leanne? Who’s Mary Beth? Who are you? And who is this missing woman you’re talking about?”

The last question seemed to slam him like a fist. He was so shocked he actually dropped my arm and took a step back, staring at me like I was some sort of strange and not particularly attractive breed of animal that had just been unveiled at the zoo. Maybe in the reptile house.

“She is your mother,” he said finally, pointing to one of the insignias on his chest, which I now saw, belatedly, said HOWARD. “And I’m your big brother, Steven.
Now do you remember me, Nikki?”
FOUR

WELL, THAT DID KIND OF EXPLAIN THE nasty looks he kept giving me.

And continued to give me, now that I’d brought him up to the loft. Not that I blamed him. It wasn’t like I knew what to say to him, exactly, and was nervously buzzing around, making him

an espresso from our deluxe cappuccino/espresso maker, which Lulu had only recently

showed me how to work. I wasn’t sure what else to do, other than offer him coffee, realy. I mean, I’d never had a big brother before. Let alone a big brother who was realy mad at me

for losing our mother, for whom apparently Nikki was responsible while he was on duty.

He didn’t seem too enthused about the espresso, but at least he’d finally accepted the amnesia explanation. Sort of. Lulu was a big help in this capacity. She’d come staggering out of her

room (wearing nothing but a shiny peach-colored camisole and a pair of tap pants, with her

hair doing something crazy because she had evidently just woken up, even though it was two in

the afternoon—early for her, realy) while I was trying to get the espresso maker to work. Lulu took one look at the uniformed man taking up so much space in our living room (not that he

was fat or anything. He was just tal and muscular and…wel, the kind of guy who
took up a
lot of space) and went, “Wel, hel-o000 there,” with this big smile on her face.

I wanted to go, Not now, Lulu, because I knew exactly what she was up to. Lulu was getting

ready to make Steven fal in love with her, the way she did every cute guy she encountered.

Making cute guys fal in love with her was Lulu’s hobby, besides shopping, drinking mojitos,

and occasionaly recording songs for her record album that never seemed to get finished.

But I needn’t have worried. Because Steven—Nikki’s brother—just went, “Hi,”
to Lulu in this
totaly uninterested way and kept right on saying what he’d been saying the whole time we

were coming up in the elevator together, which was, “Amnesia? Like people get on soap

operas?”

“Not exactly,” I assured him. Even though, from what I understand, there isn’t such a thing,

really. Wel, there is, but not the way Nikki Howard was supposed to have it. People don’t

conk their head and just selectively forget some stuff when they get amnesia. They forget

everything. Like their own names and the country they live in. Sometimes they even forget how

to tie their shoes.
“And you’re telling me you don’t remember,” Steven went on, completely ignoring Lulu, who

was now sauntering past him in her shiny getup, which she’d accessorized with a pair of

matching feathered mules, “that you promised to look after Mom while I was gone, make sure

she was paying her rent on time and that things were running smoothly with the dog grooming

kennel?”

Dog grooming kennel? Nikki Howard’s mom owned a dog grooming kennel? This was

information it might have been helpful for someone to have shared with me—along with the

fact that Nikki had a brother in the navy—earlier than, oh, say, now. Al anyone had ever said

to me was that Nikki was an emancipated minor who hadn’t gotten along with her family.

For this reason I shot Lulu a dirty look as she hopped up onto one of the kitchen counter

stools—careful to cross her spraytanned legs so that Steven had as ful a view of them as

possible. But Lulu completely ignored me, al her attention being focused on the handsome

blond man in the uniform standing in the middle of our living room.

“Um,” I said, fumbling with the espresso machine. Better to concentrate on the coffeemaker
than on what was happening in the living room, which was precisely what it looked like:

trouble. Nice of Nikki, by the way, to have a whole drawer of press clippings about herself

and not a single photo of her own family. “Up until you told me, I didn’t even know I had a

brother. So, the answer is no, I don’t remember teling you that. Or about Mom and her dog

grooming business, either, for that matter.”

“So what rank are you?” Lulu wanted to know, her gaze raking Steven’s buff form as he stood

with his arms crossed, consequently making his biceps bulge a little beneath his uniform. Lulu couldn’t seem to keep her foot from jiggling, and this was causing one of her feathered mules

to bobble up and down in a very distracting manner. She was doing this on purpose, of

course, to get Steven to look at her recently waxed legs.

Steven continued to ignore her.

“And what about al the messages I left you,” he asked me. “You just thought it was better to

ignore those?”

“I get a ton of messages from guys I don’t know,” I explained. This was excruciating. “They al say they’re related to me and that I owe them money for something. I stopped listening to

Nikki’s—I mean, my messages a long time ago.”

“Great,” Steven said. He turned away, running a hand through his hair…the
exact same color
and texture hair, I realized, that sprouted from my own head. Only his hadn’t been treated to
some golden honey highlights. “That’s just fantastic. Do you stil have them? Those messages.
Maybe Mom tried to reach you, left you a message or something, teling you where she’s
gone.”
“Are you, like, an officer?” Lulu asked Steven, her foot stil bobbing like mad. I noticed she’d had a pedicure—Balet Slipper Pink. Don’t ask me how I know these things when, three months ago, I wouldn’t have been able to tel the different nail polish colors apart if you’d held a gun to my head. “Do you give people orders al day? I love taking orders from a man. It’s so sexy.”
“Sorry,” I said, apologizing both for my roommate and for what I was about to tel him.
Because I realy was sorry. For both. “I deleted al Nikki’s—I mean, my messages. But”—I slipped a tiny espresso cup under the appropriate spout and pressed the button with a smal
cup on it—“I’m sure she’ll cal back. Right?”
Steven shook his head, looking more exhausted than ever, and slid onto one of the kitchen
counter stools like he couldn’t support his own weight anymore. Lulu looked delighted,
because the seat he’d chosen was only two stools down from hers. Apparently, she didn’t get
the subtle message that he’d chosen the stool farthest away from her. She immediately
straightened up to show her chest area to better advantage and gave him a dazzling smile,
which he ignored.

“You really do have amnesia,” he said to me. His face was a mask of misery. I felt so sorry for him, my heart twisted. “Mom never calls back. She’s always been one and done. Why do you
think I’m here checking to see if she’s been in touch with you instead of waiting to hear from her back in Gasper?”

Lulu completely forgot about making Steven fal in love with her and choked on some of her

Steven actually looked at her for a second, then back at me. “You never told her?” he said. It
was more of a statement than a question, and it caused me to pause as I slid the espresso,
complete with a foamy crème cap on top, in front of him.

“Um…apparently not,” I said. I had no idea what he was talking about, either, of course, since I wasn’t actually his sister. His sister was dead. Or at least, her brain was sitting in
formaldehyde in a jar somewhere in the bowels of the Stark Institute for Neurology and
Neurosurgery, even if the rest of her might have been walking around with my brain inside it,
using her credit cards and making her brother espressos.

Which made her dead enough.

I just couldn’t tel her brother that.

Steven was looking at me over his steaming espresso like he couldn’t quite believe what he’d heard.

“Wait,” he said, his blue-eyed gaze incredulous. “You don’t remember home, either?”

Hesitantly, I shook my head. I didn’t want to hurt him. The truth was, he looked like he’d been hurt enough.

But I couldn’t outright lie to him, either, no matter how much Stark Enterprises might expect me to.

And now I knew where I’d seen those eyes before: In the mirror, every time I glanced at my new reflection. They were Nikki’s eyes.

Only without Chanel Inimitable Multi-Dimensional Mascara in noir/black on the lashes.

Steven folded his arms, leaned against the back of his stool, and stared at the ceiling. For a second, I wondered if he was noticing the same thing I’d come home and noticed the other day… the two round holes, no bigger than pennies, on either side of the sunken halogen lamps,

that hadn’t been there before and had obviously been filed in, but rapidly and badly, as if someone had been placing something in there and gotten the news that one of the
loft’s

occupants was coming home early.

What were those holes for? They were too high up for me to ever climb up there and check

myself—the ceilings were twenty feet high, at least.

But they couldn’t possibly serve any purpose—other than a nefarious, Stark-related one.

Maybe I was just being paranoid. When I asked Karl about the holes, he consulted a

maintenance schedule, and told me it looked like a routine wiring check.

Wiring, my butt.

Maybe “routine wiring” was the reason the RF transmitter—or bug detector, I bought at one

of the surveillance gear stores in Midtown shortly after I noticed the holes in the ceiling and my paranoia got the better of me—went crazy every time I turned it on inside the loft. The place

was either loaded with listening devices or the detector itself was a total scam (but for the

money I paid, it ought to have been genuine). Besides, it didn’t go off anywhere else—school,

for instance.

But Steven, it appeared, hadn’t noticed the holes. Instead, it looked as if he was staring at the ceiling because he might be trying to hold back tears. Tears over his missing mom, and the fact that I didn’t even remember the hometown we shared in common.

I threw a panicky glance at Lulu, who dropped her vamp act for a milisecond
and looked just

as alarmed as I was. What do we do? Our gazes seemed to ask as we stared at each other.

We had a big strong military man in our girly loft...and he was crying! Over his lost mother!

Oh, this was awful. How could Stark Enterprises have put me in a position like this? It was

one thing when I just had to fool makeup artists and Nikki’s mostly heinous ex-boyfriends that I was her and not me.

But this was different! Poor guy. I was such a loser. I mean, here I was in all these AP classes at one of the best high schools in Manhattan—I was more capable of using a bug detector,

diagramming a complex sentence, using Manolo tips (which, it turned out, meant standing on

tiptoe in the water during a beach shoot, to make your legs look longer), and writing a simple string processor than anyone at Tribeca Alternative.

But help Nikki Howard’s brother find his mom? My hands were tied, thanks to the

confidentiality clause Stark had my parents sign. I couldn’t say a word—especially not here, in the loft.

Then I heard a sound come from Nikki’s brother. For one breathless moment, I thought it

must have been a sob. A single glance at Lulu revealed she felt the same way I did—like

crying, too. It really was just the sweetest thing, this big strong guy, crying over his mom.

It took us a second or two to realize Steven wasn’t crying at all. He was laughing.
And not like someone who found something genuinely funny, though.

“You are a piece of work, Nik,” he finally said, when he looked away from the ceiling. There were tears in his eyes, al right. But they were tears of amusement. “You’re so ashamed of where you come from, you never even told anyone the name of the town you were born in?

Not even your best friend?”

I blinked at him in confusion. Wait. He was laughing?

“Wait.” Lulu leaned forward on her stool. “You’re laughing?”

“Hel, yeah,” Steven said. “How can you not? Did you know this girl used to tell people she was from New York, New York, when we were growing up? That’s how ashamed she was to say she was from Gasper. I’m not surprised she never told you.”

Lulu looked over at me. “Realy, Nikki?” she asked. “You used to tell people you were from here?”

“How would I know?” I asked. I couldn’t believe I’d thought Nikki’s brother was crying, when he’d been laughing—at me—the whole time. “I have amnesia, remember?”

“Yes, she did,” Steven said, in reply to Lulu’s question. Now, instead of ignoring Lulu, he was ignoring me. “Are you saying she never even told you she had a brother?”

Lulu shook her head, delighted he was paying attention to her. Her brown eyes
were enormous, thanks to last night’s makeup being sexily smudged around her lashes. She looked,
as always, adorable, like a dol.

“Noooo,” she said. She leaned an elbow on the counter and cupped her pointed chin in her

hand so she could peer up at him. “I’d have remembered if she’d mentioned having someone

like you around while she was growing up.”

Steven snorted and threw a disgusted look at me. Typical, the look seemed to say.

Great. Now my roommate and brother were ganging up on me.

Which was so unfair. I was getting blamed for something I didn’t even do. Nikki did it!

Or had she?

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude or anything…,” I said. Which I knew was a horrible way to

start a sentence, because of course whenever you say I don’t mean to be rude, whatever

you’re about to say is going to be rude. That was something the Walking Dead, and especially

Whitney Robertson, had taught me, since she used to preface all her most tactless barbs with I

don’t mean to be rude, but.

“I don’t mean to be rude, Em, but have you ever thought about going on a diet? Your butt is
so big, it’s almost impossible to pass you in the hallway. Maybe you need to put a sign on your ass that says Wide Load.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Em, but have you ever considered wearing a bra during PE? Those things are flopping around so much, you’re going to put someone’s eye out.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, Em, but has it ever occurred to you that your harping on how not enough women are entering the sciences might be one of the reasons none of them wants to?

Maybe they don’t want to hang around with girls like you.”

Still, even though Whitney’s I don’t mean to be rude I had stung me so many times, I found myself saying the exact same words—and to my own brother, of all people. Well, Nikki’s brother.

“…but how do I even know for sure you’re who you say you are?” I asked.

The difference between me and Whitney, though, was that I felt awful for my I don’t mean to be rude. I really did.

At the same time, how did I know Steven really was Nikki’s brother? I mean, he seemed sincere, and yeah, he looked a lot like the reflection I saw every day in the mirror (and in magazines, and on billboards, and on the sides of buses, and okay, just about everywhere).

But there’d been guys (and even some women) showing up in our lobby for
weeks now with

stories saying they were related to me. How did I know this one was legit?

And, I mean, I knew from the way everyone (except Brandon) reacted to me that Nikki must

have been pretty awful back in the day.

But I had a hard time believing she’d cut her own big brother out of her life…not to mention

never having said a word about him to her best friend. Who, by the way, was shooting me an

astonished look over my I don’t mean to be rude.

“Nikki!” Lulu cried. “Of course Steven is who he says he is! How could you even ask such a

thing?”

“Well,” I said. I felt bad for having to ask. I really did. If Nikki had kept a family photo instead of press clippings of herself anywhere in the loft, I wouldn’t have had to. But none of this was my fault. “I’m sorry. But you have to admit, Lu, there’ve been a lot of guys lately with kind of similar stories, and I’m just trying to…”

My voice trailed off. This was because Steven had reached around to his back pocket, puled

out a walet, opened it, and unveiled a school photo of a smiling young blond girl in pigtails and braces. He held the walet, photo dangling forward, in front of me.

Wait. What was this?
FIVE

THIS TURNED OUT TO BE A PHOTO OF Nikki Howard. Which in and of itself wouldn’t

have been that extraordinary. There were hundreds—no, thousands—of photos of Nikki

Howard al over the place.

But this one was of Nikki Howard in that extremely awkward phase al of us go through when

we’re thirteen, just turning fourteen. What Britney Spears caled “not a girl, not yet a woman.”

I’d never have guessed Nikki Howard had gone through that phase…or anything that could

remotely be caled awkward…let alone have alowed anyone to take a picture while she was

going through it. From what I could tel, Nikki was nothing if not ruthless about having al

photos in which she looked the slightest bit bad destroyed.

But not this one, that’s for sure.

“Oooooh,” Lulu coed as she leaned forward to peer at the photo. “Look at you, Nik! You

had braces! And were you using Sun-In back then? My God, I’m surprised you have a hair

left on your head.”

“Flip to the next photo,” Steven said to me.
Obediently, I flipped to the next photo.

It was of Nikki in the same hairdo and braces beside a slightly younger version of Steven,

hosing down a poodle that looked not unlike Cosabela, only with black fur, in what looked

like some kind of doggie grooming parlor. Both siblings—and they looked even more alike in

this photo, recognizably related—were grinning, although Nikki’s grin looked strained, what

I’d come to recognize (having seen endless Polaroids of my new face during photo shoots) as

her hurry-up-and-take-the-photo-already-I’m-sick-of-this smile.

“That,” Steven said, about the photo of the two of them, “was taken about the year before you

decided you were embarrassed to be seen with me. And Mom. Before that talent agent lady’s

car broke down outside of town and she saw you at the Stop ’n Shop and asked if you’d ever

thought of modeling, and the next thing we knew, she was signing you up to be the new Face

of Stark. Next time I saw you, it was on the cover of some magazine.”

I nodded. I believed him now. This sounded too much like the Nikki I knew—the one who

kept only photos of (and press clippings about) herself lying around—not to be true.

“Okay,” I said softly, handing the wallet back to Steven. “I’m sorry. Of course
you’re really
my brother. I—I’m not saying I didn’t believe you.” Even though I hadn’t. “I just…I mean, I
had to check. There’ve been a lot of creeps who’ve shown up saying all kinds of crazy things.

So…what have you found out so far? About, um, Mom?”

“That no one’s seen or heard from her since shortly after your accident.” He said the word
accident like there were quotes around it…or like he didn’t believe there’d ever been one.

“She hasn’t used any of her credit cards since then, either. Or paid any of her bils.”

Lulu gasped. “Oh, my gosh!” she cried. “I saw an episode of Law and Order like this once!

Did anyone call the police?”

I shot her a warning look. I mean, this was the guy’s mother we were talking about, not some
TV show. I didn’t want him getting upset. Or more upset than he already was.

“Well,” Lulu said, noticing my look but evidently not registering why what she was saying might be upsetting to anyone. “What if there’s been foul play? On the Law and Order episode I saw

where this woman disappeared, everyone thought she’d run off with her boyfriend, but really

she was inside the couch the whole time because the boyfriend had conked her on the head

and hidden her dead body there! Your mom could be inside the couch. Did
“Lulu,” I said severely.

“I notified the local police when I got home and found her gone,” Steven said. I realized the reason he wasn’t offended by Lulu was because he was ignoring her again. “I tried calling you to see if you’d heard from her, but you wouldn’t return my calls. So I had to come here in person to see if you’d heard from her.”

I bit my lower lip. But what could I say? His call was just one of thousands I’d ignored on Nikki’s cel. Thankfully, Steven went on without seeming to expect a comment from me.

“The cops said there’s nothing they can do. A woman not using her credit cards or refusing to answer her cel phone and leaving her apartment and business in a lurch isn’t a crime. It’s more like she went on vacation without telling anybody. And took her dogs with her.”

“Well,” I said hopefully. “Maybe she did just that.”

“You think Mom just took off,” Steven said, “on vacation, without letting any of her customers know she was going? She didn’t cancel any of her grooming appointments. She hasn’t paid up the rent on either her apartment or the kennel. You realy think that’s something a dedicated business owner like Mom would have done—left for a fun-filled vacation without finding
someone to take over her appointments first?”

“So,” Lulu said, looking wide-eyed. “You really think your mom’s… Missing? No one knows anything about where she could be?”

“No one I’ve talked to,” Steven said. “Nikki was my last hope. But”—he glanced down at the espresso in front of him, which by now had gone cold—“I guess that was a waste of time.”

“Maybe I can get a printout or something of the incoming calls I’ve had,” I offered. I desperately wanted to do something—anything—to help him. He just looked so tired and sad.

“And see if any of them were from your—I mean, Mom. Then maybe we can see if the phone company can figure out where she was when she made them.”

“They can triangulate her position through the position of the cell towers,” Lulu said. When we both glanced at her, she said, “I saw that on an episode of Law and Order, too.” Then she added, “Oh, and you can hire a private detective, Nikki! My dad used to hire those to follow my mom around when he thought she was cheating on him.” She gave Steven a brilliant smile.

“I come from a broken home.”

I’m sure he’d ever seen a single episode of Entertainment Tonight, he already knew this. But Steven wasn’t paying any attention to her.

“I don’t want Nikki to do anything she doesn’t feel comfortable doing,” he said
stiffly.

“It’s no problem,” I said. “I’ll hire a private investigator to find…Mom. Maybe you can recommend some good ones, Lulu, since you seem to have so much experience with them.”

“Oh, yeah,” Lulu said, twinkling. No, really. She twinkled as she said it, like freaking Tinker Bel. “Mind you, detectives aren’t cheap.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Steven said, with a smile in my direction. “Nikki can afford it.”

I smiled sweetly back at him, but all I could think was, I am so dead. And not even literally, for once. I couldn’t hire a detective. A detective was only going to uncover stuff related to my brain transplant and blow this Stark thing sky-high, and next thing I knew, it’d be on CNN and I’d be on the run from Brandon’s dad’s armed gunmen.

And don’t tell me Robert Stark doesn’t have them.

Okay, just calm down and smile at the nice sailor and go, “Okay, fine then. So, I’ll start calling private eyes first thing in the morning.” Seriously. This was my life now? Well, why not? I’d already had a brain transplant and had to wear mascara every single day. Why not this?

“And in the meantime”—Lulu twinkled some more in Steven’s direction—“you have to stay here with us. Because we’re having this holiday party, and we want you to be the guest of honor.”

I threw Lulu another warning look, because having Nikki’s brother stay with us didn’t exactly
seem like a good idea to me. For one thing, we only had the two bedrooms, so where was he

going to sleep…on the couch? And for another, how long was it going to take him to catch on

that I wasn’t calling private detectives like I said I would…oh, and that I wasn’t his sister at all but another girl living in his sister’s body? Plus, there was the whole thing about him being the guest of honor at a party at which I wasn’t even going to be in attendance, except I hadn’t

quite worked up the courage to tell the hostess yet…

And what about our loft possibly—okay, probably—being bugged by parties unknown (even

though I was pretty sure who was responsible)?

“Uh,” Steven said, looking uncomfortable. Who could blame him? I was a virtual stranger to

him (in more ways than he knew). “Thanks for the invitation, but I grabbed a hotel room

uptown—”

Lulu looked horrified.

“A hotel room!” she cried. “No! You’re family! Stay here. That’ll give you and Nikki a chance

to reconnect. Right, Nikki?”

“Sure,” I said, hoping Steven didn’t sense my reluctance. “Although we do only have the two

bedrooms—”

“He can sleep in my room,” Lulu volunteered. Then, looking a little embarrassed—a first for
Lulu—she explained, “What I mean is, Nikki has this huge, king-size bed. I can sleep with her and, Steven, you can have my room.”

“No,” Steven said, not unkindly. There was warmth in his voice, and in his expression—real, human warmth…the first I’d seen him show since meeting him downstairs in the lobby. I felt bad about the fact that I had no intention of helping to look for his mother. Wait. I did intend to help him look for his mom. I just didn’t intend to hire a detective to do it.

Only how do you find a missing woman on your own?

“Thanks, that’s really nice of you,” Steven said. “But I wouldn’t want to put you out—”

“Stay,” I heard myself saying.

I don’t know what came over me. I mean, I needed Nikki Howard’s brother hanging around the loft like I needed a(nother) hole in my head.

But I knew from something I’d seen in the photo he’d shown me—the one of him and Nikki washing the dog—that Steven Howard loved his mother. I was pretty sure she’d been the one taking the picture that he had in his wallet. The look in his eyes as he gazed at the person holding the camera had been one of pure—if slightly irritated—affection.

I knew what I had to do. And that was everything I could to help him find her. It was the least I could do to make up for Nikki having been such a horrible sister
and daughter. So horrible

she had never even kept a picture of either her brother or her mother in her room or walet.

“Realy,” I said, when he turned his astonished gaze toward me. “You have to. I insist.”

“You insist?” He gave me a strange look. I didn’t know if it was because I’d used the word

insist, and that’s not the kind of thing Nikki ordinarily would have said, or because he was the older one and he wasn’t used to Nikki bossing him around.

Whatever the reason, my insisting did the trick. He shrugged, and said, “Wel, if you insist. I’ll just go back uptown then and get my gear.”

Then, without another word, he slid off the kitchen stool and headed for the elevator.

No one seemed to have come home from either the gym or Starbucks since Nikki’s brother

and I had got off the elevator earlier, because the elevator door slid right open. He stepped

inside and looked at Lulu and me for the second before the door closed again.

“See you in a few,” he said. And then the door closed, and he was gone.
SIX

OKAY, SO THINGS WERE BAD. BUT THEY stil weren’t that bad. Nikki Howard’s

brother may have been moving in, and her mom may have been missing, and I might have put

myself in charge of finding her.

But at least Nikki had a brother and mom, whereas a few hours ago, I’d thought of her as a

siblingless orphan. Wel, practicaly. Some family was always better than none, right?

Of course, it was a little annoying that every five seconds, my roommate kept going, “Do you

think he liked me?”

That was al Lulu could ask.

And ask.

And ask again.

I’d never seen Lulu like this over a guy. Granted, I hadn’t known her al that long.

But even if I didn’t know her at al, I’d have been able to tel: She had the hots (and that was putting it mildly) for Nikki Howard’s big brother.

Which was sad, because I was pretty sure the feeling wasn’t mutual.

In fact, I’m fairly certain that was why Lulu liked Steven Howard so much. He was the first

guy she’d ever met who wasn’t a hundred or obviously gay (because even though I’m almost
positive Steven Howard isn’t gay, you can never be sure, especialy with military men and the
whole don’t-ask-don’t-tell thing) who didn’t like her back.

“He had to like me a little bit,” Lulu was saying, as she lay sprawled across my bed, stil in her silky pajamas. “I mean, I’m cute, right?”

“You’re so cute,” I assured her, jamming my feet into a pair of Stark brand imitation Uggs. I
seriously never thought I’d be caught dead—ha-ha—in a pair of these, since every girl I knew
at Tribeca Alternative had a pair, including my own sister. I wouldn’t wear them at al if I
wasn’t required to by my employer. Stark brand Ugg knockoffs were the hot new thing…half
the price of the real ones. Although, believe it or not, they were the most comfortable footwear you could put on if the bottoms of your toes were raw from having been clinging to a cliff face the night before. Also if you’d spent an hour pacing the length of your apartment while calling your cel service provider, begging them to give you a printout of al the cals you’d received—
not made—on your cel phone for the past two months.

“I am cute,” Lulu said firmly as she rubbed Cosabela’s ears, breaking into my reflections. “I’m totaly cute! He just doesn’t know me yet. Every guy who gets to know me agrees—Lulu
Colins is cute! And, anyway, Steven’s al bummed out from the awful way you’ve treated him
over the years. I mean, no wonder he’s al tortured and moody and stuff.”

“Hey,” I said, shooting her a wounded look. I was completely guilt-stricken over the fact that I hadn’t recognized my own brother. Wel, Nikki’s brother. And how I was going to have to get
to the bottom of his mother’s disappearance and find her myself if it was the last thing I did.

Even though I didn’t know how.

“Oh, right,” Lulu said. “I forgot. The old you was the one that was mean to Steven. Sorry.

Stil. How could you have treated him that way? He’s so hot. I’ve never met a guy that hot.

Did you see those arms. I mean,” Lulu went on, bunching one of my pilows beneath her head,

and staring dreamily up at my ceiling, “he looked strong enough that if he lifted me, he could do it with just one hand. Did you notice that?”

“Well,” I said, slipping on a fitted leather jacket, then snapping my fingers for Cosabela to come to me. “He’s my brother, Lulu. I wasn’t exactly checking out his arms. Because, ew. Look, if anyone calls, I’m just going to take Cosy for a walk for an hour or so. I’ll be back soon.

Okay?”

“Mrs. Captain Steven Howard,” Lulu breathed, stil staring up at the ceiling. “No —Mrs. Major Steven Howard!”

Lulu had totally lost it. It was sad, realy, what a uniform could do to a girl. I hoped she’d be feeling more like herself when I got home. Or that she’d at least have brushed her teeth.

In the meantime, I had places to be. I left my room, threw on a scarf and gloves and wooly cap and sunglasses (even though it was stil gray and dismal outside. But I didn’t need anyone
recognizing me. Until I started walking around in a celebrity’s body, I had no idea what they had to go through, with people grabbing them and screaming and trying to get them to talk on their cel phones to their friends in Pasadena just to prove they’d really met them), then grabbed Cosy’s leash and a dog coat for her (because dogs get cold and wet exactly like we do; Cosabela actualy shivered like a person when she got cold), my tote of gifts for my family, and finaly left the building, heading across town toward Washington Square Park.

It wasn’t somewhere I was supposed to be. In fact, my “handlers” at Stark had subtly been encouraging me not to go home to visit my parents since the first time I went there in my new body (and brought Lulu). It wasn’t hard to imagine how they knew we’d been there…not once I saw the holes in the ceiling in the loft. I just tried to make sure none of them brought any Stark brand electronic products home, even as promotional gifts from Stark.

But there was nothing I could do about the fact that I’m regularly folowed…at least by paparazzi (though not today. The weather outside was horrible. It was spitting little drops of ice crystals that stung my skin wherever it was exposed, and the temperature had to be barely thirty degrees out. Anyone sane was staying in where it was warm and dry).
Then again…whoever said the paparazzi were sane?

I didn’t think I was being paranoid about feeling as if I were being spied on. Pictures of me doing the most innocuous things were popping up all over the place. I could be at the corner deli, buying toilet paper at eleven o’clock at night, for Pete’s sake, and the next day a picture of me would show up on Page Six, looking al pasty and strung out (because it was after a shoot and I was exhausted and had no makeup on and it was eleven o’clock at night at the corner deli and I was buying toilet paper, the toilet paper Lulu should have remembered to buy, but hadn’t), and the story underneath my photo would read, What’s Nikki Howard been smoking? We’d sure like some of that! when I had not, in fact, been smoking anything, because I don’t smoke. How had they even gotten that photo? I never saw a flash go off. There wasn’t anyone in the store with me except the clerk. It was creepy, that’s what it was. Because next thing I knew, this extremely unflattering photo, in which I did, in fact, look high or stoned or whatever, was on every Internet gossip site known to man, with even less complimentary captions than What’s Nikki Howard been smoking?

And then my mother was calling, wanting to know if we needed to “talk” about my
recreational drug use. My mother! It was bad enough that Gabriel Luna, hot up-and-coming
British Latino heartthrob singing sensation with whom I was constantly being thrown together
because he’s on the Stark label, and who always seemed to see me out in clubs with Lulu and
Brandon (where I drank nothing stronger than water, thanks very much), believed my press
and thought I had chemical dependence issues (although in Gabriel’s case, he knew I’d been
hospitalized a couple of months ago... just not for what). But my own mother?
Yeah. Someone was spying on me, al right. For al I knew, he could be watching as I stood
on the corner of Houston and Broadway at this very moment, cursing the fact that I hadn’t
brought along an umbrella to ward off the sleet. Although if I had, I probably wouldn’t have
been able to juggle it and Cosy’s leash and my tote and Nikki Howard’s cell phone, which
suddenly went off. I had to fumble around in my pocket to find it instead of just letting it go to voice mail as usual, because I was afraid it might be Nikki’s mom, and I’d miss her, and then
I’d have even more to feel guilty about.
“Helo?” I said.
It wasn’t Nikki’s mother, though. It was Nikki’s agent, Rebecca. Who was exactly like a
mom, if you asked me. If your mom smoked and wore four-inch heels and talked through a
headset at all the time and said things like, “Ten thousand? Are they high?” or kept asking you if you’d remembered to keep your bikini line electrolysis appointment (Yeah. Nikki has no hair
down there. Wel, a strip. Talk about creepy. But it cuts down on the amount of
time I have to
spend getting waxed by Katerina).

“Why are you calling me on a Sunday?” I asked her, when she said, “Thank God, you’re
there.”

“You know I work seven days a week,” Rebecca replied in her smoke-roughened
voice.

“You’re supposed to take Sundays off,” I informed her. “Even God took Sunday off.”

“Wel, if He hadn’t,” Rebecca said, “maybe the world wouldn’t be such an effed-up mess.

How was the shoot in St. John?”

“Fine,” I said. “Except for the part where I nearly tore off most of the skin on my
fingers and toes, clinging to this cliff. Oh, and where Brandon Stark wanted to
stay an extra day to take
me Jet Skiing. I think someone is letting money and fame go to his head.”

I’d crossed Houston, and was walking past the Stark Megastore where, ironically
enough, al
of this had happened to me.

“Brandon Stark is worth thirty milion.” Rebecca sounded like she was inhaling.
“At least. A billion when his father croaks. Maybe more. Breaking up with him was a big mistake.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I take it back about Rebecca being like a mom. No mom would give the kind of advice she does. Which reminded me. “Rebecca, have you heard anything from Nik—I mean, my mom?”

“Why would I hear anything from that woman?” Rebecca asked. She said that woman like Nikki’s mom wasn’t someone she liked.

“Because,” I said. “Apparently, she’s missing. No one’s heard from her in three months, and people back in, um, Gasper are starting to worry maybe something’s happened to her.”

“Wel,” Rebecca said. “Your mother was never the sharpest knife in the drawer. Chances are, she went up to Atlantic City to play craps and got lost.”

“Oh,” I said. “Good to know.” For some reason, I didn’t mention Nikki’s brother. I don’t know why. I just didn’t.

It didn’t matter, I guess, because Rebecca had already moved on.

“But about why I’m calling,” she said. “So, listen. Are you sitting down?”

“No. I’m walking Cosabela.” I didn’t tel her I was realy on the way to see my family. That’s
the last thing I’d mention to Rebecca. Because she doesn’t know about my real family. Or the
real me.

“Wel, I just got the cal from Robert Stark himself…The nationally televised Stark
Angels

New Year’s fashion show is going to be shot at the newly constructed Stark
Sound Studios in

Midtown, live on New Year’s Eve…and they want you to be the Angel wearing the ten-
million-dollar diamond bra. Apparently, it’s just your size. Gisele dropped out due to a


I stumbled over a grate in the sidewalk and nearly dropped my phone. A couple who were

hurrying by, as anxious to get out of the rain as I was, barely gave me a second glance, even

though my image was in every window of the store next to us, blown up to ten feet tall. Nikki

Howard in a trench coat, Nikki Howard in a bikini, Nikki Howard in an evening gown, Nikki

Howard in a summer dress, Nikki Howard on a pair of skis, Nikki Howard in jodhpurs, Nikki

Howard in a kimono, Nikki Howard in a matching Stark Angels bra and panty set. The

sunglasses and knit cap totally worked as a disguise.

“Oh, no,” I breathed into the phone. My heart felt as if it had just gone into
thought I might throw up. My bones felt as if they were frozen solid.

Because Stark Angels lingerie was seriously the saddest of the sad. It was Stark Enterprises’ attempt to compete with Victoria’s Secret for American women’s underwear drawers. Only Stark’s bras and panties cost about twenty percent less, and itched and poked about fifty percent more. And the Angels were a straight-up rip-off of the Victoria’s Secret’s Angels.

Except that their wings were much smaller and cheaper-looking. The only thing more expensive was Stark’s diamond bra—ten million as opposed to the Victoria’s Secret paltry million-dollar bra.

“Oh, no?” Rebecca sounded shocked as she echoed what I’d just said. “What do you mean, oh, no?”

“I mean,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady, “I have to go to high school every day.” I tugged Cosabela away from someone’s abandoned hot pretzel, now cold and congealed on the sidewalk, which she seemed determined to examine and then consume, even though I always fed her extremely wel at home. “I’m not going to go on live national television New
Year’s Eve in a pair of wings and a demi-cup bra…even if it is one made of diamonds!”

“You’d be wearing panties, too,” Rebecca said, sounding surprised that I hadn’t realized this.

“Oh, well, that just makes everything all better,” I said sarcastically.

“It would be very tasteful,” Rebecca said. “You wouldn’t be showing any more than you did in the Sports Illustrated bathing suit shoot last week.”

“But this is underwear!” I wailed. “Even worse, Stark’s underwear!”

“Oh, that’s a nice way to talk about your employer,” Rebecca snapped.

If only she knew about the phone tap. And the spyware on my Stark brand PC. And the hidden surveillance transmitters in my loft (if that’s what they were). Oh, and about the brain transplant. Which did save my life, but stil.

“And that was stil photography,” I said. “This is TV.”

“There’s a seven-second delay,” Rebecca said. “So if anything were to—you know, slip out, you adjust it before…you know.”

“That is so reassuring,” I said.

“Nikki, honey,” Rebecca said, exhaling audibly. “I wasn’t actualy asking your permission.

Robert Stark caled to let me know it’s already settled. You’re doing this. I would have thought you’d be thriled. You’re the lead Angel. Do you have any idea what that means?”
Yeah. I knew. I knew, al right.

“I have to go,” I said to Rebecca. I knew I’d been wrong to think everything was going to be al right.

“Wait,” Rebecca said. “Don’t you want to know how much they’re paying you for this?

Because you’re never going to believe what I negotiated—”

But I’d already hung up. It realy didn’t matter. However much it was, it would never be
eough. Not for being publicly humiliated in front of everyone I knew. Specificaly,

Christopher.

Who, okay, wouldn’t actualy know it was me, his old pal, Em Watts.

But we used to sit and watch the Stark Angel fashion show every year together and make

mercile fun of it, and especialy of the dumb Angels, and how many starving Africans they
could have fed with the money that had gone into making the diamond bra.

And now I was going to be the dumb Angel wearing it.

Great. Just great.

Maybe I could give the money to some Africans.

Except I was probably going to need it. For therapy.
SEVEN

THE PART I WAS PROBABLY GOING TO need the most therapy for was the expression

I saw on Mom’s face every time I let myself into the apartment.

Like just now—after lying about my identity to the doorman—and saying, “Hi, Mom. It’s me.”

It was all about the flicker—it only lasted an instant—of excitement, followed by disappointment, then resignation. She was expecting the old Em, and instead, she got Nikki…

well, outwardly, anyway. So, for a split second, she was disappointed. It passed in a flash, to be replaced with her normal, oh-of-course-it’s-you face.

But it was always there, every time she saw me—the disappointment. Because the truth was, I

wasn’t her daughter. Not really. Not anymore.

On the inside maybe. But not on the outside.

And she hadn’t accepted the new me. Not completely.

And a part of me knew she never would.

I couldn’t blame her, really, I guess.

“Oh, Em, honey,” she said. The flicker was gone, and she recognized me, the stranger in her

apartment, the tall blonde with the miniature poodle in the waterproof coat, prancing at her

side. I guess she’d never come to accept me—in Nikki’s body—unless I got rid of the
poodle, stopped washing my hair, gained fifty pounds, and started wearing nothing but sweats again, like the old me. People are funny. “I can’t believe you came all the way over in this weather! Weren’t you supposed to be in Aruba or something today?”

“St. John,” I said, leaning down to kiss her. Before the accident, Mom had been taller than me.

Now I was taller than Dad. Even in my Stark brand imitation Uggs. “We flew back this morning. I came over as soon as I could.” I wasn’t going to tell her about the long-lost brother I had found waiting for me in my lobby. I don’t know why. She just had enough problems, and I wasn’t going to burden her with mine. Instead, I shrugged out of my outdoor things, which were rapidly becoming soggy wet in the over-radiated heat of the apartment. “What’s this I hear about cheerleading camp?”

Mom rolled her eyes and said, “Don’t get me started,” just as Frida burst from her bedroom, having heard me come in.

“You came!” Her eyes were wide with excitement. “You’re the awesomest! Did you bring Lulu?”

On my sister’s registry of all things awesome, Lulu Collins rated only slightly below Nikki Howard. The fact that both of them were now in her life on an almost daily basis
had put her
into a kind of teen girl nirvana from which I feared she wouldn’t emerge until
college.

“Uh, Lulu’s busy,” I said, deeming it unnecessary to mention that Lulu was busy
staring at my
ceiling, planning her wedding to Nikki Howard’s estranged big brother. “Is Dad
around?”

“Dad went back to New Haven,” Frida said. “He couldn’t stand the fighting.”

“There was no fighting,” Mom corrected her. “Fighting implies that the issue
was ever
negotiable, and it isn’t.”

Frida threw me a help me look. “See?” she said.

Mom glared at me. “And I can’t believe,” she added, going back to the sofa and
the Sunday
Times, which she had strewn al around her, her normal weekend habit, “that you
knew al this
time, and you didn’t tel me.”

“Wel,” I said lamely. If she only knew the things I knew and hadn’t told her. “I
don’t see
what’s wrong with it, really. Cheerleading is a sport, after al.”

Mom didn’t even look up from the Week in Review section. “Name a sport you
play in a
miniskirt,” she said.

I almost laughed, since I’d tried the same argument on Frida when I’d first heard
about her
going out for the team.

“Wel,” I said. “Figure skaters wear even shorter skirts, and figure skating is an Olympic sport.

And so is gymnastics. And cheerleading is basically al gymnastics.”

Mom just rattled the paper. There was classical music playing softly over the stereo. The whole apartment looked so cozy and warm, I almost wanted to cry. Somewhere, I knew,

were bagels Dad had picked up that morning from H&H. With vegetable cream cheese (I couldn’t eat bagels anymore because they caused Nikki massive acid reflux. Anything doughy did).

But looks, of course, were deceiving. Cozy as the place looked, I couldn’t help suspecting it was every bit as wired as the loft was. I didn’t know where the bugs were, but I was sure they were there, somewhere, and that Stark was listening. Hadn’t Dr. Holcombe, during my last checkup, asked me if I thought it was such a good idea to introduce Lulu to my family…

something he could have known I’d done only if Stark had been listening in that time Lulu and

I dropped by my old apartment with a pizza?

And hadn’t the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery handed us all brand-new Stark brand cel phones on which to cal one another? Phones that had been way
more

staticky than any mobile phone I’d ever owned—clear proof, to me, anyway, that they were

tapped.

It had been kind of hard after that not to believe Stark wasn’t spying on us, especialy since my pocket bug detector—yes, I’d gone off the deep end and bought every spy gadget I could get

my hands on—whined like crazy every time I walked in the door. I didn’t know where the

bugs were, but they were there, somewhere. Which was why I had encouraged my family to

use the non-Stark brand, nonstaticky cel phones I’d bought them, and why I now usualy kept

my visits to my old home brief.

“The thing is,” Frida said to Mom, “I have to go with the team to winter camp. We have al our

routines down, and I’m, like, the most important person. I’m a base, and without me, basicaly

al our pyramids, our stunts, anything involving a flyer, everything fals down. Furthermore, if I don’t receive proper training, someone—including me—could be badly injured. Which isn’t to

say our coach isn’t magnificent, because she is, but at this weeklong training camp, we learn

proper techniques to avoid injuries as wel as new stunts and routines that wil blow the

competition out of the water. Besides, cheerleading is a realy good extracurricular. It looks
great on your college apps. I mean, do you want me to look like a total loser, like Em, who

has no extracurriculars whatsoever?”

“Hey,” I said, coming to my own defense.

“Sorry,” Frida said, throwing me an apologetic look. “But it’s true. Until your surgery, you

never did anything after school, except boring computer stuff with Christopher. Now at least

you go to tropical islands for swimsuit shoots and stuff.”

“I do not like,” Mom said, finally lowering her paper, “the tone that this conversation has

taken. I do not want my daughters’ extracurricular activities to be swimsuit shoots and being

the base supports of human pyramids.”

“Mom,” Frida said, going to sit on the couch beside her. “It’s so much more than

that. I’m

learning teamwork and physics and making new friends, while at the same time

getting

physically fit and staying healthy—”

I brightened up a little. The truth was, I’d been feeling a little depressed since this afternoon, coming home and finding Steven Howard, not Christopher, waiting for me in my lobby, then

getting the news about Nikki’s mom. That, followed by the information that I was now a Stark

Angel, hadn’t really done much to cheer me up since the whole sitting-at-the-bottom-of-the-
ocean thing.

But seeing how much Frida had matured over the past couple of months? That was doing the trick. I mean, she wasn’t half the whiny, self-centered kid she’d been before my accident,

always insisting on getting her way. Not anymore.

“That’s why it’s so important you let me go to this cheerleading camp over break,” Frida went on. “I swear I won’t do anything to make you regret it, Mom. Because, the best part is, the camp is in Miami, which is really close to where Grandma lives in Boca Raton. We’re going there, anyway, for winter break. So I can still be with you guys at night, only during the day, I can go to camp with everybody else. I don’t even have to stay in the hotel with the rest of the team.”

See? Frida had learned how to compromise and see things from other people’s points of view.

This was something she’d rarely, if ever, done before. I couldn’t believe how my little sister had grown! She was practically a mature young woman now! Never mind that she was wearing a pair of pants that said “Juicy” on the butt.

“That sounds totally reasonable,” I said. “We can all fly down together and stay at Grandma’s,

and then Frida can go off to cheerleading camp with her friends, and, Mom, you and Dad and I can hang with Gran. Won’t that be fun?”
Before the words were fully out of my mouth, though, I noticed both Mom and Frida were staring at me with odd looks on their faces. I couldn’t figure out why. I mean, we always went to Grandma’s in Boca for the holidays. Mom’s Jewish and Dad’s not, so in our house we’d always celebrated both Christmas (the secular, Santa version) and Hanukkah. Gran was always fine with that, and it was nice to spend Christmas Day at the beach, getting a little sun after enduring the first part of a New York winter.

Was this year going to be different somehow? That’s what Mom’s and Frida’s looks seemed to imply.

“Em, honey,” Mom said, after a tense silence. “You weren’t thinking…I know we never discussed it, but I just assumed…I mean, you know you can’t go to Grandma’s this year. Or any year. Stark would never allow it. You know you’re not supposed to be seen with us. How would they explain it if the paparazzi snapped a picture of you with us on the beach in Florida over the holidays?”

I blinked at her.


Definitely.

“And besides,” she went on, “you know we told Grandma—everyone in the
family, actually—

that you...died. How would we explain to her—and her friends—what Nikki Howard was doing, joining us for our family vacation? Obviously, you couldn’t be Em around her...”

Of course. My obituary. The memorial service. The story on CNN about my gory death by plasma screen TV. Everyone at school had seen it, too.

“Right,” I said. My bones did that frozen thing again, the way they had outside the Stark Megastore, the scene of the accident that had caused all this. Only this time I wasn’t outside, with so many windows filed with posters of Nikki Howard smiling blandly down at me. So there was no rational explanation for why I suddenly felt like I was freezing cold. “Grandma thinks I’m dead.”

How stupid of me to have thought I was going to her condo for the holidays with the rest of my family. How stupid of me to have brought that tote bag, sitting over by the door, filed with wrapped gifts for all of them, to take down to Florida to open with Grandma.

Everyone thought I was dead.

I was Nikki Howard now.

Em Watts was dead.

“It’s okay,” I said, with a careless laugh—or a laugh that I hoped sounded careless. It actually sounded more brittle, I think, than careless. Suddenly, I was
blinking back tears—where did those come from?—but I hoped Mom and Frida couldn’t see them. “How dumb. I totally forgot about Stark. And the contract. And everything. Geez. I’m so stupid.”

“How dumb.” Mom put down the paper and got up off the couch to wrap an arm around me, even though I took a step back, away from her. “Are you all right? We probably should have discussed this, but I just assumed you’d be working, anyway, so…”

“I’m fine,” I said, still moving away from her. I didn’t want her to see my tears, that I wasn’t fine. Also, I was afraid that her touch would cause me to crumble. “Actually, it’s much better this way, because Lulu is having this huge party, and I was worried about how I was going to break the news to her that I wasn’t going to be able to be there, and now I won’t have to. So, phew!”

Mom didn’t look convinced that I was all right.

“You know what,” she said. “This is silly. We’ll just stay here in town for the holidays this year. I’ll give Gran a call. I’m sure we can work something out—”

Frida didn’t seem to hear what Mom had just said. She was too excited about something else.

“Lulu’s having a party?” she asked. “A holiday party? Am I invited?”

Yeah. Forget everything I said about Frida being so much more mature now.

“No,” I said. I started reaching for the outdoor things I’d only just put down, like Cosy’s coat and leash and my gloves and stuff. “You know what, I forgot, I
promised Lulu, actually, that

I’d pick up some stuff for her party, and here it is getting close to five and the party store is going to close since it’s Sunday, so I better go—"

“Em,” Mom said, reaching for me again, looking as if her heart were breaking on my behalf.

But I was too quick for her. I sidestepped her and was halfway out the door and down the hall

before either of them seemed to realize what was happening.

“I’ll call you guys later,” I tossed back over my shoulder as I heard Mom say my name again.

But I was hurrying toward the elevator, hoping I’d get there before the tears did, and before

either of them caught up to me…

And I made it, but barely. I actually managed to get past the doorman and into the driveway in

front of the building, under the protective canopy, before I burst.

And then my face melted. Or at least that’s what it felt like. The tears in my eyes overflowed, coursing hotly down my cheeks. I couldn’t see anything in front of or around me, because it all kind of disappeared into a hot mess of little dots and smears, like the Impressionistic paintings in the nineteenth-century wing in the Metropolitan, as the tears took over everything. I’m pretty sure there was snot involved, too.

And even as I was doing it—crying, I mean—I knew it was ridiculous. I never actually liked

going to Grandma’s that much, except for the beach and her pool. Her condo was way too

small for the four of us plus her, and I always had to sleep on a foldout cot that
was too short for me, and she gave us frozen bagels for breakfast instead of the real kind you could get here in New York, stil warm from the oven, crusty on the outside, and warm and gooey in the middle.

But somehow, being told I couldn’t go, because I was dead…

Wel, it just made me wish I’d stayed down at the bottom of the ocean last night. It had been

so nice down there, so quiet and calm and, okay, cold, but stil. No one had been demanding

things of me, like Climb This Cliff, Find My Missing Mom, Wear This Diamond Bra, or Don’t Go to Florida with Us, You’re Dead, Remember?

Although, I guess in a way, I was at the bottom of that ocean again. I was just as cold, anyway, and just as alone—except for Cosy—and soon I’d have to go out into that sleet, and

then I’d be just as wet, since I didn’t bring an umbrela.

Suddenly, I decided I couldn’t take it. I just couldn’t take it! I knew I must have looked like an idiot, but I didn’t care. There was no one around. Only a fool would have been out in

weather like this, anyway. I decided just to stand there and cry. At least until a cab went by and I could try to hail it.

Because no way was I walking home in this crappy weather.

I was standing there in front of my parents’ building, crying and feeling sorry for myself, when I felt a hand on my shoulder. Thinking it was Eddie the doorman, asking if I wanted him to flag
down a cab—which, good luck finding one in this weather—I turned my head, sniffling. I stil

couldn’t exactly see because of my face melting, but I could sort of vaguely make out a

masculine shape beside me.

“What?” I asked, sniffling.

“Nikki?” a familiar voice asked. As familiar to me, almost, as my own. Or as familiar as my

own voice used to be, before my larynx was crushed beneath three hundred pounds of plasma

television.

It wasn’t Eddie. It was someone else who lived in my parents’ building. I’d just forgotten that little fact during the pity party I’d been throwing for myself.

And for a second, I nearly choked on my own tears.

Because it was Christopher.
EIGHT

GREAT. THERE’S NOTHING A GIRL WANTS more than the guy she’s been crushing on since, like, the sixth grade or whatever to find her standing outside his building on a miserable wintry Sunday afternoon, sobbing her guts out.

There was absolutely no way I could think of to get out of this one, either, other than the obvious—suicide. I contemplated simply running away from him and throwing myself under the first cab I saw speeding down Bleecker Street. But I wasn’t sure I’d be able to see clearly enough, what with the sleet and my sunglasses and tears and al. I figured I might just end up throwing myself under a parked car.

Besides, I had Cosabela with me. And I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to her.

I reached up and hastily swiped at my face with my gloved hands, hoping the suede would absorb some of the moisture spiling out of my eyes so I could at least see him properly.

This turned out to be a huge mistake, however. Because it revealed that Christopher was standing there in his leather jacket (when had he gotten one of those?) looking down at me

(unlike my dad, Christopher was not shorter than Nikki Howard) with an adorable mixture of
confusion mingled with concern on his face. He was obviously just coming home from

somewhere and, in typical male fashion, had remembered to wear neither a scarf nor a hat, so

the sleet had caused his short blond hair to stick to his head, and the cold had turned the tips of his ears and his cheeks bright red.

This only made him look cuter, however, if such a thing was possible. I mean, even his lips had turned red, which I know was a weird thing to notice about a guy—much less think looked cute.

But then, I’d had my brain taken out of my body and put into someone else’s. I was about as weird as you can get.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Christopher asked. He’d barely said three words to me since I’d

slapped a set of glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers down in front of him in the school’s

computer lab, hoping he’d get the message that I was really his best friend trapped in a

supermodel’s body (he didn’t). But he seemed to take the fact that I’d just shown up in front

of his apartment building, weeping behind my Gucci sunglasses, in stride. “Cold out today,

huh?”

“Um,” I said. “Yeah.” I tried not to look at his lips. I looked at the canopy stretching over the apartment building’s driveway instead. They’d painted the facade an ugly-looking gray. The
paint was flaking off on parts of it.

“Were you shopping or something around here?” Christopher asked me. I don’t suppose he could figure out any other reason why I’d be in his neighborhood. It would never occur to him that I might be stalking him, or standing here thinking about how much I wanted to kiss him.

He wasn’t the kind of guy who would think that girls fantasized about those kind of things. At least, not about him.

That was one of the reasons I loved him. When I wasn’t thinking about how much I’d like to strangle him for being so dense as to not realize I was me, Em Watts. Just inside somebody else.

“Yeah,” I said, staring at a particularly large flake of paint peeling off above his head. “Yeah, I was. But…it’s sleetiong so badly. And there…were no cabs.” Did that sound reasonable?

Would he believe it?

Apparently so.

“And you didn’t think to bring an umbrella when you went out,” Christopher said, with a little smile. He seemed to believe it. “Just like me.”

I couldn’t help lowering my gaze to his hands. They were gloveless and empty and huge. And would look so much better if they were somewhere on my person. I knew exactly where, too.
God, what was wrong with me? I used to think it was just Nikki’s body that was wanton.

Now I was starting to wonder if my brain was catching up to it.

“You want to borrow one?” Christopher asked. “I mean, I do actualy own one.”

I dragged my gaze from his fingers to his face. “One what?” What was wrong with me? I couldn’t even follow a simple conversation anymore. Either Stark Enterprises had attached a few wires wrong when they’d put my brain into Nikki’s head, or I had it really, really bad for this guy.

“An umbrela,” Christopher said, looking down at my feet. “And I think there’s something wrong with your dog.”

I glanced down at Cosabela. She was trembling all over from the cold because she’d been standing with her paws in an icy puddle, and I’d been too busy crying—and lusting after my secret crush—to notice.

“Oh!” I bent down to scoop her into my arms. “Cosy! You’re freezing!”

“Why don’t you come on up,” Christopher said, “and I’ll get you an umbrela and you can let your dog defrost for a minute before you both head out again?”

I was looking down at Cosabela when he said this, holding her close to me in the hope that
my body heat would eventually warm her enough so that she’d stop shaking.

So I was pretty sure he didn’t see the blush that flooded my cheeks. At least, I hoped not. It was a happy blush, since this stroke of luck—his inviting me upstairs to his apartment, where I hadn’t been since before the accident—was totally unexpected, considering the sucky twenty-four hours I’d had up till then.

“I guess,” I murmured into the puff of fur growing out of the top of Cosabela’s head.

“Thanks.”

It wouldn’t be cool, of course, if I let on how I felt about his invitation—I wanted to shriek with joy and dance around like a maniac. I had to act calm as we walked by Eddie the doorman. I prayed as Christopher and I passed that Eddie wouldn’t say anything like, “Forget something?” Because how would I explain to Christopher what I’d been doing in his building a few minutes ago?

On the other hand, maybe it would be a good opener. I could be like, “Wel, the truth is,

Christopher, I was here seeing my mom and sister. Yeah, they live in this building. Because they’re Em Watts’s mom and sister. Get it? GET IT?”

But Eddie was preoccupied with a tenant who had called down to complain about something,

so Christopher and I just breezed by and managed to get on the elevator without incident.

It was a slightly awkward, silent ride up, but Christopher broke the tension by looking over at me as I was clutching Nikki Howard’s dog, and saying, “So. You
don’t really go everywhere

in a limo, do you?”

I smiled some more into Cosy’s fur. I still hadn’t taken off my sunglasses—I didn’t want him to see the full extent of what had been going on under there. It was possible I’d escape all this

without his ever knowing I’d been standing down there bawling my eyes out.

I just said, “Uh, no.”

I was obviously not at my witty best when I was around Christopher. Which made no sense,

because I used to be able to talk nonstop around him. This was a problem that I was going to

have to do something about one day.

But right then, seeing as how I was just barely hanging on emotionally, I figured monosyllabic

answers were okay. Now was really not the time to dive into the whole Guess what? I’m not

really Nikki Howard thing. Not when I was on the verge of bursting into hysterical sobs—or

laughter—at any moment.

“Yeah,” Christopher said, nodding. “I figured the rumors were bull.”

I smiled enigmatically—as enigmatically as I could. I mean, let’s face it: I was on the elevator

—with Christopher! I was going to Christopher’s apartment on a Sunday afternoon! It was

just like old times! It was hard to be enigmatic when I was kind of kveling with happiness.
The elevator doors slid open on Christopher’s floor—which, thankfully, was seven stories up from my parents’ floor, so I was unlikely to run into either my mother or Frida—and he said,

“It’s to the right,” and held the door open for me. Christopher had never held doors open for me back when I’d been in my old body. Not that I would have expected him to. It was just…

wel, it kind of caused my happiness to dry up and make me realize…

This wasn’t old times. It wasn’t old times at al.

“It’s right here,” Christopher said, puling out his keys.

Christopher threw open the door and I went inside, nearly tearing up again at the familiar sight of piled-up newspapers everywhere (the Commander read every newspaper he could get his hands on in the morning, so he’d know exactly what was going on in the world. I always thought it would be easier to use the Internet, but he read that, too) and the faint scent of leather (most of the Maloneys’ furniture was upholstered in soft English leather, handed down from some ancient estate long since entailed away from their branch of the family, and was much too large for a tiny faculty apartment).

“Here,” Christopher said. “Let me take your coat.”

Trying to hide my shy smile (I know! I felt shy! Around Christopher, of al people!), I puled
off my gloves and began untwining my scarf, then shrugged off my leather jacket—but not before kneeling down to help Cosabela off with hers first.

The one thing I didn’t take off, when I was done disrobing both of us, and had handed everything to Christopher to stack on the antique bench in the front entranceway, were my sunglasses. My excitement wasn’t the only thing I was trying to hide.

“Have a seat,” Christopher said when I folowed him into the living room. He shoved a stack of the Times, The Wal Street Journal, and The Washington Post out of the way, just letting them crash to the floor, to make room for me on the cracked brown leather couch. “Do you want some coffee or tea or hot chocolate or something?”

Refreshments. He was offering me refreshments. Like I was a real guest.

Which in a way I was, I guess. I always should have been…Em Watts, girl. Not Em Watts, sexless friend from seven floors down.

For some reason, however, that had never seemed to occur to Christopher. Not until I started wearing much tighter shirts. In someone else’s body.

“So, some tea would be great,” I said, putting Cosy down. She was better now that we were inside, where it was warm. She’d stopped shaking and was looking around for a place to curl.
up and take a nap. “Could I just use your bathroom for a second?”

Christopher said sure and showed me where it was, and I followed him, pretending I didn’t

know where I was going, even though I’d been in his bathroom a thousand times before.

Once safely inside, I shut the door and whipped off my sunglasses and squinted at my

reflection in the shaving cream-flecked mirror above the sink (Christopher and his dad had a

housekeeper, but she only visited every other week. Or at least she used to. Judging by the

mess, it was hard to tel if she stil came at al anymore).

Actua(y, I didn’t look that bad. You could barely tel I’d been crying. I wiped off a little

mascara where it had smudged. Just a wave of the lip gloss from my Miu Miu
tote (which I

realy only kept in there to prevent chapping, because you don’t know how the makeup artists

get on your case when you presented yourself to them with chapped lips, which they then had

to exfoliate), and I was good to go. I gave myself a smile for luck, and noticed how the

bathroom smeled like Barbasol, Christopher’s shaving gel of choice. I stood there and inhaled

it for a while, because it smeled like him.

Yeah. I was that far gone. I couldn’t even be mad at him for treating Nikki better
than he had ever treated me. Because I realized he just didn’t know any better. He hadn’t understood what he’d had in me until I was gone.

Except that I wasn’t gone. That was what he hadn’t figured out yet. Though how I was going to let him know that—in a way he was going to be able to comprehend—was what I hadn’t figured out yet.

But checking for tearstains wasn’t the only reason I’d gone into the bathroom, of course. I reached into my tote and pulled out my pocket bug detector and turned it on. It seemed almost too much to hope that Stark hadn’t hit the Maloneys’ place as well as my parents’. But since I hadn’t yet been able to establish any kind of meaningful contact with Christopher, there was always a chance they hadn’t bothered to slip any surveillance equipment in here.

Except…that they had. At least if the antennae were working properly. The signal was strong and steady. Even after I smacked it a few times.

Geez! Thanks, Stark. Thanks a lot.

Sighing, I put away the detector, washed my hands, and came out. Well, at least I’d dodged a bullet in the form of any embarrassing questions about why I might have been weeping.

Christopher couldn’t have noticed my little crying jag outside.
“So, why,” Christopher asked, after I’d settled onto the couch and he’d come out of the kitchen with a steaming mug of mint tea for me in one hand and a cup of coffee for himself in the other, “were you crying down there, anyway?”
NINE

I STARED AT HIM.

Great. I wasn’t going to tel him. I wasn’t going to tel him a thing.

“I wasn’t crying,” I said, taking the mug from him. Oh, excelent response, Em! Score one for
you.

“Yeah, you were,” he said. He sat down on the other end of the couch, after first kicking off
the Los Angeles Times and the Seattle Post-Inteligencer. Cosabela, who had made herself at
home on the cushion between us, watched the individual sections of the paper fal to the
parquet floor, with her ears perked in curiosity. “I mean, I guess you could try to say that your eyes were just watering with the cold. But it looked pretty obvious to me that you were
crying.”

I stared at him speechlessly. What was there for me to say, after al? I was busted. I took a
tiny sip of the hot tea and hoped to find inspiration in its mint flavor. Except… no. Nothing.

“You don’t have to tel me if you don’t want to, of course,” Christopher went on. “But I don’t
see what you’ve got to lose. I don’t know anybody you know, so it’s not like I’m going to tel
anyone.”
I looked around the apartment, half afraid a paparazzo or even someone from Stark was going
to pop out from behind a piece of furniture and snap my photo. Christopher had barely spoken
three sentences to me since I’d come out of my coma and started attending Tribeca
Alternative again. Why would they put transmitters in his home? Even Stark could see he was
more interested in McKayla Donofrio than he was in me. What was their problem?
“My dad’s at his weekend office hours right now,” Christopher said, seeming to read my
thoughts—although not entirely correctly. “Last day before finals. All his students are
panicked.”
“Oh,” I said. I wished he’d read my other thoughts. The ones where I wanted him to put down
that coffee mug and kiss me. And realize that I was his old friend Em and not Nikki Howard.
Although that might put a damper on the whole kissing scenario, since Christopher had never
expressed the slightest interest in making out with me when I’d been alive. In my old body, I
mean.
“It’s just,” I said slowly. Why not tell him? Why not tell him I was his old friend Em, that I
wasn’t dead after all? I couldn’t tell him verbally, because somewhere in this apartment was a

listening device. But I could write the truth down, couldn’t I? Then destroy the evidence when I was through?

Yeah, why not? Christopher wouldn’t tell anyone.

Except his dad, of course. Who was such a conspiracy theorist that, when he found out his

apartment was bugged—as he would, since I’d have to tell Christopher that’s why I was

writing, instead of just telling him, my secret—he’d surely insist on going to every news

organization in the country with the story. The Commander hated Stark almost as much as I

did. There was no way Christopher would ever get him to keep quiet about what they’d done

to me…or the fact that they’d bugged his apartment.

And then Mom and Dad would be ruined, if not made to serve actual jail time, for breaking the

contract they’d signed. Those millions of dollars they’d have to pay back for my surgery, legal

fees, and fines? Even Nikki Howard didn’t have that much in her bank account…not that I’d

have access to that money anymore, after the Commander went to CNN.

No. Just no. I couldn’t tell Christopher the truth. Not now.

And the way things were going? Maybe not ever.

“It’s just,” I said again, stalling for time. What could I say? What? How about…
wel, some

semblance of the truth, I guess? Just not the whole truth. “...I got some bad news today.”

“Really?” Christopher looked concerned. This was how he used to look when I’d tell him

about a bad grade, or a fight with my sister, or my character losing a life on Journeyquest.

That’s when I realized... What was I saying? I couldn’t tell him about what had just happened

with my mom... that I was upset that I couldn’t go to Florida for winter break with my family.

Because they weren’t supposed to be my family anymore.

But I had to say something now that I’d blurted out the thing about getting some bad news.

Only what? That I’m a Stark Angel? Oh, God, no... Christopher wouldn’t have the slightest bit

of sympathy. Anything but that. But what else?

“My mom’s missing,” I heard myself say.

Oh. Great. Okay, yeah, so I didn’t mean to blurt out that. But it was too late to stuff the words back in my mouth now.

Christopher stared at me, his blue eyes wide.

“Your mom is missing?” he echoed.

Only when the words were out of his mouth did it occur to me that possibly this was the part I shouldn’t have mentioned after all. Maybe leading with being a Stark Angel would have been

better.
“We’re not close,” I said lamely. “She’s, uh”—Wow. How do I get myself out of this one?

—“been missing awhile, and I only just found out because we don’t talk on a regular basis—”

Then I realized maybe this wasn’t the most tactful thing to say, either. Christopher and his own mother weren’t close, due to his having chosen, when his parents were divorcing, to live with his father and not his mother. But this, he’d once confided to me, wasn’t because of any particular dislike of his mother or a surfeit of affection for his dad, but because his younger sister had chosen to live with their mother, and Christopher had felt it only fair that one child side with their father, who’d also sued for ful custody. Which is how he’d ended up living in my building.

“How long has she been missing?” he asked. He was absently petting Cosabela, who’d f alan asleep with her muzzle on his knee.

“A couple of months,” I replied, a little surprised by the intensity of his interest. But then I guess it would be alarming to hear that someone’s mom was missing. If you were anyone except my agent, Rebecca, that is. “Maybe…three.”

Christopher got a faraway look in his blue eyes. “Right around the time of the accident,” he murmured as he stared off in the direction of the television. “It makes sense.”

My eyebrows went up. “Excuse me?” I asked.

His gaze snapped back toward me. “Nothing,” he said. But it was clear it wasn’t nothing.
“What have you done to try to find her?” he asked. “Has anyone filed out a missing person report?”

“Um,” I said. “Yeah. I guess.”

“You guess?” Christopher looked confused. I couldn’t blame him. I was confused, too. What was going on, exactly? I was really starting to wonder if maybe grief over my death had sent Christopher around the bend. Chopping off all his hair the way he had—it used to be to his shoulders—wasn’t the only change I’d seen in him since I “died.” He’d gotten too intense, spent too much time alone in the computer lab in school, not talking to anyone. Including me, despite my efforts to draw him out.

“Well, my brother’s the one who’s looking into it, really,” I said. “All I’ve done is call my cell phone service provider,” I added. “To see if she called and maybe I missed it—”

Christopher shook his head. “It could take months before they get back to you with that information.”

I looked at him and shrugged. “I know,” I said. “But what else can I do?” I hated feeling this helpless. Especially in front of Christopher. Back in my old body, I’d always made a point to do everything for myself in front of him, like if I showed the slightest female weakness, he might think less of me somehow. If there was a bug on the floor? I
squashed it. If something was too high for me to reach on a shelf? I got a chair and climbed it. If the lid to the peanut butter jar was on too tight? I’d have gone all the way to my own apartment and asked my dad to open it

before I’d have asked Christopher.

But now…now I was wondering if this had been the wisest strategy. I mean, did you really get
guys by acting like you didn’t need them? That had not been how I’d gotten Brandon to kiss

me the other night. I’d asked him for help getting back to New York, and next thing I knew,

we’d started making out, and he’d asked me to be his girlfriend.

If I wanted to make out with Christopher, wouldn’t it have behooved me to act like I needed

him? Just a little bit?

And okay, I hate girls like that—the Whitney Robertsons of the world. But hey. Didn’t she

have the hottest boyfriend in school (if you considered Polo-wearing, thick-necked jocks hot)?

“McKayla Donofrio’s father is with the Office of the Attorney General,” Christopher offered,

obviously trying to be helpful. “Maybe he could do something for your mom.”

McKayla Donofrio? How did Christopher know what her dad did for a living?

Although knowing what a snob McKayla was, she’d probably bragged about it in class one

day when I hadn’t been there. She bragged al the time about being a National Merit Scholar
and head of Tribeca Alternative’s Business Club. She even bragged about being lactose intolerant. Having a father in the Office of the Attorney General would be only slightly less prestigious to a girl like McKayla.

On the other hand, maybe Christopher and McKayla were dating. Hadn’t I caught her staring at him more and more often as the semester had gone on, especially since he’d cut his hair and started wearing more black (what was up with that, anyway)? And hadn’t I seen his gaze stray more than once in her direction? But then, I’d just thought he was staring blankly at whatever was in front of him out of abject boredom.

There couldn’t be anything going on between the two of them. There could not. And yet…

Suddenly, I felt like crying all over again. The thought of Christopher with McKayla, on top of everything else, was more than I could handle.

And that’s exactly what I needed, someone from the Office of the Attorney General of the state of New York poking around in Nikki Howard’s business. Please.

“Hey.” Christopher reached out and laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. I was so startled—I’d been busy picturing the two of them at one of McKayla’s Business Club meetings, his fair head and her dark one bent over some kind of PowerPoint presentation together, I’d almost
forgotten he was there—that I jumped. “Are you all right?”

“I—I’m fine,” I said. My eyes were filled with tears again. I reached up hastily to wipe them away. “Just…allergies. Sorry. I should probably go…”

I got up, wanting to leave before I had even less control over my tear ducts. I was turning into a total basket case. Also, allergies? In winter? Right. Brilliant, Em.

“You’re really upset about this,” Christopher said, gazing up at me. He hadn’t fallen for the allergy excuse. “Aren’t you?”

“Well,” I said, sniffing. Did I feel a twinge of guilt over the fact that he was mistaking my tears for concern over Nikki Howard’s missing mom, when they were, in fact, tears for him? Yeah.

But so what? It was kind of hard to feel bad about it when he was gazing at me so worriedly with those bright blue eyes of his. “I mean, yeah. She’s my mother.”

Oooh, nice one, Em. Laying it on kind of thick, are you?

“Look.” Christopher seemed to come to some kind of decision in his head. “Before you go… just let me try something.”

He got up—jostling Cosabela, who sighed and curled up into a ball—and crossed the living room, heading down the hall. I realized he was heading toward his bedroom. What was going on?

“Uh. Christopher?” I called after him when a few minutes passed, and he didn’t
reappear.

Clearly, he wasn’t just getting me an umbrela.

“In here,” he caled back. “It’s okay. Come on in.”

I folowed the sound of his voice, wondering what on earth he was up to, since getting me an umbrela shouldn’t have taken that long.

I found myself freezing in his bedroom doorway, however.

“All of this would be a lot easier,” Christopher was muttering, from the chair in front of his desktop, “if we could crack their firewal—”

But I was barely listening. That’s because sitting there on top of Christopher’s messy bookshelf, which was sagging in the middle because there were so many hardbacks piled onto it, was a framed photo of…

Me.


It was the photo they’d used at my memorial service. It wasn’t very flattering, in my opinion. It was a school photo, the one I’d told Mom not to even bother buying, because in the proof,

one of my teeth was doing this weird snaggle thing (I always thought I’d have time to get that fixed one day. No such luck). She’d gone ahead and bought it, anyway, because…wel, of

what happened.

And now a copy of it was sitting in Christopher’s bedroom, on such prominent
you couldn’t go anywhere, really, without feeling like it was looking at you.

“Hey, Felix.” Christopher, ignoring me, was speaking into his computer.

A squeaky young male voice came on over the speakers, and I saw Christopher’s fourteen-year-old cousin, Felix, the one who was under house arrest in Brooklyn for some kind of computer-hacking crime, on Christopher’s monitor.

“Didn’t you just leave here?” Felix wanted to know. “What’d you do, forget something?”

“I got my friend Nikki here,” Christopher said. “Her mother is missing. Can you run her Soc and see if anything comes up?”

“A girl?” Felix’s voice rose an octave. “You got a girl in your room?”

“Yeah, I got a girl in my room,” Christopher said in a calm voice. He didn’t blush or anything, the way he might have in the old days. This, to me, was only clearer proof there was something going on between him and McKayla.

But then…what was with the picture of me?

To tell the truth, I couldn’t believe the way he was…well, taking charge. That just wasn’t Christopher. Christopher was Doritos and the Discovery Channel, not ordering people around and Skyping his cousin to consult about “running” a missing woman’s Social Security number.

This change in him was kind of freaking me out. In a good way. Except for the photo of the
old me, and the McKayla part.

“Can you help her?” Christopher asked his cousin.

“Of course I can help her,” Felix said. He sounded like a kid. Which wasn’t that unusual, since I could see from the monitor that that’s what he was…skinny neck, tufted black hair, pimples, and al. “Let me see her.”

“You don’t need to see her,” Christopher said.

“I want to see her,” Felix said. “I have to sit cooped up in here al day by myself. If you’ve got a girl in your room, I want to see one.”

“You can’t—” Christopher began.

I took a quick step so that I was viewable in the lens of the camera on Christopher’s monitor.

“Hi, Felix,” I said, just to shut him up.

Felix let out an expletive and abruptly disappeared from view. “Chris,” he whispered from somewhere off camera. “That’s Nikki Howard. You didn’t tel me the girl in your room was Nikki Howard.”

“Well,” Christopher said, sounding faintly amused. “The girl in my room is Nikki Howard.”

“How,” Felix wanted to know, from wherever he was hiding, “did you get Nikki Howard to come into your room?”

Christopher looked over at me. He was smiling a little. “She basicaly folowed me here,” he
joked. I couldn’t help smiling a little back at him. If he was doing all this to make me stop crying, it was working. Wow. I should have tried a few tears on Christopher years ago. I probably could have gotten him to change the channel all those times he’d insisted on watching those boring episodes of Top Gear. “Do you think you can help her, Felix, or not?”

“Of course I can help her.” Felix reappeared on the computer monitor. He’d combed his stick-uppy black hair and put on a different shirt. “Hey, there, Nikki,” he said in a much deeper tone of voice. “How you doing?”

“Uh,” I said, laughing a little, in spite of my unease about the situation. “I’m fine.”

“Great. That’s great,” Felix said. “So, just give me your mom’s Social Security number, and we can get down to business.”

I glanced at Christopher. “The police already checked this stuff out, I think—”

“The police!” Felix’s scorn was explosive. “You think they have the resources I do, even though they did take away my Wi-Fi connection and now I have to piggyback off my neighbor’s? Trust me, unless she’s dead or living off the grid, I’ll find her. Just cough up the digits, babe.” Christopher gave him a warning wag of his finger, and Felix apologized. “Sorry, I mean, Miss Howard.”
“I don’t actually have that number on me,” I explained. Then, seeing Felix’s look of dejection, I added quickly, “But I guess I can get it—”

“Great!” Felix perked right up. “As soon as you do, text me! Or maybe you could come over, actualy. My mom makes really good chili—”

Christopher reached out and switched the monitor off. Felix disappeared in a poof.

“He’s kind of a freak,” Christopher explained. “But he really does know what he’s doing, believe it or not. That’s why the judge gave him six months instead of just a slap on the wrist.

My dad sends me over there every Sunday to try to be a good influence on Felix, but I think it’s the other way around. Anyway, you can just give the number to me when you get it. And I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said, glancing up at my picture, which was leering toothily down at us. I glanced hastily away from it. “This is really nice of you.”

Christopher shrugged. “You can make it up to me, actualy. I mean, if you want to.”

I could? All sorts of ideas how I could make it up to him went through my head. The tongue trick, even though I still didn’t know what it was, sprang foremost to mind, which was disturbing. I had to go sink down on Christopher’s tightly made bed (the
Commander believed
a tidy bed was a sign of a tidy mind) before my knees gave out from under me.

“Oh?” I managed to squeak out, when I could finally speak.

“Yeah,” Christopher said. “So. Just how loyal are you to your boss, anyway?”

This was such an unexpected question, I blurted, “Who?” without thinking.


Taken completely aback, I stammered, “W-why?”

“You work for a company that reported three hundred billion dollars in sales last year, most of
the profit of which went to line your boss’s pocket. I’m just wondering,” Christopher said

calmly, “how you feel about him.”

I was so transfixed by the blueness of Christopher’s eyes, I heard myself saying, before I

could stop myself, “He wants me to parade around in a ten-million-dollar bra made out of

diamonds, on national television. How do you think I feel about him?”

Christopher smiled. When he smiled, something strange happened to my insides. It was like

they turned to liquid.

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

And then he told me what he planned to do. And what he needed from me.

And my world, which had already been upside down, flipped over one more
time.

“Felix and I have been trying to find a wormhole to get us into Stark’s corporate mainframe for ages,” he said. “But we haven’t been able to. Their firewall is that good. So instead of a back door, I think we’re going to have to try going in through the front door.” Christopher had stopped smiling and regarded me seriously. “Do you think you could get us a user name and password for someone who works at Stark Enterprises? Someone high up would be best, but at this point we’ll take anyone…”

I just stared at him.

This was what he wanted from me? was all I could think. A lousy user name and password?

It so figured. Why was I even surprised? I mean, the guy had a picture of a dead girl on his bookshelf. Not a small one, either, but an eight-by-ten glossy, with eyes that followed you everywhere you went.

Great. Now I was starting to get jealous of myself.

I stood up. Then I walked over to Christopher’s bedroom window. To his surprise, I leaned over and yanked it open, letting in a blast of cold air, as well as the steady patter of the sleet and loud traffic sounds from Bleecker Street, below. The acoustic interference, I hoped, would make it hard for anyone listening to our conversation to hear what we were saying.
“What are you doing?” he asked me curiously. He had to raise his voice a little to be heard over the traffic.

I waved my hand around my head. “Did it ever occur to you,” I asked, “that they could be listening?”

Christopher stared at me. “Who could?”

“Stark,” I whispered. My heart gave a little thump as I said it. Not so much because of the thought of Stark listening to us, but because Christopher was looking at me… really looking at me, like he was actually seeing me for the first time.

Only, of course, he wasn’t.

Christopher laughed. “Stark? Here? Are you serious?”

I was dead serious. But, I couldn’t tell him that. Especially not now.

“Christopher, you shouldn’t underestimate them,” I said instead. “They…they know things.”

He laughed some more. “You’re paranoid.”

“Maybe,” I said, going back to my perch on his bed. “Maybe you should try being a little paranoid, too. What you’re talking about…it’s crazy. I mean…what are you guys going to do once you get into their system?”

He looked surprised.
“Take it down,” he said in a What else? tone of voice.

Take it down. Like it should be so obvious. Also like it would be that easy. Like he was Robin Hood, and Stark Enterprises was a coach ful of gold he was going to rob.

“Isn’t that a little…childish?” I pushed some of my hair behind my ears as I tried to figure out how to phrase what I was going to say next without offending him. “I mean, okay, yeah, so their system goes down for a few hours. You’ll make some Stark cel phone owners mad,

whatever. Maybe you’ll get on Google News. But…what’s the point? Just to show you can?

Your computer is bigger than their computer? Big deal.”

“No, no,” Christopher interrupted, shaking his head. “You don’t understand. I mean, the point

is to take it down. To take Stark Enterprises down. Forever.”
TEN

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN OBVIOUS TO anyone looking at me as I staggered into school

Monday morning just before the late bell rang, a cup of tea clutched in one hand and my Marc Jacobs tote full of overdue assignments and my MacBook Air in the other, that I hadn’t had a

good weekend. I know I looked particularly heinous. I’d tossed and turned all night, unable to

sleep not just because Lulu Collins was hogging my Frette sheets and duvet, but because the

guy I was hopelessly in love with? Yeah, wel, he was in love, too. Only not with McKayla

Donofrio, it turned out. He was in love with a dead girl.

Oh, and did I mention that he planned to obliterate the company I worked for? Yeah.

It wasn’t like I was al that enamored of Stark Enterprises. But I didn’t want to destroy it,

necessarily. After al, I actualy liked a few people who worked there.

Not that Christopher had been kind enough to share with me yesterday the details of what he

and his cousin Felix intended to do once they’d gotten the information they needed. Why

would he tel me? I was just some bubbleheaded model.

He hadn’t put it that way, of course. But it was clear he didn’t think I’d
“understand” and that I was “better off not knowing.”

Of course, part of that was my own fault for pretending not to understand the simplest things about computers when I’d first “met” him.

But there hadn’t been any pretense in my reaction to his statement that he was going to take down Stark Enterprises. I couldn’t help myself. I’d been honestly horrified. I’d blurted out the first thing that sprang into my mind, and that was, “But…why?”

Christopher had just smiled in an enigmatic way and said, “I have my reasons.”

I hadn’t missed the way his gaze had flicked, just for an instant, toward my photo.

Great. Just great! It was perfectly obvious now what was going on. My death, as had the deaths of so many tragic heroines before me, had caused another one…the death of Christopher, only just on the inside. His heart had died, and created where fun, joyful

Christopher used to be—the Christopher I had loved, the Christopher with whom I’d played

so many rounds of Journeyquest, the Christopher whom I’d longed to notice me as not just a
gal pal but as a girl—an evil supervilain.

Why had I been so surprised? It happened at the time in comic books. Christopher was now going to use his powers for evil instead of good to avenge my death. What other explanation
could there be?

Just to be sure, I’d asked, “Wel, is one of the reasons what happened to your friend who died at that Stark Megastore? Because I’m pretty sure that was the fault of the protester who shot that paintbal at the plasma screen she was standing under.”

Christopher had looked at me without expression and said, “And who was responsible for making sure that plasma screen was secured wel enough to the ceiling that an assault from a paintbal attack wouldn’t cause it to come crashing down?”

“Wel, Stark,” I’d said. “But—”

“Stark has to be held accountable for what it did.”

Oh, my God! I couldn’t believe how upsetting this was.

But also, in a way, how kind of hot it was. I mean, what girl wouldn’t want a guy to go on a wild computer-hacking rampage against a majorly environmentaly irresponsible corporation,

just for her? Especialy one that was basicaly holding her in corporate slavery, and which had just the day before almost made her get eaten by sharks.

The only problem was, he wasn’t doing it for me. Wel, I mean, he was, but he didn’t know it.

Because he thought Em Watts was dead.

And now more than ever, I couldn’t tel him I wasn’t. Because it was obvious
he’d completely
lost it. Who knew what he’d do if he found out the truth? In seconds he might spil it al over
the blogosphere, in order to get his “revenge” on Stark.
And where would that leave me? And my parents? In bankruptcy court, that’s where. Oh,
sure, Stark would go down.
But so would the Watts family.
It was bad enough Christopher had been doing al this crazy virus programming and Stark
probably knew it, given that they were bugging his place, and there I was, sitting in his
apartment. I just couldn’t believe any of it was happening. Christopher, my sweet, funny best
friend, Christopher, had turned into this dark, cynical crusader for global justice? Since when?

“Do you realy think,” I’d said, trying to figure out how I was going to handle this, “that this is what your friend—Em, I think you said her name was—would want? I mean, what if you get
caught? You could get house arrest, like your cousin. Or worse, actual jail time, if you’re tried as an adult.”

“I don’t care,” Christopher had said, shaking his head. “It’d be worth it.”
A chil had gone up my spine. It was obvious then that Christopher’s transformation was a
hundred percent complete. Al that was missing were his black cape and a jagged facial scar.
“You’d risk possible incarceration,” I’d asked in astonishment, “for a dead girl?”

His next words had rocked my world to its core:

“She was worth it,” he’d said simply.

If I could have picked up a knife and jammed it in Em Watts’s heart right then, I would have,

too, I hated her so much at that moment. Never mind that Em Watts was me. I couldn’t look

at her picture a second longer. I’d had to get out. I’d had to get out of Christopher’s lair slash bedroom. Especially because of the whole stil-wanting-to-kiss-him thing.

And he so very definitely not wanting to kiss me. Because he was in love with a dead girl.

I don’t know what I did or said after that. Somehow I’d found myself in his front hallway,

jamming my arms back into my coat and suiting Cosy back up into hers. It shames me to say I

think there might have been some more of those unshed tears in my eyes…

But I don’t think he noticed. This time.

And, of course, now I had to decide…Did I give him what he wanted and risk the jobs of al

the people I worked with on a pretty much daily basis (if what he and Felix had planned were

to succeed, which, let’s face it…the chances? I loved Christopher, and I don’t

think there’s anything he couldn’t do if he set his mind to it. But bring down a bazilion-dolar corporation like Stark with a computer virus, or whatever he was
planning? Let's get ever so slightly real?)?

Or did I blow him off and try to find Steven’s mom some other way?

Plus, the whole thing about getting him to like me as I was now, in Nikki Howard’s body.

Because when I was standing there in the halway, trying not to let him see how freaked I was,

he was definitely giving off a let’s-get-the-pretty-girl-out-of-here-now-since-she’s-not-coughing-up-the-info-we-need vibe.

Oh, he’d been polite enough. He’d given me that umbrella he’d promised and everything.

But he hadn’t exactly begged me to stick around or anything.

Was it any wonder I’d been up all night? And had done zero studying for finals?

As soon as I got to Tribeca Alternative, I wandered into the ground-floor ladies’ room, hoping to snatch a minute in the mirror before class to do some kind of repair work to my face prior to encountering Christopher in first-period Public Speaking. I had no idea what I was going to say to him, but I knew I’d feel more confident if I had some lip gloss on. The merits of lip gloss had long been praised by my sister but ignored by me, until professional makeup artists had started slathering it on me every day, and I saw the results in the mirror and the pages of the magazines Nikki’s face routinely graced. It could really boost a girl’s self-esteem, and anyone who thought otherwise had never tried Nars Triple X.

It was funny that as I was thinking this, my sister came barreling out of the ladies’ room and crashed right into me.
“Em—I mean, Nikki!” she cried, as hot tea sloshed out of the cardboard cup I was holding,

and all over the floor beside us. “Oops! Oh, no, I’m so sorry!”

Her friends—Frida rarely traveled without a pack of fellow junior varsity cheerleaders around

her—al stared at me owlishly. Even though I’d been going to Tribeca Alternative (in my current incarnation) for almost two months now, the student body stil hadn’t gotten used to seeing me around the halls, and I was the recipient of a lot of gawking and even the occasional catcall, though I was probably among the more conservative dressers there. Bely, cleavage,

and thong-baring ensembles weren’t tolerated by the administration, but that didn’t rule out the occasional “accidental” flash of tanned flesh from Whitney Robertson and her ilk. I, however,

kept what I had going on strictly under wraps. Of course, it would be no secret after New Year’s, thanks to the Stark Angel fashion show.

“Hey,” I said to Frida. “Thanks.” I was being sarcastic about the tea, which had burned my hand. I wiped it on my Temperley top, which was fortunately dark blue and wouldn’t show the resulting stain.

“I’m so glad I bumped into you. We really need to talk,” Frida said, grabbing my arm and

dragging me into the bathroom she’d just vacated. “You guys go on without me,” she called to
her friends. “I gotta chat with Nik for a sec.”

Nik. Nice one. Her friends would be so impressed.

Fortunately, the ladies’ room was empty, as Frida quickly ascertained after a quick stall check.

“How could you run off like that yesterday?” she demanded, dropping my arm as well as the polite tone she’d adopted in the hallway in front of her friends. “Mom and I were so worried about you. And then you wouldn’t return any of our calls.”

I just blinked at her. This was too much for me to handle so early in the morning on basically zero sleep and no caffeine. Not that I ever got to have much caffeine, anyway, since I found out it’s forbidden on Nikki’s acid reflux diet (which she’d fortunately kept taped to the side of the refrigerator). One cup a day is all she could handle, I’d discovered, or it’s reflux city.

“I was having a really bad day,” I said. This wasn’t a very good explanation, I knew. But it was all I had.

“And you left that big bag of presents for us!” Frida went on. “Just left it, without saying anything!”

“Those were for you guys to open when we all got to Grandma’s,” I said. I didn’t want to think about the fun present fests we used to have down in Florida, the free-for-all of gift wrap and dreidels and chocolate Santas. I’d never experience any of that
again, I knew.

“I know,” Frida said. “That was so nice of you…”

I knew she’d already shaken the distinctively wrapped, robin’s egg blue box I’d gotten her,

and had figured out by now it contained exactly what she’d always wanted… something al her

friends here at Tribeca Alternative had but that our parents could never afford to get her…

pair of diamond stud earrings.

“Look,” I said uncomfortably. I didn’t like thinking about how she was going to be opening

that box down in Florida, without me being there to see her expression when she did. “I have
to go. The bell’s going to ring, and I haven’t even been to my locker yet.”

“No,” Frida said, reaching to grab my wrist again. But this time not the one holding the tea.

“Nikki, Mom and Dad and I talked. That’s why we kept calling you. Mom didn’t think you’d be so upset about not going to Grandma’s. She thought you’d be going somewhere fabulous

like Paris or wherever and wouldn’t care—”

“I really have to get going,” I said. I didn’t want to hear this. She was going to say they’d

decided to have some kind of lame Christmas-Hanukkah party here in the city for me before

they leave, with a gift exchange and hot cider and a viewing of A Christmas
Story or
something.

But it wasn’t going to be the same without Grandma and the beach and her
stupid frozen

bagels. Which I couldn’t eat, anyway, in this dumb body.

“—but now that we know you’re going to be around, we’re going to change the
whole thing,”

Frida went on. “We’re skipping Florida this year. We’re going to stay here in the
city, and

Gran’s agreed to fly up! So you can come over. We can say you’re my friend
from school—”

“Free,” I said. I did not want to hear this.

“Come on, Em. I know it won’t be the same, but it’ll be fun. Gran’s even excited

about

coming to the city in winter, and you know how hard it is to get her to come here
when it’s
cold—”

“Free!”

Frida jumped, but whether because of the bel or the fact that I’d shouted at her, I
didn’t

know. In any case, I’d gotten her attention.

“We’re going to be late to class. We’ll discuss it later, okay?”

mean, I agreed

to give up going to cheerleading camp so I could stick around here in the city
and be with

you.”

Suddenly, I didn’t want my tea anymore, caffeine fix or not. I dumped the entire thing into a

nearby trash can and made my way out of the ladies’ room.

“That doesn’t make me happy, Frida,” I hissed at her, from between gritted teeth, as she

trotted along behind me. “I want you to do what you want, not what you think I want.”

“But I am doing what I want,” Frida said. “I really want to come to your party.”

I staggered to a halt and whirled around to face her, even as the last of the latecomers were

running past us, trying to get to class before tardy slips were given out.

“Wait a minute.” I stared down at her. “Did you weasel out of going to Florida just so you

could come to Lulu’s party?” It would totally be like her to have done this. Frida was so

obsessed with glitz and glamour, she’d gnaw her own arm off in exchange for a chance to

brush up with a celebrity…if it were the right one.

Frida’s blush revealed the truth before she could say a word. “No, not exactly,” she said.

I threw my hands into the air in exasperation and turned around again to head back to class. I was done.

“What?” Frida trailed after me. “I thought you’d be happy! I mean, you looked so sad
yesterday! Now you’ll have Mom and Dad and me to hang out with—”

“You’re incredible,” I said. “You know, Frida, yesterday I went out of my way, slogging

through terrible weather, not to mention risking getting Mom mad at me, to stick up for you, al because you were so adamant about going to that cheer camp. And as soon as you got a

better invitation, you totaly dropped it. What happened to your being such an integral part of the team? What happened to your being the base?”

Frida hurried along beside me, her mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. She was trying, I knew, to think of an excuse for her behavior. But there was nothing she could say, because

there was no excuse.

“I know you think you’re doing me this big favor,” I said. “But you’re not actualy doing it for me, are you? Because you’re the one who’s realy getting something out of it. Wel, I’ve got

news for you, Free. There are some things that are more important than parties. Such as being

there for your teammates. Did you ever think of how they’re going to feel when they find out

you’ve ditched them so you can party with Nikki Howard and Lulu Colins?”

I’d reached the room where my Public Speaking class was held, and turned at the doorway to

glare down at her. Frida’s eyes were filed with angry tears.

“I thought I was being there for my sister,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Wel, funny how you only remember you have a sister when you want
something, like someone to side with you against your mother or give you diamond earrings or
an invitation to a kick-ass loft party. Which you’re not invited to, by the way.”

I stormed past her just as Mr. Greer caled, “Ms. Howard? Are you joining us today? Or are
you going to stand out in the halway, chatting?”

“Sorry,” I muttered. I sailed into the classroom and slid into my seat…

…which just happened to be in front of Christopher.

This was so not shaping up as my kind of day.
ELEVEN

CHRISTOPHER WAS ACTUALLY AWAKE, for once, and greeted me with a smile.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Oh,” I began, telling myself, Don’t you dare smile back, Em Watts, no matter how much you might want to because of how much you love him and what that smile does to you! He’s evil!

And even if he’s not, he doesn’t like you! Wel, he does, but not the real you. The dead you.

And that’s just wrong. And so is what he and his cousin want to do.

Right?

But before I had a chance to say anything more to Christopher, Whitney Robertson, who was sitting one desk over, leaned forward and whispered, “Oh, my God, is that top Temperley?

It’s so nice.”

“How was your weekend?” Whitney’s henchwoman, Lindsey Jacobs, seated in the row beside hers, was also leaning forward eagerly. “I saw online that you were in St. John with Brandon Stark.” There were photos of our trip online? Great. If there were any of Brandon and me making out, I was going to murder someone. “That must have been incredible! I would
give anything to get out of here for a couple of days, the weather’s been so
miserable. And

with Brandon Stark! He’s so hot. How could you even stand to come back? I’d
have killed

myself.”

She had no idea.

“Ladies.” Mr. Greer sounded snide. “So sorry to interrupt. But some of you
might recal that

it’s the last week of the semester, and we’re finishing up our final three-minute
oral

presentations, which wil count as a quarter of your grade, before winter break.”

I couldn’t help groaning inwardly. I was completely unprepared for this. And it
was going to

be my turn to give my presentation sometime soon, and I hadn’t had a second to
work on it.

When I’d got home from Christopher’s last night, I’d been astonished to find
Lulu there

instead of out partying with her friends, and in the kitchen making, of al things,
coq au vin.

Since I’d never seen her cook anything more complicated than microwave
popcorn, I’d been

sure she was suffering some kind of stroke and had almost caled for an
ambulance.

But it hadn’t been a breakdown. Lulu had been cooking for Nikki’s brother,
Steven, whom

she’d sent out in search of “a realy crunchy baguette of French bread” to go with
the meal she was preparing.

“I want your brother to think I can cook,” Lulu had informed me when I asked her what the

heck was going on. “No, wait, maybe I don’t. Wait, which do you think he’d think is cuter, a

girl who lied and tried to cook just for him, or a girl who really knows how to

cook?”

I’d given her a weary look and said, “Lulu, I’ll tell you what’s not cute. You, right now. This is pathetic. If you want Steven to like you, why don’t you try being yourself? That’s what you’ve always told me, remember? To just be myself?” Not that it’d ever worked. Well, it had, of

course. Just not with Christopher.

I could have worked on my homework after dinner, I suppose, but somehow I’d ended up on

the couch between Steven and Lulu, while he told her (after she’d prompted him) about his

job as radioman on the sub on which he served.

And then when I’d tried to sneak off to work, Lulu had followed me, clearly aching for a little girl talk, asking over and over again, “But…do you really think he likes me?”

“Lulu,” I’d said to her. “You just met him. Why do you like him so much already?”

Lulu sighed and snuggled down into the pillows beside me. “Because he’s just so…amazing.”

So far, the most amazing thing I’d seen about Nikki’s brother, Steven, was that he’d

volunteered to wash all the really big pots Lulu had used making the coq au vin,
the ones that

wouldn’t fit into the dishwasher and that Lulu was going to leave for Katerina to wash when

she got to the loft in the morning.

But I had to admit…for a guy, that was pretty amazing.

Stil, if I’d used our girl chat time to do my homework instead of listening to how amazing

Steven Howard was, I’d probably have felt a lot less like throwing up than I did the next

morning, when I saw Mr. Greer flipping through his roster.

“So if we could get straight to business,” Mr. Greer said. “I’d like to cal on…”

Not me, I prayed. Not me, not me, not me, and I swear I’ll stay home and study til midnight

every night this week…

“…Christopher Maloney.”

Christopher got up and went to the front of the room. I noticed with some

chagrin that I wasn’t the only girl in class whose head turned as he walked by.\n
Christopher’s look in the past few

weeks had gone from preppy Polo shirts, which used to cause him to blend right in with the

Jason Kleins of the school—Whitney’s boyfriend and reigning king of the Walking Dead—to

wearing his newly acquired black leather jacket indoors. McKayla Donofrio (I swear I was

going to rip that tortoiseshel hair band right off her head, and not even care how much hair I took with it) stared as he went past her, and both Whitney’s and
Lindsey’s eyebrows shot up
as well… and not, as in the past, because they were making fun of him, but
because his form-
fitting jeans didn’t leave much to the imagination.

“And…,” Mr. Greer said from his desk, when Christopher reached the front of
the room and
indicated he was ready to begin. Mr. Greer timed all our speeches with an oven
timer. Things
were nothing at Tribeca Alternative, considered one of Manhattan’s finest prep
schools, if not high tech. “…GO!”

“Stark Enterprises,” Christopher began, “is now the world’s largest corporation, surpassing
even the oil companies, pulling in almost three hundred billion dollars a year.”

Wait. What? Christopher’s three-minute final oral presentation was on Stark
Enterprises?

I felt myself begin to sink down in my seat.
From the sound of it, he wasn’t about to say anything good, either. Not that I had
anything
good to say about Stark. But it was just slightly embarrassing that I, the Face of
Stark, was
sitting here in the classroom while a fellow student went on a rant about my
employer. I could
feel everyone’s gaze nervously sliding toward me.

“Stark Enterprises,” Christopher went on, “declares a profit of over seven billion
dollars a
year, and yet, with more than one million employees—this country’s largest
business—the

average employee makes only fifteen thousand dollars a year before taxes for full-
time work—

hardly enough to sustain the average household in America. But Stark
employees receive

medical benefits only after two years of work, and then at such high premiums
they often have
to supplement them with government-subsidized health care programs. Essentialy, many ful-
time Stark employees, who aren’t allowed to unionize, find themselves
depending on Medicaid
to pay for their health care. Meanwhile, Robert Stark, Stark CEO and chairman, routinely
appears on the Forbes List of Wealthiest People in the World, generally in the top
ten, with a

personal worth of somewhere around forty bilion.”

Hearing this, several people began muttering…and not just Lindsey and Whitney, who

whispered that Brandon Stark was worth a lot more than they thought. I knew what was

coming next (from them): They were going to want to know if I could get them Brandon’s cel

number.

“During the past twenty years,” Christopher went on, “it’s been illustrated again
and again that while on the surface, Stark Megastores seem to provide
convenience and low prices to the
consumer—and Stark Enterprises receives tax incentives for building their stores in many towns—that convenience comes with a cost…and that cost to the communities in which these megastores appear may prove irreparable, since they wipe out locally owned businesses that didn’t get tax breaks, don’t sell cheap, knockoff products made exclusively in China, and so can’t compete with Stark’s rock-bottom prices. These megastores turn whole communities into ghost towns as locally owned businesses are forced to close. And who suffers because of this? We do, the taxpayers, when states and cities then have to finance downtown revitalization programs, which usually fail, since it’s easier for everyone to shop at Stark, where the parking is more convenient.”

I looked around to see how people were reacting to all this. Normally, this early in the morning, most of the class would have been asleep—including Mr. Greer, who had a bad habit of dozing through his students’ oral presentations.

But weirdly, everyone was wide-awake, and paying total attention to Christopher. This, of course, only fed into his rant.

“Stark keeps costs down by outsourcing every step of the way, paying nothing to the American worker,” he continued. “And Stark Quark, this computer Stark is launching after the
new year, is no exception. Not a single person involved in the manufacture of it was employed
in this country. And to guarantee every kid in every American household will be clamoring for
one this Christmas, Stark has arranged for the new Quarks to come with the only available
copies of Realm, the new version of the Journeyquest RPG, and has been doing an aggressive
ad campaign for the PCs for weeks now—"
I sank even lower in my chair. No one here could have missed the commercial, which had
gone viral on YouTube, showing Nikki Howard plinking around on a Quark keyboard resting
on her bare stomach while floating on a raft in a Stark brand bikini in a laptop-shaped pool.
The Quarks are waterproof (well, splashproof. You couldn’t actually drop them in water, as I
discovered when I accidentally did just that) and come in a variety of colors. The ad shows
Nikki in a different-colored bikini to match each of the colors the computers come in, while a boppy rock tune plays in the background. There’s no mention, of course, of how technically
useful the laptops are…just that they’re pretty.
Kind of like Nikki Howard, now that I thought of it.
“If we want to keep America from going the way of ancient Rome,” Christopher continued,
seemingly unaware of the uncomfortable silence as I caught Lindsey humming the Quark jingle,

“which in the fifth century found itself in a similar situation, with a collapsing economy and a society dependent on imported goods, we have to become producers again, and stop consuming so much. Otherwise, people like Robert Stark are going to continue getting insanely rich off our laziness, our refusal even to go buy our music at a music store, books at a

bookstore, food at grocery stores, and clothes at clothing stores, because it’s more convenient to buy al of these things in one place. Some of us are so lazy, we’d rather waste fossil fuels driving a few miles to get al of them in one store, made overseas at a discount price—even if the quality is substandard—than buy them in a few local stores, made in the good old USA.

Let’s take a moment to think about what this is doing to the communities we live in, not to mention to the American spirit—murdering them. Because that, not progress, is the true legacy of Stark: murder.”

There was a moment of silence as what Christopher had said sunk in, during which he simply

looked out at us with his ocean blue eyes. Not just out at us in general, I realized after a few seconds, but out at me…yes, me, directly at me, like I was there in the room as some kind of representative of Stark.

Which might technically have been correct. But, helo, I was the last person who needed
convincing of Stark’s evilness. Look what they had done to me.

I mean, sure, they had saved my life.

But they had also forced me to completely give it up, too, in most of the ways that matter. I couldn’t even spend the holidays with my family. Give me a break.

And okay, I completely agreed with every point Christopher brought up about Stark in his speech. But what did he expect me to do about it? Quit because my boss was the devil?

Yeah, well, I couldn’t quit.

Not that I could mention this in front of everyone.

I had no choice but to sit up straighter in my seat, fold my arms, and stare right back at him.

Even though, of course, doing so caused me to have to look at those lips again… those lips that yesterday I’d so foolishly thought might be close to finally brushing mine. I still wanted them to.

Desperately.

I was smiling bitterly to myself about this when the oven timer on Mr. Greer’s desk went off,

and I jumped, as did a few other people in the room. Everyone except Christopher, who just kept staring at me, cool as an iced mocha latte.

Then someone—McKayla Donofrio. Of course. That suck-up. Was there nothing she’d stoop
to in order to get Christopher’s attention?—started to clap. A few seconds later, more than
half the class was applauding. Like they realy meant it, too, not sarcasticaly like they
sometimes did when someone did something spastic like drop their tray in the cafeteria.

And Mr. Greer was going, “Excelent work, Christopher. Realy excelent work. Strong,
persuasive argument. I think you went a little under three minutes, but I won’t take off any
points for that because it was such an improvement over your past piece. You can take your
seat now.”

Christopher went back toward his seat. I didn’t miss the swift glances both Whitney and
Lindsey, who were among the people applauding, gave him as he passed them. I couldn’t
believe how quickly Christopher went from being a social pariah to almost revered by them. It
was as if they could sense how dead he was inside…just like they were.

And yet a part of me refused to believe Christopher realy was one of them, a member of the
Walking Dead. I knew he couldn’t realy be dead inside. Not the Christopher I loved. He was,
after al, only doing what he was doing for revenge…revenge for what had happened to me.

That thirst for revenge had made him blind to everything else, like the fact that I wasn’t realy dead—that I was sitting right in front of him…turned in my seat to face him, as a matter of fact, and saying, “Nice speech.”
Wel, what else was I going to say? Everyone was watching to see how I was going to react. I had to play the game.

Christopher nodded. “Thanks. Do you have that information we talked about yesterday?”

“Part of it,” I said, and fished from the depths of my tote bag the Social Security number I’d cadged from Steven that morning. I slid it across his desk toward him. “I’ll try to get the rest of it soon.”

I wasn’t entirely sure this was true—or how I was going to get it for him if I did decide that’s what I was going to do. But I wasn’t ready to say I wouldn’t help him when there was still a chance he was my only hope of finding Mrs. Howard.

And when there was a chance that, by helping him, maybe…just maybe…he might stop hating me.

He took the slip of paper and put it in his jacket pocket, just as Mr. Greer was calling the name of his next victim—fortunately not mine.

“Everything I said up there,” Christopher said, “is true, you know.”

His words burned. And he knew it.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m aware of that.”

“And yet you’re still loyal to Robert Stark.” He was smiling a little. I didn’t get what the smile was about. It was like he knew something—something about me.

But how could he, when the most fundamental thing of all continued to escape him completely?

“I don’t have what you want,” I said.
“But you’re going to get it for me,” Christopher said. He was so confident. He had never been
this confident when we were friends. About anything. It was sexy…but also a little frightening.

“Right?”

“Um,” I said, just as Nikki’s cel phone, deep in my tote, began to chime
“Barracuda.” “I’ll let you know.”

McKayla Donofrio, who’d been about to begin her three-minute oral presentation on
whatever incredibly boring topic she’d chosen, no doubt about the dairy industry and its
unfairness to the lactose intolerant, glared in my direction.

“Okay,” she said. “What’s with Fergie? That’s not cool, whoever didn’t turn off their cel.”

She said whoever, but from the direction of her gaze, she clearly meant me. “You could extend
some common courtesy, you know.”

“Sorry,” I said, digging through my tote. “Sorry, sorry.” I found and turned off my cel.

But not before I saw the text from my agent, Rebecca.

Rehearsal going on for Stark Angel show right now, she’d written. Where are you????
TWELVE

THREE MONTHS AGO, IF YOU’D ASKED me what I thought I’d be doing during finals

week, hanging out in my underwear at a fashion show with a bunch of the world’s top

supermodels would not have been high on my list.

In fact, it wouldn’t have been anywhere on my list.

And by hanging out at a fashion show in my underwear, I mean, About to go out onstage

wearing nothing but.

Except that they didn’t call it underwear. They called it lingerie.

And it wasn’t a stage: It was a runway.

Yeah. I was about to publicly humiliate myself wearing fewer clothes than I had ever worn in

public in my life, including in the locker room at school, where I’d always made sure to have

on something that covered me from armpits to mid thigh at all times, even if it was only a towel.

Forget about showering with my fellow students in Tribeca Alternative’s prison-style showers

—one nozzle for four to six girls at a time—in the locker room. It was impossible to work up a sweat during what passed for physical education class at TAHS, so there was no need to

shower, anyway.
Wel, impossible for me, considering that, in the past, whenever a voleybal or whatever came near me, I’d always make sure to step calmly away to avoid it.


Only now it appeared as if karma was sending me a great big power serve for all my slacking off in PE. I not only got to parade around in my underwear at the real deal on New Year’s (an event where I’d be humiliating myself in front of a live audience of four hundred photographers, journalists, cameramen, fashionistas, designers, stylists, art directors, and your everyday run-of-the-mil celebrities such as Sting and John Mayer, and various celebutantes who’d have gathered at the Stark Enterprises Sound Studios in Midtown for the occasion), but I’d have to endure several dress rehearsals, where I’d be half naked in front of assorted sound and camera people, light and technical crew, stylists, and don’t let me forget my fellow models.

One of whom—I think her name was Keley—was peering at me right now as we sat amid the craziness backstage, wardrobe assistants running around, trying to get us all sorted out and fitted with our wings and various assigned bras and panties and thongs so they’d know if they’d ordered the right amount for the Big Night.

“Are you worried, Nikki?” Keley leaned over to ask me, in a Southern accent. “’Cause you
look worried.”

“Uh…” I was totally shocked that she was speaking to me. No one had spoken to me all day,

except for the stylists, one of whom warned me about my chi. In his opinion, it could have

used some realigning. “Maybe a little.”

I smiled queasily at her. I really did think I was going to have the chocolate-covered

strawberries I’d just scarfed from the catering table. Why couldn’t I follow the advice on the

list of forbidden foods on the refrigerator back in the loft? Chocolate was definitely on it.

“You’ll be fine!” Keley said. She had huge brown eyes, made to look even larger by the liquid

liner around them. “If the lights get to be too much and you can’t see, just feel for the stage with your feet. If all you touch is air, don’t put your foot down. That means you’re at the end of the runway. You don’t want to step off into thin air. You know what happens then.” She

made a splatting noise.

This didn’t reassure me. If anything, I felt more like throwing up than ever. I was going to be so blinded by the studio lights, I was going to walk off the end of the runway? No one had

mentioned this to me before. I was already completely unsteady on the six-inch platform

Louboutins they’d handed me. My sassy “catwalk” strut? It wasn’t all that sassy, it turned out.

But I said, “Great, thanks,” anyway, to be nice.
“Gosh, Nikki,” Keley said, looking a little surprised. “You’re the one who told me that about the lights when I was just starting out. Remember?”

I blinked. I’d screwed up. As usual.

“Of course,” I said, with what I hoped was a fierce laugh. Nikki was nothing if not fierce.

Right?

Keley didn’t fall for my alleged fierceness. Wel, why should she have?

“You really did bang your head and get amnesia, like everyone is saying.” Keley looked at me pityingly.

“What’s it feel like?” another girl—this one as fair as Keley was dark—wanted to know as we waited for someone to come over and tell us the director was finally ready for us.

I was surprised—surprised Keley and the other girl were even talking to me. We’d been in the studio for hours for our fitting and rehearsal, but none of them had said a word to me, even though I’d figured, you know, being in the same business, some of the girls had to have known Nikki, and maybe even been friendly with her.

But either these girls were just too shy (doubtful, given their outgoing personalities) to say hello, or Nikki had done something to piss them off—which, knowing Nikki, was the most likely explanation.

“How’s what feel?” I asked, starting to freak. Not that this girl was speaking to
me. But that she knew. Only how could this gorgeous girl, sitting there so coolly in a water bra and thong,

have found out about my surgery?

Or maybe she didn’t know. Maybe she was a plant, sent by Stark, to try to screw me up. See

if I’d talk.

Yeah. That’s how paranoid I’ve gotten. It’s amazing what happens when you start thinking

you’re being spied on al the time, the tricks your mind starts playing on you…

“The diamond bra,” the blond girl said, when I didn’t say anything for a minute. “You’re

wearing ten million bucks on your chest, Nik. What’s that feel like?”

I looked down. Oh, yeah. I was completely cracking up, that was obvious.

“Oh,” I said. “It’s really uncomfortable. Diamonds, being the hardest substance on earth,

aren’t the best material with which to make a bra. Well, technically, that’s aggregated diamond

nanorods. But you know what I mean.”

Oh, wow. I sounded like the biggest nerd. And nothing like Nikki Howard…

The blond girl—whose name, I seemed to recall from the stylist, was Veronica—just stared at

me. But thankfully, Keley seemed to get a kick out of my reply—as did a couple of the other

models nearby—and giggled.

“Diamond nanawhatevers,” she echoed. “What have you been doing since I last
saw you?”

Keley wanted to know. “Taking science classes at night school?”

“Wel,” I replied. “Not night school, exactly, but high school—”

It was at that moment my non-Stark brand cel phone rang. I checked it to find a text from Frida.

I’m sorry, Frida had written. Plz don’t b mad! I luv u! U should c me, I can’t stop crying! Plz cal back!

Honestly. I would give anything to have the biggest crisis in my life be that my big sister said I couldn’t go to her holiday loft party. I mean, suppose Mom could see me now, in a ten-miliondolar diamond bra and sheer, black lace-trimmed panties? Oh, and did I mention the angel wings?

And PS, I was so not caling back. I was having my own personal drama right then. I did not need to get sucked into my little sister’s, which could wait until my own was finished. Which would be never, at the rate things were going.

“That’s an awesome phone,” Keley said admiringly. “And what’s the name of that ringtone?”

I looked at her in surprise.

“You can download it for free off the Internet,” I said, knowing how lame I must have sounded to these twenty-something models. Just wait until they found out my ringtone is caled Dragon Battle Cry and from an online RPG caled Journeyquest.
Except…they didn’t seem to care. In fact, Keley gasped and handed me her Stark brand phone.


“Me, too!” the other models squealed. Al but Veronica, who looked around at her friends like they’d lost their minds. Have some dignity, her look seemed to imply.

“Ladies!” Alessandro, the show’s stage director, clapped his hands to get our attention. “It’s time! Exactly like we rehearsed last time, al right?”

Except, of course, when we’d rehearsed, we’d been in our regular clothes because the lingerie hadn’t arrived yet. Not to mention our wings.

Also, it was hard to hear him, thanks to the pulsing beat that had started out on the runway.

“Oh, and the musicians are here now,” Alessandro said unnecessarily. “So let’s see if we can walk in time with the music now.”

Al the girls who’d gathered around me, wanting me to download the geekiest ringtone possible onto their phones, had run off to get into their places for the show, and Shauna, my agent Rebecca’s assistant, had hurried over to whisper, “Okay, now, Nikki? Don’t freak out,

but they’ve made a last-minute change. When you come out wearing the diamond bra, Gabriel Luna is going to play his new song, ‘Nikki.’ I said don’t freak out.”
“What?” I couldn’t hear her, because of all the noise onstage.

But I was pretty sure she’d just said the hottest new sensation on the Stark record label,

who’d just happened to have written a song about me, was going to be singing it when I came out on-stage wearing nothing but wings, a bra, and a pair of panties. A diamond bra and panties.

A song about me.

This was really not what I needed to hear just then. I had been successfully avoiding Gabriel Luna for weeks now.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like him. I actually did. But like with Brandon, not in that way. I liked someone else that way.

So I didn’t really need to be hanging out with some other guy—even one who was writing love songs about me—when my heart belonged to another.

Who, okay, it turned out was in love with another girl—a dead girl—and might happen to be a supervillain. But no relationship is perfect.

“Rebecca said not to tell you about Gabriel before,” Shauna said with an apologetic smile. “So you wouldn’t get nervous.”

I just stared at her. I wasn’t nervous. Not exactly.

The truth was, I wasn’t nervous at all.
I was pretty sure I was having a nervous breakdown.

“Try not to think about it,” Shauna said, spinning me around to face a line of tal, impossibly thin girls al getting ready to go onstage. “Take deep breaths. Just concentrate on your breathing!”

My breathing? What was she talking about? Gabriel Luna, on whom my little sister, Frida, and al her friends were crushing in the biggest way—That accent! Those eyes! That dark hair!—

was going to be singing a song about me while I was prancing around in front of him in my underwear, and I was supposed to concentrate on my breathing? I was hyperventilating. I needed to stop breathing so much, actualy.

Like I didn’t have enough problems with Christopher and Steven and Nikki’s missing mom and al. Now I had to deal with this?

And sure, most girls, such as my sister, would die to have a song written about them by a guy like Gabriel. I would, too…

…it hadn’t just been manufactured to propel the singer to the top of the charts. It wasn’t like Gabriel’s song meant anything. He barely knew me. We’d had a few, mostly chance encounters. We’d never even been out on a date. We’d never even kissed. Wel, for any

significant amount of time. It wasn’t like he was in love with me.
And even if he was, it didn’t matter, because of Christopher.

In front of me, the girls were taking off, one by one, like graceful butterflies, swooping out from backstage and onto the runway and into the blindingly bright lights, which the tech crew was still adjusting in the rafters of the vast, dark studio, which seated hundreds. Those seats were empty now, but on the big night…

Okay, try not to think about that now. I was attempting to control my breathing, and not think about what was going to happen when I stepped out there…

And then suddenly, the girl in front of me—I didn’t realize it was Veronica right away because her wings had masked her face up until just then—turned to say, “You know, Nikki, you have some nerve.”

I looked at her blankly. “I’m sorry?”

“Yeah, you better be sorry,” she said. “After what you did. I can’t believe you have the guts to even look me in the face.”

What I did to her? I’d done nothing all day but memorize my blocking and eat chocolate strawberries and feel like I was going to throw up. I’d barely said a word to anyone…

Oh, wait. She must mean what Nikki did to her.

“I’m sorry,” I said. This time I meant it as an apology and not Excuse me. “I really don’t remember what you’re talking about—”

“Oh, right,” Veronica said. The music was so loud, I could barely hear her. But I could read the hatred in her eyes clearly enough.

“You might have all the other girls eating out of your hand, with your weird
ringtones and your oh-I’m-so-nervous routine,” she said. “But I know the truth. I know this whole amnesia thing

is a scam. And I know you’re still in touch with Justin.”

I blinked at her. “What? Justin who?” She better not have meant Justin Bay, Lulu’s ex…and

Nikki’s, too, incidentally. Or maybe not incidentally, since it turned out Nikki had been seeing him behind Lulu’s back.

And now, apparently, behind Veronica’s back, too.

Veronica glared at me. “Don’t play dumb with me. I know you still e-mail him,” she spat.

“And I’m just warning you. You better watch your back.”

Wait…what? That made no sense at all.

“I don’t e-mail anyone named Justin,” I insisted. I couldn’t believe this was happening.

Although that made it like most of the things in my life these days. I wished I were wearing a little more clothing. I might have felt less exposed. However, at least I knew if she tried to stab me or something, my diamond bra would stop any sort of blade. And probably most bullets. “I can assure you—”

“I know it’s you,” Veronica snapped back. The music was thumping, and the girl in front of

her had just taken off for her turn down the runway. “You stay away from him. Do you hear me?”

“I’ve never—”

It didn’t matter, though. She was gone, sashaying out onto the stage in front of
me, the ends of her wings drooping onto the high-polished metallic floor.

Great. So I had yet another enemy.

What was wrong with Nikki, anyway? What was she doing, going after her friends’ boyfriends, when she could have had any single guy she wanted (except Christopher Maloney)? Were single guys not enough of a challenge for her? She had to go after guys who were taken?

It was tough being one of the most beautiful women in the world, I guess. When almost every guy you met fell over himself trying to get with you, you naturally found yourself only drawn to the ones who didn’t.

But why did that nutcase think Nikki was still e-mailing her boyfriend?

“Nikki,” Shauna hissed at me. “Go!”

I realized the music had changed. It wasn’t the pounding technopop it had been a minute before, when all the other girls had been heading out onto the stage. It had turned into a more melo, haunting melody.

A second later, I heard a deep, British-accented male voice singing from the stage: “Nikki, oh, Nikki…The thing of it is, girl…in spite of it all…I really do think…I love you.”

If I hadn’t been hyperventilating before, I was definitely about to then. Oh, great. Gabriel Luna, a guy I’d met maybe four or five times in my life, loved me? Yeah. I didn’t think so.
Wel…it was just a song. Just the song that, as soon as it hit the airwaves when this show goes live New Year’s Eve, everyone was going to be humming, instead of the Stark Quark song.

Or at least, I supposed that’s what Gabriel Luna and Stark record label were hoping.

“Nikki,” Shauna said again. “Go.”

I went. I wandered out onto the runway in a daze. I was trying to remember my sassy catwalk strut, but it was really hard when all I could think about was Gabriel Luna loves me? Really?

No. No, he couldn’t. Every time I saw him, I was doing something boneheaded, like getting carried around by Brandon Stark, or being in a hospital, recovering from a transplanted brain.

He didn’t love me. This was all just a publicity stunt. A Starkengineered publicity stunt. After all, that’s why he was in this country and not back in his native England in the first place, right?

To further his career?

But as I moved out more centrally onto the stage, and I saw him there with his guitar, wearing a faded blue shirt beneath a brown suede jacket over jeans, I could sort of see why Frida and her friends were so gaga over him. I mean, he looked really cute. And he was looking right at me, not smiling, not frowning, just looking, super-intently, as he sang, “It’s not the way that you walk, girl…the way that you smile or the way that you look…it’s just the way you move me…
the way that you move me…that makes me say, Nikki, oh, Nikki…The thing of it is, girl…in

spite of it all…I really do think…I love you.“

Al I could think was what I thought every time I saw him, which was, Oh, my God. Frida’s

right. He is kinda hot.

But at the same time, I realized he wasn’t my kind of hot. If that makes any sense.

I was trying to keep my gaze on where I was going—down the runway—but the truth was, I

could hardly see two feet in front of me, the lights were so bright, plus they were reflecting up off the diamonds in my bra—and that was a lot of reflection, let me tel you. There were
diamond rainbows dancing everywhere before my eyes. I couldn’t see a thing as I looked out
toward the lights—nothing except rainbows. I tried to remember what Keley had told me

about feeling with my feet for the edge of the catwalk so I didn’t sassy-strut my way right off it.

But it was hard to do that without inching along like I was walking the plank on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride at Disney World.

Alessandro seemed to realize I was in trouble and shouted from somewhere out in the vast

emptiness of the studio, “Yes, Nikki! You’re doing fine! Now…turn!”

I turned on his command, trusting he wouldn’t lead me astray. And he hadn’t.
Suddenly, I was
facing away from the lights, and I could see again. What I saw was Gabriel at the opposite end of the catwalk. He was grinning at me a little now. Only through some trick of the lights, for a moment his dark hair looked gold, and his blue eyes seemed, just for a second, to belong to someone else.

“The thing of it is, girl... in spite of it all... I really do think... I love you.”

God! What I wouldn’t give to hear those words coming out of Christopher’s mouth. About me. Not me the way I was, but me the way I am now.

And okay, maybe his song was only a publicity gimmick.

But I knew that somehow, coming from Christopher, I’d have believed those words. I’d have believed them in a second. Why, oh why, was it Gabriel and not Christopher saying he loved me?

And then suddenly, right as Gabriel was hitting his third chorus of I love you’s, my foot landed on something that was not catwalk or air. I didn’t know what it was, but it was soft... and it was slippery.

And it caused my feet to go flying right out from under me.

Only, since I wasn’t really an angel, and my wings didn’t actually work, I didn’t just float lightly off into the air.

I came crashing down, hard.
“JUST KEEP YOUR GAZE STRAIGHT AHEAD, don’t look into the light.”

That’s what Dr. Higgins told me as I sat on the examination table in front of her. She was flashing a beam from a penlight into my eyes. I guess she wanted to see if Nikki’s brain had come loose or something after my huge and embarrassing tumble on the catwalk at the Stark Angel dress rehearsal.

“Honestly,” I told her, doing as she asked and looking straight ahead, “I’m fine.”

“Shhh,” she said. “Don’t talk.”

I’d been assuring everyone that I was fine—except for my wounded dignity (and backside)—but everyone had just shushed me. I guess they all thought no one could take that hard a tumble and not be hurt. Alessandro was the one who’d insisted I be checked out by a medical professional.

And of course, when the Stark security town car stopped and I found myself in the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery, I wasn’t surprised. I was right back where I’d started. Well, sort of.

“Are you experiencing any double vision?” she wanted to know. Dr. Higgins was
al business.

Apparently she, and not Dr. Holcombe, who’d been part of the team that performed my brain transplant, was the one on call tonight. “Headache? Nausea?”

“No,” I said. “No, and no. I told you. I just slipped. On this.” I held up the object I’d slipped on, which I’d found a few seconds after I’d sat up. A bunch of feathers, wadded together and tossed onto the runway. They’d clearly been ripped from a set of Stark Angel wings.

It wasn’t hard to guess who they’d belonged to, either. The last Angel to walk out onto the stage before me, and the one who had a particular grudge against me: Veronica.

The first face I’d seen hovering above mine after I’d landed was Gabriel’s, his blue eyes filled with concern. Gabriel Luna’s blue eyes, I’d noted. Not the eyes I’d been fantasizing about seeing, Christopher Maloney’s.

“Nikki? Are you all right?” Gabriel had wanted to know, putting an arm around me—as best he could with the tangle of wings behind me.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I’d assured him. “I just slipped on something—there was something on the runway…”

And I’d looked to make sure I was right, and there it was. Thank God. It wasn’t just me and my utter inability to be fierce in six-inch heels.

I’d made out like it must have been an accident. Alessandro’s face had darkened when he saw
what Gabriel was holding up—because he’d seized the clump of feathers from me, and turned
to face the director with indignation. That’s when Alessandro began to swear in a steady
stream, primarily at the costume mistresses, for not gluing the feathers down hard enough.
I hadn’t corrected him. I don’t know why. I knew Veronica had done it, and on purpose—
You better watch your back. More like right in front of you—but I’d had other important
things to worry about.
Like the fact that I’d known I was going to end up here, at the institute.
And not just because they were worried about my head, either. Or at least how attached it
was to the inside of my skull.
I knew they’d use this opportunity to give me a little lecture about…wel, my behavior lately.
And sure enough…
“There was an incident in St. John earlier this week,” Dr. Higgins said, looking
down at a thick white manila file she was holding. “You fel there as wel.”
God! I knew they were watching me. I just knew it. When were they ever going to leave me
alone?
Oh, that’s right. As long as I’m the Face of Stark, making them milions? Never.
“I slipped,” I corrected her. “I didn’t fal.” Of course, technicaly, I’d sort of jumped. But she didn’t need to know that. “They were making me hold on to this
cliff, and it was really slippery, and I couldn’t hang on anymore."

“I see,” Dr. Higgins said, still looking down at the file. “You went to visit your family recently, too. And that boy, Christopher Maloney.”

It was a statement, not a question. I could only stare at her. What could I say in response?

anyway? I knew the deal: I got to live in exchange for their watching—and listening in on—my every move. What was there to say about it, really?

“You know we’d like you to limit visitations with people from your past,” Dr. Higgins went on.

“It will only cause people to wonder how you know them, and you wouldn’t want unnecessary attention drawn to them, would you?”

“No,” I said. “But…” Suddenly, I felt like punching something. Or someone. I’d changed out of the diamond bra and panties and wings and back into my normal clothes, so I didn’t look like quite as big a freak sitting there in her office as I might have.

But I was still, I realize, a plenty big freak. Which I could handle, actually, because I’d always been a big freak.

It was the fact that there were people spying on me all the time—and not just the paparazzi—

that was kind of hard to bear without breaking something.

“I know it’s hard,” Dr. Higgins said sympathetically, as if she could read my thoughts. But she couldn’t…because if she could, she’d have looked more
scared. Besides, surely my thoughts
were stil my own. Stark didn’t own them. Yet. “Of course you miss them. And we don’t
expect you never to see them. That’s why we let you go to school with your sister. But you
really need to cut back on the personal visits. You won’t assimilate into your new life as easily if you keep trying to cling to your old life. Do you know what I mean?”

I thought of Christopher. Wasn’t that exactly what he’d been doing, clinging to his old love,
Em (even if he’d never once acknowledged, while I was actually around, that he liked me),
instead of embracing the here and now?

“Maybe,” I admitted, more so she’d shut up and let me leave than because I thought it was
really true. “I’m just having a rough transition period.”

“Acknowledging that,” Dr. Higgins said, with a smile, “is half the battle toward overcoming it.

Now.” She looked down, and turned a page in my file. “About Nikki Howard’s brother.”

All of my internal alarm sensors went off. Stark knew! Stark knew about Steven! Then again…of course they did. Why wouldn’t they? They knew everything.

Dr. Higgins looked up from the file and smiled at me again. “I know you feel bad about his
mother, and want to help. But really, all you had to do was ask. Because we at Stark would
be happy to do anything we can to help resolve this unfortunate and really quite sad situation.”

I blinked. “Wait…really?”

“Yes, of course. It’s odd that Steven Howard came to you and not us first, but considering the circumstances—”

I shook my head. “What circumstances?”

“Wel, his mother’s…condition. I’m sure he was a bit embarrassed.”

“Condition?” I stared at her. What was she talking about? “What condition?”

Dr. Higgins closed my file and crossed the room to sit at her desk, where her computer was.

Because Dr. Higgins had been out of the office, she had to turn the computer on and let it boot. While it did this, she said, “I’m not surprised he didn’t mention it, but Mrs. Howard is not a wel woman. If she should contact you, or Steven, it’s important, whatever outrageous things she tells you, that you remember that. She has a long history of mental illness and, I’m sorry to say, drug and alcohol abuse.”

I stared at her in shock. Dr. Higgins looked up from the computer screen, saw my startled expression, and nodded.

“It’s actually not that unusual that she’s disappeared like this. She’s done it before, many times.”

I listened with growing disbelief to Dr. Higgins as she continued.
“—of course, if you do hear from her,” Dr. Higgins was saying, “you should contact us at once, and we’ll take care of it. Mrs. Howard needs immediate medical care.”

What was going on here? What was Dr. Higgins doing? This was not the person Steven Howard had described to me—not that he’d gone into much detail at all about his mom. Still, this didn’t jibe with what he’d said about his mom not being the type to leave her business unattended.

Who was telling the truth? Dr. Higgins? Or Steven?

“Um,” I said. Dr. Higgins was typing something into the keyboard in front of her. “Okay.”

“I’m glad we had this little talk.” Dr. Higgins straightened, came over to me, and patted me on the back, then helped me down from the exam table. “Sometimes it’s nice when it’s just us girls, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. You mean, when we didn’t have lawyers from Stark Corporate around, telling me what I could and could not say? “It sure is.”

“Good night,” Dr. Higgins said, and shook my hand at the door to her office. “If you experience any headaches, double vision, nausea, or any symptoms at all, don’t hesitate to cal.”

I assured her I’d cal. Then, as Dr. Higgins returned to her computer, no doubt to
input every
detail of our conversation into my file, I allowed myself to be escorted by Stark
security
through the dark and silent—this time of night—always to the hospital’s front
entrance,
where the Stark town car was waiting to take me back to the loft.
Only, when I got there, I found that the press was waiting. Hordes of them. They
must have
been tipped off by someone that this hospital was where I’d been sent, because
otherwise
how could there have been so many of them? The flashbulbs started going off
the second I set
one foot out the door, instantly blinding me. It was a good thing those security
guys were there, giving me their strong arms for support. Otherwise I’d have
suffered another embarrassing
tumble as they led me down the hospital steps to the town car waiting below.
“Nikki!” a paparazzo cried. “Are you all right?” White flashes burst all around
me. I could
barely see the cement steps underneath my feet.
“What happened, Nikki? Care to comment?” another wanted to know.
“Nothing,” I said, trying to give a casual laugh. “I was just a klutz, that’s all. I’m
fine. See?
Nothing broken. Except my pride.”
“Nikki, was this fall related to what happened to you a few months ago, when
you suffered
from a hypoglycemic incident at a Stark grand opening and had to be
hospitalized?" someone

else asked. Flash. Flash. Flash.

“No, nothing like that,” I said. “I just trip—”

But I didn’t get the full sentence out of my mouth. That’s because my vision had finally cleared enough for me to see that, waiting next to the town car was a guy. A dark-haired, blue-eyed

guy, wearing jeans and a brown suede jacket. He was holding an enormous bouquet of red

roses. And grinning. At me.

“Helo there,” Gabriel Luna said with a smile.

“Why, helo,” I said. I glanced around, pretty sure I knew the answer, but wanting to make

sure I wasn’t about to make a fool of myself again. “Have I got the wrong car?”

“No,” Gabriel said. “This is your car. So. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” I replied, still not quite believing what I was seeing. Gabriel Luna was waiting with a big bouquet of roses next to my car. In front of the paparazzi, who were snapping tons of

photos of us both now. What, exactly, was going on? Was this because he “loved” me or

something?

“Oh, these are for you.” Gabriel seemed to remember the roses suddenly, which he passed to

me. Tons more flashes went off. “A bit sappy, I know,” he whispered, so the paps couldn’t

hear him. “But my manager thought it would be a good idea.”
I took the beautiful bouquet. “Your…manager?” I whispered. I didn’t understand anything that was going on.

“And your agent,” Gabriel said, stil smiling away as everyone took our photo. He was opening the car door and helping me inside. “They go to the same gym. Anyway, what with the song and the show and us both working for Stark and al, they just thought, wel, it wouldn’t be such a bad idea for us to be seen out and about together. I know it’s a bit stagy, but it can’t hurt to have the fans think we’re an item, now can it?”

“Oh,” I said, finally catching on. “You mean your song…”

Gabriel grinned. “Right. The song.”

We were in the car now, and my security guys had slammed the door behind us and were shooing the paparazzi away, even as they clamored for just one more shot and called things like, “Nikki! Are you and Gabriel Luna going out? Where are you off to? How long have the two of you been seeing each other?”

It was much quieter in the car, with the door shut. Gabriel looked at me, his dark eyebrows raised inquiringly. “I hope,” he said, “you don’t mind. Your agent said it was al right.”

“Oh,” I said. What could I say? That I was going to kil Rebecca later? “No. It’s fine.”

“Good,” Gabriel said. “And of course I don’t want to keep you. I’m sure you
must be exhausted. And if you want to get back to your place, that’s fine. But if you wanted to get a bite to eat—”

Suddenly, I realized I was starving. It had been a long time since those chocolate-covered strawberries. And I had so many things to do—finals to study for, an oral presentation to prepare, a sister to make up with, Nikki Howard’s mother to find, and her brother to ask something really horrible. Not to mention Christopher waiting for an answer about whether or not I was going to help him bring down Stark Enterprises.

“Sure,” I said, without a second’s more hesitation. “Why not?”

Which was how I found myself, an hour and a half later, at Dos Gatos, the underground club you needed to be a celebrity even to know it existed, since it looked like an ordinary diner on the outside.

But when you said your name, a guy with a walkie-talkie would let you through a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, into what was really an elevator. And suddenly, you were in one of the hottest clubs in town. There I sat sharing a cozy booth in the corner with Gabriel Luna,

sitting beneath the flickering candlelight from dozens of Mexican lanterns hanging overhead
while he explained the genesis of the song “Nikki.”

“The Nikki in the song isn’t necessarily you,” he was saying. We’d finished a platter of bite-size carne asada tacos, sprinkled all over with bright green bits of cilantro, and a pitcher of key lime margaritas (virgin, of course. I doubted Gabriel would have allowed them to be served any other way, given Nikki’s reputation).

“Realy,” I said. “So it’s about some other girl named Nikki you happen to know?”

He grinned. “Okay. Wel, maybe she’s you. But she’s more the idea of you—” In the candlelight, a wave of his dark hair cast his eyes in shadow, so his expression was hard to read. “I’m saying there’s the public Nikki, the one who everyone thinks they know. And then there’s the Nikki underneath, the one you won’t seem to allow anyone to know.”

I looked at him. Gabriel was smarter than I’d given him credit for being. “You realy think that?

You think I push people away?”

“You’re the one who’s been impossible to reach these past few weeks,” he said with a gentle laugh. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were seeing someone.”

I bit my lip. The truth, of course, was that I was seeing someone. Wel, at school. He just didn’t know it.

Except that now…wel, now, that person had made it clear he was in love with
someone else.

And okay, that someone else was me…but me as I used to be.

“Wait a minute,” Gabriel was saying now, reaching out to push back some of my long blond hair, which had partially fallen across my face. “There is someone else, isn’t there?”

Oh, God. Why did his eyes have to be so blue? Like someone else’s eyes, actualy. Only bluer, because they contrasted so nicely with his dark hair and long, curly eyelashes.

“There…was,” I murmured, looking everywhere but Gabriel’s face, and cursing Nikki for having such an insufferable physical weakness where guys were concerned. Because when his fingers brushed the skin on my cheek, I felt myself melting. Just a little, the way I had when Brandon had touched me that night in St. John. Why couldn’t Christopher touch me like that?

Why? “Not anymore. He likes…another girl. Not realy, but…wel, he might as wel.”

Gabriel raised one ink-black eyebrow. His hand had slipped from my cheek around to the back of my neck. Uh-oh. “Sounds complicated.”

“You have no idea,” I said.

And that’s when it happened. Gabriel began to knead the back of my neck with his fingers.

I don’t know what came over me after that. Or rather, I do: It was al Nikki
Howard’s fault.

Nikki’s body’s fault, I mean. Because the next thing I knew, it had happened again. That thing Nikki’s body was always doing, when it went al melty at a guy’s touch.

And the worst part was, Gabriel knew. I mean, he could tel. I knew he could tel because

suddenly, he scooted closer to me on the cushioned bench, and his other hand reached up to

cup my face.

And then, even though I didn’t want to—even though there weren’t any paparazzi around to

take a photo of us together—I let him tilt my face up toward his, and didn’t move away when

he pressed his mouth down against mine. I know! I let him kiss me. In fact, I kissed him back, kissed him with al the pent-up emotion I’d been feeling for what seemed like days.

The worst part of it was, the emotion I felt? It wasn’t for Gabriel. That much I knew. It was

stored-up passion for someone else. Someone with eyes just as blue as Gabriel’s.

But someone who would never, ever in a milion years cup my face in his hands and lean down

and kiss me, much less write a song about me. Or notice that there was a public Nikki, and

then a different Nikki underneath.

Gabriel didn’t kiss me like someone whose manager’s idea it had been to bring me roses.
He’d slipped both his arms around me now and was kissing me like he meant it, and had been waiting around for exactly this to happen, like everything leading up to it had only been appetizers, and finally, finally, we’d gotten to the main course.

Which was why it was a bit disheartening when I realized what I felt about him was exactly zero. And when I started to become aware that the soft chatter from other diners all around us had gotten a bit quieter suddenly, as if everyone had stopped eating to stare at something.

Which, I realized, as I broke the kiss and drew away from Gabriel a little, was us.

“Uh,” I said to him, ducking my head so that my hair covered my burning face. I started digging through my tote for my lip gloss. “Whoa.”

“Sorry,” Gabriel said. He reached for his water glass. The conversation level of the diners around us picked up again, and not a moment too soon. “I probably oughtn’t have done that.”

His voice wasn’t completely steady.

“No,” I said. I held my compact up over my face so I could check my reflection and reapply my gloss without going outside the lines…but also in the hopes that he wouldn’t be able to see how hard I was blushing. “It’s all right. Realy.”

“And you’re quite certain there’s someone else?”
“Yes,” I said gently. “I’m sorry. But there is.”

“Shame,” he said, grinning, as he set down his now empty water glass. “I think we’d have
gotten along famously. Even though you’re impossible.”

“I’m impossible?” I clicked the compact shut. I wasn’t blushing anymore. “I’m not the guy
who stuck the name of a girl he barely knows in a song about how much he
loves her. I’m
trying to overlook the fact you chose a girl who just happens to be the face of the
corporation that owns your label, by the way.”

“You don’t honestly believe I wrote a song about you to get press, do you?”
Gabriel asked,
looking hurt.

The truth was, I didn’t know what to believe anymore. Everything I’d ever
believed these past
few months had turned out not to be true. Parents who were supposed to be there
to protect
you actualy couldn’t always do that, and corporations that were allegedly evil occasionaly
saved your life, and brainiacs like me turned out not to know anything at al.

What could I believe in anymore?

“It’s kind of hard not to notice that you’ve decided to let Stark introduce your
song about me to the world by having you sing it at a fashion show for
underwear,” I pointed out. “Or am I
wrong?”

Gabriel appeared startled for a minute. Then, out of nowhere, he started to laugh.
“Touché,” he said. “But my agent is making me do that last part. I was against doing the Stark Angel show from the start.”

“Wel,” I said. I was trying hard not to smile. Because it wasn’t funny. Except it sort of was. “I wasn’t exactly thrilled about doing the Stark Angel show, either.”

“I guess maybe we have more in common than either of us thought,” Gabriel said.

“Right,” I said, rolling my eyes. Though it was hard to keep on being a sarcastic, tough model when he was being so nice. “We’re both corporate slaves.”

“But that doesn’t mean,” Gabriel said, “what I said in the song isn’t true. There is something about you, Nikki, that I haven’t been able to get out of my head since we met. But until tonight, you never seemed to want to let me in.”

I smiled at him miserably. “Believe me, Gabriel,” I said. “This is one head you’re better off staying out of.”
FOURTEEN

HANGING OUT WITH A HOT BRITISH singing sensation way past midnight on a school night probably wasn’t the best way to prepare for finals.

In fact, it was pretty much the best way to guarantee you weren’t going to perform your best the next day.

Another good way to assure you were going to bomb was to come staggering into your loft and then find your big brother waiting up for you.

Except, of course, he’s not really your big brother.

“Where’s Lulu?” I asked. Steven was sitting alone on one of the white couches, watching TV.

Almost all the lights were out in the loft, and I nearly tripped over Cosabela as she darted over to greet me when I stepped off the elevator.

“She went to bed,” Steven said, switching off the sound of the show he was watching. I was almost not surprised to see what it was. Shark Week. Yeah. Nothing surprised me anymore.

“Which is where you should have been hours ago, isn’t it? Don’t you have school in the morning?”

The idea of Lulu going to bed before me was so laughable I almost choked. I knew she had
only done it to impress Steven with how responsible she was. As if.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. I collapsed at one end of the couch on which he was sitting and began
tuggling at the high-heeled boots I was wearing. They’d been killing my feet all
day—except
during the brief interlude when I’d been wearing the Louboutins, when my feet
ached in a
different way. I almost longed for the Stark brand imitation Uggs. “I better head
to bed. Sorry I was out all day. Rehearsal ran late. Did you get dinner?”

“Lulu took care of me,” Steven said, with a nod. “She made sure I got the entire
tour of
downtown Manhattan, including Chinatown, Elis Island, and the Statue of
Liberty.”

“Wow,” I said. Cosabela hopped up onto the couch beside me, and now that my
boots were
off, I absently stroked her ears. “That’s a lot. No wonder she went to bed. Aren’t
you tired,
too?”

“I am,” Steven said. “But I wanted to wait up for you. We need to talk.”

I was instantly seized with alarm. I knew I hadn’t exactly been spending the
hours since I’d last seen him doing what I’d said I’d do—hiring a private
investigator. In fact, I’d been doing very little in the way of looking for his
mom…unless you counted giving Christopher Mrs.

Howard’s Social Security number.

Then there’d been that piece of information Dr. Higgins had told me. Which was
not exactly
the kind of thing you wanted to share with a guy. At least not at one in the morning.

“What?” Steven said, before I could say a word. “What are you not telling me?”

I blinked at him, wondering how he knew.

“Um,” I said. “I did hear something—”

How do you tell someone you’ve heard their mom is crazy?

I guess you just blurt it out. Which I did. Because I couldn’t exactly hide it, could I?

“Do you think it’s possible maybe, what with you away, and her relationship with me not being the best, your mom might have just…snapped? I hear she wasn’t the most mentally stable person in the world to begin with,” I said, all in a rush. “People at Stark say—”

“People at Stark say?” Steven stared at me like I was the one with a screw loose. Which couldn’t possibly be true, because I just had all my screws examined and they’d been ruled completely tight. “What do the people at Stark know? They’ve never even met her!”

“Don’t be mad,” I said. I was starting to feel worse than ever. And I didn’t mean my sore feet.

“I’m really sorry. But maybe, because you’re her son, you don’t want to see that—”

“See what?” Steven demanded. “That Mom worked her whole life to feed and put two kids through school single-handedly because Dad ran out on us when I was seven and
you were
two? That none of us ever heard from him again, but Mom stil managed to get
you everything
you ever wanted for Christmas, even though we could barely afford it? That
when you wanted
balet lessons because your best friend had them, Mom took on an extra job,
working even
more hours, just so you could have those, too? And now you don’t want to
bother looking for
her because someone at Stark told you she was off her rocker?”
Whoa. I’d screwed up. Big-time. Why had I believed Dr. Higgins’s version of
things, instead
of Steven’s? Why had I falen for the lies of a doctor who worked for a
corporation I knew to
be evil?
I knew why, actualy. Because it had been easier than doing the right thing—the
responsible
thing—which was actualy helping Nikki’s brother. Especialy when I’d been so
wrapped up in
Christopher’s drama these past few days. I couldn’t believe how stupid and
selfish I’d been,
worrying about nothing but me this whole time, when Nikki’s family had been in
so much real
trouble and pain. What did I have to be concerned about, realy? Whether or not
Christopher
liked me? Whether or not people saw me in a bra made out of diamonds? Here a
woman was

missing—a woman who’d sacrificed so much for her kids—and I’d just been

trying to avoid

doing anything about it, realy.

I bowed my head, so Steven couldn’t see the guilt on my face, and said to

Cosabela, who’d

crawled into my lap, “I’m sorry.”

There were a couple seconds of uncomfortable silence before Steven asked, his

voice

cracking, “Who are you?”

I lifted my head and just stared at him.

“W-what?” I stammered.

“I mean it.” I wasn’t the only one who’d been staring. Steven couldn’t seem to take his

disconcertingly blue eyes off me. “I honestly don’t have the slightest idea who

you are.

Because you’re not my sister. You look like her. And your voice sounds like

hers. But the

words coming out of your mouth aren’t anything like the things she’d say.”

A smal croaking sound came out of my mouth. I managed to formulate it into, “I

h-have

amnesia—”

“Enough with the amnesia thing,” Steven snapped. “You aren’t Nikki. She’d never apologize

to me for anything. You have to be some kind of twin they found somewhere and
put in her

place for some reason. I’ll admit they did a good job. A really good job, since you

look

exactly like her, even down to that—” He grabbed my hand and pointed to a tiny crescent

moon-shaped scar Nikki had on the back of one hand, the hand I was resting on

Cosabela’s

furry head. “What’d they do, carve you up to make you look identical? That

must have

smarted.” He threw my hand down again. “Hope you’re getting paid a lot.”

I didn’t know how to handle this. No one at Stark had prepared me for this, or
told me what

to do in the event it occurred. I was starting to feel panicky. What was I

supposed to say? No one had ever not fallen for the amnesia line. I’d talked to

hundreds of Nikki’s friends and

coworkers, and while they’d all agreed the “new” Nikki was a little strange, none

of them had

ever accused me of not being Nikki at all…

I just shook my head, looking up at him and saying, “I don’t know what you’re
talking ab—”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Steven said. “Just tell me. What

happened to

Nikki? What, did she get fired for getting too full of herself or something? It

wouldn’t be the first time. Where is she, anyway?”

I reached up with a shaking hand to push some of Nikki’s hair from my face. I

glanced around
the room…then at the ceiling, at the tiny holes next to the halogen lights. Then I pressed a finger to my lips and pointed upward. Steven followed my gaze, then looked back down at me as if I were insane. A second later, I reached for the remote and hit the volume button. The sounds of Shark Week filed the apartment. Then I got up and walked over to the stereo cabinet and switched on the last disk that had been playing. Lulu’s voice filed the loft, crooning that she was a cat, and how much she needed to get scratched. Then I went to the loft’s floor-to-ceiling windows and threw them all open, letting in blasts of cold air and the sound of the traffic from Centre Street, below.

“What are you doing?” Steven demanded.

But instead of answering him, I sat down again, and looked urgently up into his face.

“I can’t tell you what happened to your sister,” I said, not raising my voice to be heard above the cacophony of the television, the stereo, and the traffic sounds. “I’ll get in realy big trouble if I tell you. Wel, I won’t, but my family will.”

Steven’s gaze sharpened.

“So you admit you’re not her.” His voice was hard.

I shook my head. “I do,” I said. “I mean, I am, partly…on the outside.”

“What do you mean, on the outside?” Steven glared. “That makes no sense.”

“I know.” I was staring down at Cosabela, who had gone completely limp across the couch between us, as if she were in a coma, she was so relaxed, in spite of all the noise.
God, I’d

have given anything to have been a dog just then. “I can’t explain it. But you have to believe me. Nikki—the Nikki you knew—is gone.”

“Gone?” Steven asked. “What do you mean, gone? Gone as in—” He looked disbelieving.

“Yes,” I said. “She had an aneurysm. It was like a ticking time bomb in her head. She had a rare congenital brain defect—”

“No, she didn’t,” Steven said. Now he didn’t just look disbelieving. He looked like he was going to burst out laughing. “Who told you that? Did she tel you that?”

“Um, no,” I said. I was pretty sure laughter wasn’t the correct response when someone told you that your sister had died of an aneurysm in the brain. “I never met her, exactly—”

“So what’s this BS about her having some kind of genetic brain defect?” Steven wanted to know. “Nikki was healthy as a horse. My whole family is. None of us has any genetic defects,

believe me, and especialy not Nikki. She hit her head falling off the back of the bleachers in school and they did a CAT scan and an MRI when she was in the ninth grade, and there was no sign whatsoever of any brain defect. Who told you there was?”

I swallowed. Then I said softly, “Stark.”

“Stark.” He stared at me. “The same people who told you my mother’s a
fruitcake.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. “Um…yeah.”

“And you believe them?”

I couldn’t really tell him I had pretty good reason to believe them. That if it weren’t for Stark, I wouldn’t be there talking to him.

I chewed my bottom lip before I replied. “I have no reason not to,” I said finally. It seemed like the most diplomatic answer.

“Let me ask you something,” Steven said, leaning forward. “When did all this happen? You stepping into Nikki’s shoes, so to speak, and her having this so-called aneurysm?”

“It wasn’t so-called,” I protested. “People were there. They saw it. It was during the grand opening of a Stark Megastore. It was on CNN. It really—”

“Fine,” he said with an impatient wave of his hand. “When?”

“Three months ago,” I said.

He seemed to do some mental arithmetic. “Around the same time,” he murmured.

“Around the same time as what?” Then it clicked. “As when your mom disappeared?” I looked at him curiously. “But…what would the two things have to do with each other?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s a little bit more than a coincidence, don’t you think? And
now, with Stark feeding you this story about my mom being mentally unhinged —”

“You’re saying you think Stark had something to do with your mom’s disappearance?” My mouth

had gone dry.

Why wouldn’t Stark have had something to do with his mom’s disappearance, though? Stark

spied on me all day and night. Stark knows everything, sees everything. Stark’s legacy is

murder.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Steven asked. “Look at you. You’re so paranoid about Stark, you can’t

even talk about it without turning on every piece of stereo equipment in the apartment. Do you honestly think this place is bugged?”

Instead of answering, I leaned over to reach for my purse, then pulled out my bug detector and

turned it on. The audible alert clicked faster and faster the closer I waved the antennae toward the ceiling and the holes above our heads.

“And don’t say it’s a piece of junk,” I said, referring to the transmitter, “because I paid nearly five hundred dollars for it.”

Steven blinked. “Oh,” he said. “It’s a piece of junk, all right.”

“It isn’t,” I insisted. “I know they’ve got something in here, recording what we say. They knew you were here. They know all sorts of things they couldn’t know otherwise.”

“I’m a communications electronics technician,” Steven said patiently. “With the United States
Navy. And I’m teling you, what you’re holding is a piece of junk…which isn’t to say it

doesn’t work.”

I felt a cold chil up my spine. “Realy?”

“Realy,” he said. He took the detector from me and stood up, holding the

antennae toward

the ceiling himself. The clicking grew in intensity and volume.

“How long have those been there?” he asked, nodding toward the holes.

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “I just noticed them one day.”

“Not good,” he said. He took the transmitter from me and switched it off, then

threw it down

onto the couch. “What are we going to do about it?”

“What do you mean, what are we going to do about it?” I asked.

“Two women are missing,” Steven said. “And Stark obviously knows why.”

“Only one woman is missing,” I said through my too-dry lips. “I told you, Nikki

is—”

“Gone, right, you said that. Only she’s not, realy, is she?” He looked down at me

expectantly

from where he stood.

“No,” I said. “Legaly, she’s alive. Because legaly, she’s me.”

Steven stared down at me some more. He waited a beat. Then he said, “You’re

kidding me.

Right?”

“I’m not,” I said. My heart was thumping hard within my chest. I had to tel him.
I had to tell him the truth. He deserved to know. It was his sister, after all. I had to make him understand.

“This is your sister Nikki’s body. But her brain is—”

Before I knew what was happening, he’d reached down and seized me by both shoulders, hauling me to my feet, and startling Cosabela, who yelped. He didn’t seem to notice, though.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded, giving me a shake. “How can this be my sister’s body?”

Suddenly, I was having trouble seeing him, thanks to all the salt water coming out of my eyes.

“I can’t tell you,” I cried. “They already may have made your mother vanish. Do you really think I want to get on their bad side? You don’t understand. You don’t understand what they’re like, how powerful they are, how much money they have—”

Steven’s grip on me was pretty hard. I had a feeling he could leave marks on my arms, which wouldn’t look too good on the Stark Angel taping if they didn’t fade by New Year’s.

“This is crazy,” Steven said, giving me another little shake to emphasize each syllable.

Cosabela, watching from the couch, let out a nervous bark. “You’re crazy, do you hear me?”
Every word that comes out of your mouth is nuts.”

“I’m not nuts,” I insisted. “It’s called a brain transplant. My brain, in your sister’s body—”

That seemed to stagger him. But he didn’t let go. “Stark? Stark did this? If Stark did all this—

if they’re really doing this—then why doesn’t anyone know? Why haven’t you told anyone?”

“I told you,” I said to him, through gritted teeth. “We can’t tell anyone. Anyone, do you hear me? Stark says they’ll put my parents in jail if I tell anyone! And they’ll do it, too. Whatever

ideas you might have about going to the press, or whatever, get them out of your head right now. It won’t work. Stark owns the press. I’ll help you find your mom if I can.”

“How?” he asked, his fingers loosening on me. “How are you going to do that?”

How was I going to do that? I couldn’t mention Christopher and his crazy scheme with Felix.

First of all, it was so nuts, there was no chance of it succeeding. And secondly, I didn’t want Christopher more involved in this than he already was. I loved Christopher, in spite of the fact that he didn’t love me—or at least, the fact that he only loved some dead girl I used to be, not the me I was now. I couldn’t drag him into all this, not if what Steven suspected was true, and his mom had disappeared because of what had happened to me and to Nikki. It was too dangerous.

And yet…

And yet if Christopher and Felix really could do what Christopher said they could…
“I know some people who say they can find her,” I heard myself saying.

Miraculously, Steven dropped his hands.

“Who?” he asked.

It was at this point the door to my bedroom eased open and Lulu stuck her tousled head out.

“What’s going on out here?” she wanted to know, blinking sleepily. “What’s all this noise?

Why are you yelling? Why’s Cosabela so upset?”

Steven backed away from me.

“Nothing,” he said to her, reaching for the remote. He switched the TV off. “Just a family squabble. Go back to bed.”

Lulu didn’t listen to him. Instead, she came padding barefoot out into the living room. Rather than wearing her usual negligee, she had on a pair of oversized pink flannel pajamas with enormous cherries on them. I realized, from the way she had the legs rolled up at the bottom, that they belonged to Nikki.

“No, seriously, you guys,” she said. “What’s up? Hey, are you listening to my CD?”

“Yeah,” I told her, reaching up to push some of my long hair from my eyes. “Everything’s okay, really. Go back to bed.”

“No.” Lulu tottered over and plopped down onto the couch next to Cosabela. “It sounded
like you guys were fighting. I don’t want you guys to fight. I mean, I never had a
brother or
sister, so I always kinda wished for one so I could have fights. But stil. What was
the fight
about?”

I looked over at Steven. He was scowling at the white carpet. Since it didn’t
seem like he was going to say anything, I shrugged, and just said, “He found out
about the spirit transfer.”

Lulu looked up at Steven, then reached for his hand, which looked huge in
comparison to hers.

“Oh, poor baby!” She squeezed his hand. “You miss the old Nikki, don’t you?”

He looked down at her incredulously. “The old Nikki? What are you…You know
about it?”

“Sure,” she said, tugging affectionately on his pinky for him to come sit next to
her on the
couch. He resisted of course. “We al do. Wel, me and Brandon. We even went
and
kidnapped Nikki from the hospital after it first happened. She didn’t like it. But
we thought
she’d been a victim of al-Qaeda! Or the Scientologists. Only it turned out it
wasn’t either of them. The old Nikki was just gone. And this new one was here
to take her place. We decided

we like her better than the old one, though. At least I did. I don’t know about
Brandon.

Why?” Lulu looked from one to the other of us. “Is that a problem?”

Steven just shook his head. “I need an aspirin,” was al he said.
But he let Lulu pull him down onto the couch beside her, where he sat with his head sunk into his hands. He looked like a man defeated. I didn’t really blame him.

“Do you need a neck massage?” Lulu was asking him. Even though he didn’t reply, she was already reaching over to rub his neck. “I give totally good neck massages. They just about turn Nikki to Jel-O. Our housekeeper, Katerina, taught me how. And she was trained at some of the best spas in Gstaad. It’s all about getting the tension out right here…."

“I know a guy,” I whispered. I was desperate to make the situation right. Although I wasn’t sure how it could ever be right again. His sister was dead, even though he didn’t seem to want to believe it.

And, of course, somehow I felt like it was all my fault, even though I knew it wasn’t.

Steven looked up.

“You what?” he asked.

“I know a guy,” I repeated softly. Softly enough, I hoped, for none of the bugs in the loft to pick up. “A guy who’s really good with computers. He says he can find your mom.”

I didn’t want to say that this guy was the fourteen-year-old cousin of someone I’d been crushing on since, like, the seventh grade. Steven looked suicidal enough. He stared at me while Lulu kneaded his neck. Weirdly, Lulu’s neck massage didn’t seem to have the same
effect on him that al neck massages had on Nikki’s body.

“How?” Steven asked. “How can he find her when the police couldn’t?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “He just says he can. Look, I don’t see what we have to lose.”

Except everything, including my life, when Steven found out “this guy” was an adolescent.

“When can we go?” Steven asked without further hesitation.

I felt my heart lurch. I hadn’t expected him to agree so quickly. What was I doing to Christopher? To Felix?

On the other hand, if their plan worked, maybe there’d be no Stark to come after us later…

Yeah. And maybe Nikki Howard was going to be the next president of the United States.

“Um. In the morning, I guess,” I said.

“Great.” Steven nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Lulu looked pleased. “Fantastic!” she said, applying her elbow to his trapezius muscles. “And you know what? You’re feeling less tense to me already!”

“Thanks.” Steven gave her a brief smile, then got up and started heading toward her room.

“I’m really beat. I’ll… I’ll see you both in the morning.”

When he got to the door to Lulu’s room, he paused, however, and turned to look at me.

“What should I call you?” he asked.
My voice sounded almost unnaturally soft in the large loft, after our shouting match. The traffic sounds from the windows were loud, even though it was so late at night. We lived, after all, in the city that never slept. On the stereo speakers, Lulu was making noises like a cat. Whatever Stark was picking up of this conversation, it was bound to be confusing them.

“Nikki,” I said to Steven. “It’s my name now.”

He stared at me for a full ten seconds. I couldn’t have begun to read his expression if I’d tried.

Then he turned abruptly and disappeared through the door, closing it quietly behind him. I

glanced at Lulu.

“Wel,” she said, with a big smile on her freshly scrubbed face. “I think that went wel. Don’t

you?”

I collapsed onto the couch beside her with a frustrated moan. It was going to be, I knew,

another sleepless night.
“THIS IS SO EXCITING,” LULU KEPT saying.

“It’s realy not,” I assured her. I couldn’t figure out why she’d insisted on coming along. Wel, actualy, I was starting to get a good idea. I just couldn’t believe it. I was pretty sure it had to do with the six feet of manliness striding along the halway beside us, doing his best not to let steam blow out of his ears at the realization that he was, of al places, in a Manhattan high school.

Worse, a Manhattan high school at seven forty in the morning. With one of the nation’s leading teen supermodels, who was smuggling her miniature poodle in a Louis Vuitton tote, as her best friend, the celebutante daughter of one of the country’s most celebrated film directors,

struggled to keep up alongside her, despite the fact that she was wearing a pair of five-inch heels. It wasn’t like anybody was staring at us or anything as we tottered down the hal beside one another. Much.

What I couldn’t believe was that she was being so obvious about it. Lulu, and her obsession with Nikki Howard’s brother, I mean. I was glad she’d at least dressed somewhat normaly, in vintage Jordache jeans and a leather bomber jacket over an Alexander McQueen shirt (I had
to wrestle the Chloé shirt and Citizens of Humanity jeans I wanted to wear away from her.

Which was ridiculous because I’m about a foot taller than she is, so I don’t know how she
thinks she can get away with wearing Nikki’s stuff).

But stil. Up this early, for a guy? I guess I shouldn’t talk. When the dinosaur sticker thing had failed, in the first few weeks I’d come back to school after my surgery, I’d done some pretty stupid stuff myself, I guess, in hopes a certain boy would admire me…Every morning, I’d
given myself a thirty-minute blowout Christopher had never even noticed, worn a surprisingly
painful (Stark brand, of course) push-up bra that, ditto, he’d never even glanced below my
chin to admire.

I guess I know what it’s like to be in Lulu’s designer shoes.

But excited to be at TAHS? Believe me, there was nothing exciting about being at Tribeca

Alternative High School, as Steven had already pointed out. It was actualy the opposite of

exciting, if you asked me.

But then, Lulu had never been in a real American high school before. She was looking at al the students as we passed by them (and they ogled us in disbelief, whispering, “Isn’t that…?”),
going, “Oh, my God, she’s so cute!” or “Isn’t he sweet!” like she was talking about puppies

and not actual real-life fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. It was as if she didn’t realize these people were just a year or two younger than her.

The truth was, because they hadn’t been as gifted geneticaly as she was, they did look almost
as if they’d descended from another species.

But that was no excuse for Lulu’s behavior.

Especially when she saw Frida hanging out with a group of junior varsity cheerleaders by one of their lockers, and cried, “Oh, my God, look, Nikki! There’s Frida! Hi, Frida!”

Frida freaked when she saw us…particularly Lulu. Her friends’ jaws all dropped as well.

They’d dined with me upon occasion in the TAHS cafeteria, where haute cuisine extended as far as hamburger and no further. So Nikki Howard was no longer quite the big deal she once might have been.

But Frida had bragged to them that she knew Lulu, and I was pretty sure none of them ever believed her.

But here was Lulu Colins—who had graced the red carpets of so many movie premieres, and the covers of so many magazines, and the arms of so many skeevy rock-and-roller boyfriends she really should have thought twice about dating (but who was I to criticize, seeing as how Nikki Howard dated some of Lulu’s boyfriends as well, behind her back?)—in person,

strolling down the hall toward them and greeting Frida. They stared at her in total awe.

“Oh, my God, Lulu,” Frida cried, looking as if she were about to wet herself. “I-I
can’t believe you’re here. And Nikki! This is amazing! I was just talking about the two of you. You know,
about your party?”

“Oh, you have to come,” Lulu said. “You should all come. It’s tomorrow night. It’s to die for,
really. Everybody will be there. Marc, Lauren, Paris. They love it. It’s the best.”

I could see the girls doing quick mental calculations in their heads—Marc Jacobs, Lauren Conrad, Paris Hilton. I said, under my breath, to Lulu, “Lulu, they can’t come. They’re in high school.”

“Well,” Lulu said, looking blank. “So are you.”

“But I’m not fourteen and living with my parents.”

“Could someone,” Steven asked, “explain what we’re doing here? I thought we were trying to
find my mother.”

“We are,” I assured him. “Come on.”

I looked at Frida and her friends dispassionately. “You guys can’t come to our party. You’re
underage. Come on, Lulu.” I grabbed Lulu’s arm and began steering her away. Too late,
however, since I heard an al-too-familiar voice call Nikki’s name, and a second later, Whitney
Robertson was upon us, her alter ego, Lindsey, and boyfriend, Jason Klein, not far behind,
oozing Axe body spray.
“Nikki, hi.” Whitney was eyeing Steven hungrily, not even bothering to hide her interest in him for Jason’s sake. Their relationship had always been ful-on dysfunctional, however, if you ask me. Which wasn’t that unusual, considering I’d long suspected Jason of being a cyborg. “I didn’t know it was bring-a-hunk-to-school day.”

Steven looked appalled. I didn’t blame him. Whitney was like tooth decay: You didn’t have to know her more than five seconds before you started to realize she needed to be removed.

Accordingly, I ignored her and kept going, heading toward the computer lab, even though I could hear Whitney crying, “Nikki? Nikki!” in the distance. Lulu followed me, making sure Steven stayed close beside her by keeping a hand clamped on the front of his jacket. Steven didn’t appear to notice.

“What are we doing here?” he asked again. “How can—”

But I’d already reached the doors to the lab, through which Christopher was just leaving to get to Public Speaking before the bell rang. As always when I saw him, my heart skipped a beat.

Today he was wearing a black Ramones T-shirt under his leather jacket. His hair was still a little damp at the ends from his morning shower, and his jeans were as form-fitting as ever.

To say he looked surprised to see me would be an understatement…and then I was followed by Lulu, whom he surely recognized (he was as upset with her father for
butchering the
direction of the Journeyquest movie as I was), and a moody, six-foot male blond version of
me. Christopher’s jaw sank nearly to the floor.

“Oh, hey,” he said.

“I need to talk to you,” I said. It was difficult to get the words out when my heart was

hammering so hard in my chest. But I managed.

“Now?” Christopher’s gaze drifted past me, toward the clock hanging in the hall.

“Class is about to start.”

“Yeah,” I said. I reached out and took his arm. I knew he didn’t feel the electric pulse that

leapt from my skin to the leather of his jacket. But I sure did. “We aren’t going to class today.

We have to go to your cousin’s house.”

Christopher shifted his backpack from one shoulder to another, looking from me to Lulu to

Steven, then back again. His expression was impassive.

“Look, Nikki,” he said. “If this is about your mom, I thought we—”

“I have that thing you asked me for,” I said. “The password? So let’s just go, okay?”

His blue-eyed gaze swept over me searchingly. I expected him to ask about finals. The old

Christopher would have. The old Christopher would have said, “But this is first
semester of

our junior year. Colleges will be looking at our grades this semester. If we screw up, it will be held against us. McKayla Donofrio is already a National Merit Scholar. We can’t mess this up.”

But this wasn’t the old Christopher. This was Supervilain Christopher.

He looked me right in the eye and said, “Let’s go.”

And then we were heading for the nearest exit, even as Frida, who it turned out had been
trotting behind us the whole time, was crying, “Wait! Where are you going? You guys? The bell is going to ring. You guys can’t just leave.”

“Grab a cab,” I said to Christopher, “and tell it to wait. I’ll just be a second.” I peeled off from the group and swung around to grab Frida by the shoulder.

Then I pinned her to the nearest locker with one hand.

To say that she looked surprised by this turn of events would have been the understatement of

the century. But this was too important to play the kindly big sister. I couldn’t let her mess this up for me. I had Steven to think of.

“Go to class,” I told her. “Forget that you saw me here today.”

“Where are you guys going?” she wanted to know. “You can’t cut class this week. It’s finals.

You’ll flunk!”

“I mean it, Frida,” I said. “Tell your friends the same thing. None of you saw us.”

“What’s going on?” Frida was starting to look scared now.
And you know what? She had a lot to be scared of.

“Where are you taking Christopher?” she asked.

But I’d already turned and was jetting down the hal and toward the doors through which Lulu, Christopher, and Steven had just bailed.

“I’m gonna tel,” I heard Frida caling after me. “I mean it, Em! I mean, Nikki! Wait!”

Her voice was cut off by the heavy metal doors to the school slamming shut behind me as I hurried down the side steps, into the bitter cold and drizzle, to the waiting cab.
LU LU W AS S HOUTING “HURRY!” TO ME—as if the taxi she had just climbed into might take off without me.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I told her. Christopher was waiting on the corner with his hand on the open taxi door. His face had settled back into impassivity again, as if he were used to being puled out of school every day by supermodels and their entourages.

“Where, exactly,” Steven wanted to know, as I slid into the backseat where he was sitting next to Lulu, “are we going?”

“This guy’s cousin is a computer genius,” I said, pointing at Christopher, who was seated up front next to the driver. I was pretty sure Christopher couldn’t hear what we were saying through the thick butletproof barrier separating the front and backseat. The driver had the Bolywood music turned up pretty loud. “He says he can find your mom.”

Steven looked confused. “He’s with the NYPD? What was he doing in your high school? Is he a narc?”

“Um,” I said, beginning to see some inadequacies with my plan. “No.”

“Did you see that girl’s top?” Lulu wanted to know. She was, apparently, talking about Whitney. “It was so…trying too hard.”
“But he’s with the government,” Steven said. “Tell me he’s got some kind of connections with
a governmental agency.”

“Not exactly,” I said to Steven.

“I mean,” Lulu went on, “it was practically see-through. And not in a good way. You didn’t
like that top she was wearing, Steven, did you? That girl back there?”

“Are you telling me,” Steven asked, ignoring Lulu as Cosabela, whom I’d let out of my tote,
pranced on his lap, peering excitedly at the traffic all around us, “that he’s really just a high school student?”

“You know what?” Christopher had turned around in the front seat and was looking back at
us through the plastic barrier. It was clear he could hear us, after all, despite the tinny music urging us to Soniya dil se mila de and Just chil. “Don’t worry about it. If she’s alive, Felix’l find your mom. Just sit back and relax, al of you. It’s taken care of.”

Which was exactly what a supervilain would say. Especially as he was taking you to your
execution.

But wouldn’t a truly threatening supervilain have been waving a weapon of some kind at us?

Yeah, no, not so much. Considering we were al heading into this of our own volition. Wel,
more or less. I guess I didn’t have a choice, really. It was help Steven find his mother or let him go public with what he knew, which I’d started strongly to suspect last night was the
direction Nikki’s brother was heading. I could just see it now…Steven on the national news,

making appeals for help finding his mom, and then casually mentioning, “And by the way…the

girl currently occupying Nikki Howard’s body isn’t really my sister. I don’t know who she is,

but somebody please do an exorcism to get her the hell out, okay? Thanks.”

That’d go over real well with Stark, I bet.

Lulu was on her cell phone next to me. “No,” she was saying to someone on the other end.

“You have to make sure the caterer knows to deliver everything through the service elevator in the back. Last time they made a few deliveries from the front and they scratched the brass in

the elevator, and the building management got really mad. Understand? Good.” She hung up.

“Is this party all you ever think about?” Steven asked. He sounded really irritated.

Lulu looked past me and over at him. Her expression was stunned.

“No,” she replied. “Of course not!”

“It’s just a party,” Steven said. “I throw parties all the time. You get a keg and you pour out a couple bags of pretzels. You put on some music and you invite your friends. It’s not that big a deal.”

Lulu threw me an incredulous look. Since I wasn’t exactly the world’s greatest expert on

parties, I was unable to contribute to the conversation. I’ve been to some parties with Lulu, it’s true, and they seemed a bit more complex than getting a keg and pouring out a couple bags of
pretzels. The last one we went to involved a fire-eater. But I figured I’d let her handle the
situation.

“This isn’t just an ordinary party,” she explained carefully. “Sushi chefs from Nobu are going to be making hand rolls on the spot. There’s going to be every type of cal liquor you can imagine, with bartenders who are also expert astrologists. I’m having a chocolate fountain
installed on that little outside deck. And DJ Drama is going to be spinning.”

Steven just shook his head. “Why? Why are you doing al that? Who are you trying to
impress?”

“Impress?” Lulu said the word as if it were foreign. “I’m not trying to impress anyone—”

Which wasn’t exactly true. Lulu’d been spending a lot of time lately trying to impress Steven.

Still, not in a bad way, the way Whitney Robertson and the rest of the Walking Dead try to
impress…wel, me. Everything Lulu does, she does from a motivation of a hundred percent
goodness. No one who knew her wel could ever say otherwise. Steven, I’m sure, was just
upset with the way things were going, and nervous about his mom.

I hurried to intervene. “Lulu likes to entertain,” I said. “She’s compensating for a less than satisfactory childhood. She’d realy like it if you could be there.”

Steven hesitated…then saw my expression, which was beseeching—I was
sending him a
telepathic message that read, Come on, dude. She has a huge crush on you.
Don’t diss her.
Just say you’ll come to her party. I don’t care if she’s not your type. Just say you’ll come.
Come on, throw the girl a bone.
He shrugged and sank more deeply back into the seat, as Cosabela’s panting made a steamy
spot on the window beside him. “Sure. Of course. I appreciate the invitation. It sounds great.”
Lulu wriggled all over with excitement. “It’s going to be great!” she enthused. “We’re having
some of the trapeze artists from Cirque du Soleil, you know? They’re installing trapezes,
because our ceilings are so high. It’s going to be freaky! People should be able to see them
through our windows from all over Manhattan!”
Lulu went on about the party almost the entire way to Felix’s house, which we finally pulled up
in front of about twenty minutes later. It was a nondescript attached home in a pleasant-
looking middle-class neighborhood. Christopher paid the cabdriver and we stepped out into
the cold, miserable rain, which disturbed Cosabela so much—she looked up at me with a
perplexed expression, like, Why, Mom? Why would you do this to me?—that I
had to lift her
and stick her back in the tote, where she happily snuggled down again.

Then, ducking his head against the steady mist of rain, Christopher led the way
down the walk
and up the stoop to the front door, where he lifted the American eagle-shaped
doors knocker
and let it drop.

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Steven asked me as we waited for the
doors to be
answered.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. Though I didn’t actually believe this. Especially, I suspected,
when Steven saw who we’d come to visit.

I wasn’t wrong. A minute later, the door opened, and a plump middle-aged
woman wearing
jeans and a Stark brand sweater with a sparkly American flag on it cried,
“Christopher! What
are you doing here on a school day?”

Christopher smiled and said, “Oh, they already let us out on winter break in the
city, Aunt
Jackie.”

Aunt Jackie beamed and said, “And you came to see Felix? And brought your
friends? How
sweet of you. Aren’t you a nice boy?”

If only she knew.

“Wel, don’t stand out there in the cold,” Aunt Jackie cried. “Come in! Come in.”
Felix’s mother shepherded us inside, where it was warm. And decorated in everything you could buy at a Stark Megastore. I’m not kidding. I recognized a Stark brand shelving unit, a Stark sofa and love seat arrangement, a Stark entertainment set, even a Stark brand television.

Felix’s family had the complete Stark living room, down to the matching green Naugahyde Stark brand love seats Christopher’s aunt and uncle evidently sat in to watch the Stark Shopping Network at night.

I could even smell Nikki perfume emanating from Aunt Jackie, a fairly noxious combination when added to the fact she had something baking in the oven back in the kitchen. Nikki’s perfume didn’t go well with food. Or anything, really.

“You’re just in time,” Felix’s mom was saying, confirming my suspicions, as she bustled around. “I’m about to take a batch of my world-famous brownies out of the oven —”

“Gee, that’s great, Aunt Jackie,” Christopher said. “Maybe later. Right now we have to talk to Felix. Is he downstairs?”

“Of course,” Aunt Jackie said with a laugh. “Where else would he be?” She kept looking nervously at Lulu and me. At first I couldn’t figure out why, then I remembered: We were
Nikki Howard and Lulu Colins. She’d probably seen us before on Entertainment Tonight…

not to mention my face on the tag of just about everything she’d ever bought. Maybe she

couldn’t place how she knew us, but she knew we looked familiar.

On top of which, it couldn’t be every day girls came over to visit her little Felix. Or, more like, ever.

“We’ll just go say hi to Felix,” Christopher said, nodding his head for us to follow him as he

made his way across the orange shag carpeting toward a nearby door. “We’ll only be a

minute. We won’t stay long.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Aunt Jackie said. “I’ll bring the brownies down to all of you. Would you

like some milk with them? Or, I know! Hot cocoa! It’s so cold out.”

Felix’s mom apparently hadn’t noticed one of us was in his twenties.

“That’s okay, Aunt Jackie,” Christopher said. “We’ll be fine.” He yanked open the door and I

saw it led to a long, narrow staircase into the basement. Christopher started down the stairs, and, glancing over my shoulder at Steven and Lulu apprehensively, I followed him.

This, I knew, was it.

It wasn’t as scary as heading into the Bat Cave, exactly. Unless posters from Scarface, the

movie, were scary. Which were what greeted us as we descended into Felix’s parents’
basement. They were everywhere. They covered almost every bit of wall surface, giant blown-up posters of Al Pacino, who starred in the movie, in all sorts of different costumes and poses.

Someone, I was beginning to suspect, had a bit of a gangster complex.

It wasn’t really very hard to figure out who. I mean, I was guessing it wasn’t Christopher’s aunt Jackie.

The basement apparently served as a laundry room as well as an exercise room. There was a set of weights—which looked as if they hadn’t been touched in ages—as well as a treadmill, from which bits of laundry were hanging to dry. At least down here, though, you couldn’t smell the sickening scent of Nikki. The air smelt crisply of Tide.

A corner of the basement had been converted to a media center. Well, of sorts. Computer monitors that appeared as if they’d been scrounged from other people’s garbage cans hung suspended from the ceiling by what looked like bungee cords. Some of them also sat on milk cartons or perilously leaned on entertainment consoles (Stark brand, of course).

Sitting in the middle of this construction was a thin, hunched figure. The figure wore baggy jeans, a green velour shirt, and multiple gold chains. He was playing an online game involving a stick shift.
“Die,” he was saying to one of the many computer monitors in front of him.
“Die, die, die, die, die!”

Behind me, I sensed rather than saw Steven freeze. Lulu crashed into him.

“Oh,” she said. “Excuse me!” Steven didn’t react. He was too stunned.

I didn’t blame him.

The figure in front of the computer monitors turned its head. I recognized Felix from the other day. He smiled. I half expected to see that some of his teeth were capped in gold. But they weren’t. Just braces.

“Christopher,” he exclaimed. “My man! And you’ve brought visitors…” His voice trailed off as he saw just who his visitors were.

I thought there was a strong possibility Felix’s eyes might bulge so far out of his head that they’d detach from his retinas entirely…especially when he saw Lulu. At the last minute,

however, he puled it together.

Then he said, “Ladies! Helo. Welcome to the Men’s Den. Good to have you here. How thoroughly excelent of you to come. Did the matriarch offer you brownies?”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Steven’s voice, behind me, was wooden.

“Just give it a chance,” I said to him quietly.

“I wil not give it a chance.” Steven sounded like he was strangling. “That is a child.”

“Au contraire, mon frère.” Felix, evidently overhearing him, puled up a pant leg
to reveal an evil-looking black plastic device attached to one—surprisingly hairy—ankle.

“Does this look childlike? I assure you, it’s anything but. This is a state-of-the-art house-arrest tracker system.

Tamper-resistant. Communicates wirelessly to the docking station upstairs in the kitchen. It’s connected to a transformer and the phone line. It will notify the police the minute I step outdoors. Hardly something your average fourteen-year-old boy would wear, now, is it? But

then,” Felix added, with a pointed glance in my direction, “I’m extremely mature for my age, as I’m sure you ladies can tel.”

Steven tensed up and looked like he was about to slug the kid. But Lulu laid a gentle hand on his arm, murmuring soothingly, “Oh, Steven, come on. Listen to Nikki. Just give it a chance.”

Christopher, meanwhile, was leaning up against a support post, a small smile playing across his lips.


“This,” I said, pointing, “is Steven—”

Christopher held up a hand. “I think it’s probably better if we keep it anonymous,” he said. “I mean, as anonymous as we can, considering there are celebrity superstars among us.”

“Don’t think just because you’re famous, Ms. Howard and Ms. Colins,” Felix let us know,

“that I’m going to treat you any differently than I would if you were any other attractive ladies.”
I actually know some celebrities—some of my best friends are celebrities, though I can’t mention names of course, because I’m too chil—and I know how upset they get when people make a big deal out of their fame. So you don’t have to worry. I’m cool about the celebrity thing.”

Lulu and I exchanged glances. Then I said the only thing we possibly could say, under the circumstances, which was, “Um…great. Thanks.”

The truth was, people said this kind of thing to me a lot. Everybody wanted me to know they weren’t the kind of person who was impressed by celebrities, and that they were going to treat me like a “normal person.”

Except that just by telling me that, they weren’t treating me like a normal person.

Christopher—who had to know his cousin was a bit of a tool but was mostly keeping his gaze averted, as if he wanted to avoid the whole situation and escape off into his own little world—asked, “Nikki, do you have that information we asked you for?”

“Oh.” I was startled. Christopher was the one who’d always treated me like a noncelebrity.

To the point where he’d almost treated me like a nonhuman at times. “Yeah…”

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about ratting out Stark to Christopher and Felix. On the one hand, I honestly didn’t think their plan was going to work. I mean, we were talking about Stark,
which according to Christopher was the largest corporation in the entire world. Were two

teenagers really going to be able to take it down with their little hack?

Yeah, so not. On the other hand, they were so going to get caught. One of them was already wearing an ankle bracelet and, from the looks of things, living in a basement, playing video games, and eating brownies served by his mother all day...on the surface the most ideal of existences for a kid, but in reality actually kind of horrible, with his obviously made-up relationships with “celebrities” and delusions of grandeur. Was that really the sort of future I wanted for Christopher?

No, of course not. But if that were true, would I have gone to school this morning, puled him out of class during finals week, and dragged him all the way out to Brooklyn to his cousin’s house?

I wasn’t sure. But I had to do something. Because my days of doing nothing but running around with a bug detector in my pocket were over.

“It’s Dr. Louise Higgins,” I heard myself saying. “That’s the user name.”
FELIX DIDN’T WASTE ANY TIME. HE TURNED around and headed straight for his computer chair in the center of all his mismatched monitors.

“And her password,” I said, remembering the way Dr. Higgins’s fingers had flown over her keyboard, “is Miss Kitty, one word, al lowercase.”

“Sweet,” Felix said, typing.

“What,” Steven said, taking a few steps forward so he could see what was coming up on the computer screens flicking before us, “does any of this have to do with my missing mother?”

“It’s just,” I said, “what I had to do in order to get them to look for her.”

“And we’re men of our word,” Felix said. “Behold.” He reached for a bunch of papers that had been spitting out of one of his many printers while we’d been standing there, then waved them in the air. “The last known whereabouts of Dolores Howard, also known as Dee Dee, also known as your mom.”

Steven snatched the pages from Felix’s hand as Christopher came over to watch Felix, who, completely uninterested in any of us anymore, entered the information I’d given him.
“Does it work?” Christopher asked his cousin. “Are we in?”

“Oh, yeah,” Felix said, sounding pleased. “We’re in.”

“Wait a minute.” Steven was looking down at the papers in his hands, shuffling through one after another, peering at each one. “This doesn’t say where she is. This just says her Social Security number hasn’t been used to register for any new jobs or credit cards or places to live since she disappeared.”

“That’s right, buddy.” Felix’s fingers flew over the keyboards in front of him, while the various monitors flickered with information that, to me, just looked like jumbles of numbers and incomprehensible data.

“But.” I felt my blood run cold on Steven’s behalf. “Christopher, you said Felix could find her.”

“Unless she’s dead.” Christopher didn’t even bother looking over at me. He pointed at one of the computer monitors and said to Felix, “Look. Look at that.”

“I know,” Felix said.

Lulu crossed the room, her high heels clacking on the cement floor, and came to stand very close beside Steven. Then she reached for his hand, the one that wasn’t holding the pages of information about his mother. She didn’t say anything. She just reached for his hand, then squeezed it.
He didn’t seem to notice.

“So you think his mother is dead?” I demanded. I didn’t mean to sound harsh, but I was angry. Not so much at Felix, because for all his brains, he was just a kid who thought he was a gangster, and didn’t know better. But Christopher. I knew he knew better—he should have been showing more concern for Steven.

But all his attention was completely glued to those stupid slapped-together computer screens. I hadn’t any doubt he was eager to get started on his diabolical scheme to bring down Stark Enterprises and avenge the wrongful death of Em Watts…a girl he had never even bothered to kiss while she was legally alive.

But he could at least have looked over at us. He could at least have said he was sorry. A man’s mother was dead!

“What?” Christopher must have felt the intensity of my gaze, since he finally glanced over.

“What are you talking about?”

Felix looked over at us, too.

“Dead?” he echoed. “I didn’t say she was dead. Did I say she was dead? No. No unidentifed bodies fitting Dee Dee Howard’s age, description, or dental records have turned up anywhere in the past few weeks in any of the databases I tapped…which was all of them, by the way.”
Felix shrugged as he turned back toward one of his keyboards and started typing again with lightning speed. “It’s possible, of course, that someone corked her and then threw her in a lake somewhere. Floaters don’t usually pop up to the surface until spring when the temperatures rise and the gases in the bodies start the decomposing process—”

“Hey, man,” Christopher said, prodding his cousin in the shoulder. “That’s not cool.”

Felix shook his head. “Sorry. We know that’s not what happened.”

I stared at him, not sure if I could start feeling relieved. “We do?”

“We do,” Felix said. “Take a look at page four.”

Steven quickly flipped through the pages he was holding, until he found the fourth page. “These are my mom’s bank records,” he said, sounding a little incredulous. “How did you—?”

But Felix cut him off before Steven could finish his question. “Check out the withdrawal she made shortly before her last few cell phone calls.”

“Her cell phone records are here? How…” Steven’s voice trailed off. Then, his eyes widening while he was reading the page in front of him, he looked up at Felix and asked, in a shocked voice, “Nine thousand dollars? She withdrew nine thousand dollars from her savings account before she disappeared? And the police didn’t bother to mention this to me before?”

Felix had already turned back to his keyboard, however.
“When there’s no sign of foul play,” Christopher said, his gaze as riveted to the computer monitors as his cousin’s, “there isn’t exactly a reason for the cops to do a thorough forensic accounting investigation, even if they have the manpower for it, which they don’t, usauly.”

“And it’s pretty common behavior,” Felix added, “for someone heading underground to make large cash withdrawals. You want to go off the grid, you can’t be flashing your Visa around, or using the ATM. They’ll find you in a red-hot second. Whoever your mom’s running from, she doesn’t want to be traced. She’s paying cash for everything.”

Steven glanced back down at the pages he was holding. “She owns a dog grooming kennel, for God’s sake. She’s never been in trouble with the police—or even the IRS, for that matter—in her life. Who would she be running from?”

“Stark,” Christopher said. He said the word as bleakly as someone else would say the word death.

“Stark?” Steven flung him an incredulous look. “But why?”

“Give us twenty-four hours.” Christopher nodded at the mishmash of computer screens in front of him. “We’ll find out.”

“And we’ll bring ’em down!” Felix let out a whoop, not unlike the kind a kid his age would release upon plummeting over the particularly steep summit of a roller coaster.
Only this wasn’t a roler coaster. I doubted Felix had ever been on an actual roler coaster in his life. He just didn’t seem like a roler coaster kind of kid.

Felix raised his left hand for Christopher to high-five. Christopher, however, ignored him. Felix lowered his hand sheepishly.

“So this is what this is all about,” Steven said. He didn’t sound pleased. In fact, he sounded disgusted. “You two are going to hack into their computer system and ‘bring down’ Stark Enterprises?” He looked at me. “You knew about this?”

“That’s what they wanted,” I said. Why was he trying to make me feel bad about my decision?

I was helping him. Wasn’t that what he wanted? “In exchange for the information about your mom. A Stark administrative employee user name and password.”

“Great,” Steven said. He looked down at the papers in his hand. “And we still don’t have the slightest idea where my mom is.” He looked over at Christopher and Felix. “How can they be so sure she’s even alive? Someone could have held a gun to her head and made her withdraw that nine grand, then dumped her body at the bottom of the lake, like the kid said.”

“No.” My voice was soft. “You said she took her dogs with her. If someone took her by force, they would have left the dogs. Christopher’s right. She’s on the run. She
has to be.”

I glanced over at Christopher and Felix, who were not paying even the slightest bit of attention to us anymore, they were so caught up in their world of destruction and—in Christopher’s case, at least—revenge. We didn’t exist to them anymore. Maybe we never had, except for what they could get out of us.

“Let’s just go now,” I said. “Come on.”

We started toward the staircase, only to see a Stark brand imitation Ugg appear on it. A second later, Aunt Jackie’s voice was calling, as she came down the stairs, “Yoo-hoo! I’ve got those brownies for you! Fresh from the oven! And look who I found outside. Your little friend. She said you al ran off so fast, you left her behind.”

Following right behind Aunt Jackie, holding a tray ful of mugs containing steaming hot chocolate, was my little sister, Frida.
“DON’T BE MAD,” FRIDA SAID.

I was sitting in the makeup chair at the Stark Sound Studios. Hopefully, this dress rehearsal would go a little better than last night’s fitting and run-through.

Of course, dragging my little sister along with me hadn’t exactly been part of the plan.

“T’m just so worried about you,” she said.

The makeup artist was attaching the last of a set of individual faux fur eyelashes over mine. I was trying not to move for fear of being stabbed in the eye with a pair of tweezers.

“I didn’t know who that guy was,” Frida was saying, referring to Steven. “I thought he might have been kidnapping you or something.”

“This really,” I said, “isn’t a good time to talk about it.”

“But when can we talk about it?” Frida asked. “You wouldn’t talk about it in the cab back to Manhattan. Why can’t we talk about it here?”

Because, I wanted to tell her, this is Stark Central. And while the room wasn’t bugged (I’d checked), everyone—meaning Jerri—was listening.

Just like the cabdriver on the way back into Manhattan had been listening.

Besides, the less Frida knew, the safer she’d be. Of course, she didn’t know this. And if she
had, she wouldn’t have agreed.

She was slumped on the chair behind mine, clutching the D&G backpack I’d snagged for her

at the runway show I’d done for them. She looked totally miserable. She’d been looking like

that all afternoon. Although I didn’t know what she had to be so bummed about. She’d got to

miss out on a day of school—even better, a day of finals.

And then, while I’d been yelling at her about that down in Felix’s basement, Nikki’s cel phone

had gone off. It had been Rebecca, telling me I was late for rehearsal—again.

My choice had been either to leave Frida stranded in Brooklyn (she had no money left after

paying the cab to follow us out to Felix’s house) or bring her along with me. I’d tried to drop her off back at school, but she wouldn’t get out of the cab. No, Frida was sticking to me like glue.

Only, glue would be more pleasant.

“Of course I grabbed a taxi and told the driver to follow yours after you just stormed out of

school like that,” she was prattling on. “He thought I was kidding. But I told him it was a

matter of life or death. If that lady who was making the brownies hadn’t kept me in the kitchen talking my ear off about the fact that Nikki Howard was downstairs in her basement visiting

her kid, I would have been down there a lot sooner to rescue you.”

“Frida,” I said with a nervous glance at Jerri, the makeup artist. “I wasn’t—”
“Wel,” she said sulenly. “It’s not my fault you didn’t need rescuing. Or so you say.”

“You skipped,” I said to her reflection in the wide makeup mirror in front of me, hoping to change the subject. “Your finals.”

“What about you?” Frida demanded. “You skipped, too. You ran off to Brooklyn with a total stranger. I’ll admit he was cute, but—”

“He’s not a total stranger,” I said. “He’s Nikki’s—I mean, my brother.”

Frida stared at me with her mouth hanging open for a ful minute before she burst out, “Your brother? But what were you doing in a Brooklyn basement with Christopher, Lulu Colins, and Nikki Howard’s brother?” She said al this just as Gabriel Luna came stroling into the dressing room.

Perfect timing. Of course.

“Sorry?” he said. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Oh, hi, Gabriel,” Jerri said, the smile on her face huge. You could tel she was enjoying every moment of this, even though she had no idea what was going on, or who Frida was to Nikki Howard. She was just enjoying the fight. “Are you here for a touch-up? Have a seat.”

“No, thanks,” Gabriel said, looking with loathing at al her brushes and powder puffs. “It’s only a dress rehearsal.”

“Gabriel Luna,” Frida breathed. Her cheeks immediately burst into flame. “Um, hi!”
Gabriel studied her. It was obvious he recognized her. They’d met at the institute, back when

he’d visited me—or, rather, Nikki—after the accident. Just who he thought she was in relation
to me—we’d never exactly discussed it—remained sketchy.

“How are you doing?” Frida asked Gabriel, before he could say hi back. Her sisterly concern

for my wel-being was momentarily lost as she greeted her crush. Her room back home was

papered in Gabriel Luna posters the way Felix’s basement was with Al Pacino. She Google-
stalked him relentlessly on her Mac back home. “It’s been ages.”

“I’m fine,” Gabriel said. He turned his attention on me, in my makeup chair. “Brooklyn?

Realy?”

“It’s a long story,” I said, shooting Frida a look. She didn’t notice, however, having eyes only for Gabriel Luna, and the fact that he was standing in the same room and breathing the same

oxygen as she was.

Not that I blamed her. It probably was kind of hard for her to concentrate on anything else,
given the fact that Gabriel had on the performance clothes Stark had ordered him to wear, a

pair of pretty tight tuxedo suit pants, the vest that matched the tuxedo suit, and a white button-down shirt open to midway down his chest, with the sleeves roled up. This could be a very
distracting look…

But only on someone as attractive as Gabriel, as was proved a second later when Robert Stark stroled into the dressing room wearing a very similar getup. Maybe that was because Robert Stark’s shirt was buttoned up to his throat, and his bow tie was actualy tied. Or possibly because he was folowed by his son, also wearing a tux…but at the same time, a look of extreme agitation, as if the dressing room before the Stark Angel fashion show dress rehearsal with his father was the last place in the world Brandon Stark realy wanted to be.

Especially when he saw me. We hadn’t communicated with each other since that awkward plane ride home the morning after that kiss we’d shared at the hotel in St. John.

When Brandon noticed me there in the dressing room, his scowl grew even more menacing.

Nice to know I have that effect on boys. I mean, Christopher doesn’t even know I exist, and Brandon Stark practicaly throws up when he sees me. Having my brain transplanted into a supermodel’s body was doing wonders for my love life, al right.

In any case, no one seemed to be sighing over Robert Stark’s or his son’s good looks the way Frida had over Gabriel’s, seconds before, even though both of them were
wearing tuxedos,

too.

“Nikki!” Robert Stark cried. He threw out his arms wide to greet me. I was so startled I didn’t know what to do. It was the first time Robert Stark had ever openly acknowledged me. I mean, since the last time we met, at a Vanity Fair photo shoot. “So good to see you! Don’t you look beautiful?”

It took me a second, but I soon saw why he was being so effusive. A string of photographers were following the two Stark men. Flashes went off as the CEO of Stark embraced the Face of Stark. Our photos would appear in countless newspapers tomorrow morning.

“Oh,” I said. “Thanks.”

“And Gabriel Luna.” After letting go of me, Robert Stark turned and held out his hand to Gabriel, who shook it. The photographers got this shot, too. Robert made sure to turn to the cameras, smiling toothily. “So glad to have you on board here at the Stark label. Hope you play well tonight. Just a rehearsal, I know, I know, but we’ve got the Stark stock investors in the audience for your run-through before their big holiday dinner tonight. They couldn’t be more excited to see it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Gabriel said. He looked completely baffled by the whole thing. The head of
the corporation that owned his label, greeting him personaly? This had obviously never

happened before in the entirety of his career. “I hope they enjoy it.”

“Just wanted to personaly extend my thanks,” Robert Stark was saying. “I wanted my two

biggest stars to know how important they are to me. And make sure you got these.”

He snapped his fingers, and Brandon, standing behind him with his scowl deepening again,


Brandon roled his eyes, then held up a large red velvet bag he’d apparently been lugging

around…and none too happily, either. Robert Stark reached inside the bag and withdrew a

foot-long box containing a Stark Quark—color: red—which he handed to Gabriel.

“Oh, gosh,” I said, gazing down at the computer I’d pretended to be so fond of in the Stark

boat, but it’s true that I was thinking. But Why the hel is this guy giving me this? I’d have been high on my list of guesses.

“And here’s one for you,” Robert Stark said, reaching down into the bag and fishing out a pink Quark for me. Because, you know, pink = girls.

“Oh, gosh,” I said, gazing down at the computer I’d pretended to be so fond of in the Stark
Quark ad (only that one had just been an empty shell, not the real thing, since they hadn’t actually come up with anything but the prototype at that time). My MacBook Air was a thousand times more user-friendly and in the long run less likely to break down. But it also cost five times more, retail. And didn’t come with Realms, the new Journeyquest game, on it.

“I always wanted one of these,” I lied. “How did you know?”

Behind his father, Brandon kept his gaze averted from mine. I couldn’t tel if he knew I was lying or not.

“Santa knows al,” Brandon’s dad said with a chuckle, and some of the reporters laughed.

Brandon muttered something about handing out free laptops to celebrities as opposed to the poor. I raised my eyebrows just as his father asked, in the same hearty voice, “What was that, Bran?”

“Nothing, sir,” Brandon mumbled. I caught his eye, and for a moment, as our gazes met, something seemed to pass between us. I don’t know what, exactly. I was so surprised at what Brandon had said, I hardly knew what to think, to be honest.

And then it was gone, and Brandon was glaring stonily ahead again.

“And who’s this?” Robert Stark asked, when he finally noticed Frida.
“Oh,” Frida said, looking mortified. “I’m no one. Just a friend of…Nikki’s.”

An F.O.N.! Frida had just caled herself an F.O.N.!

“Wel, tonight, young lady,” Robert Stark said, reaching down into the red velvet bag, “any
friend of Nikki Howard’s is a friend of mine.” And he puled out a bright orange Quark and
handed it to her.

Even though a moment before, Frida had been acting as if she were suicidal, and she’d never
in her life expressed the least interest in owning a Quark, she let out an excited scream and
began jumping up and down.

“Oh, these are the ones that aren’t on sale until Christmas! Thank you, thank you, sir!” she
yeled, throwing the arm that wasn’t wrapped around her gift around his neck, and planting a
kiss on his cheek. “Oh, thank you!”

The reporters got lots of photos of this. Excited young teenage girl embracing one of the
richest men in the world? It would be al over Fox Business News in about five minutes.

And not just because it was a cute shot, either. It was sickening, really, watching the way
Stark operated…giving away something for free, something that the individual didn’t even
know she wanted, and thus incorporating in her a feeling of goodwil toward both
him and the company…and ensuring that Frida would go fully Quark from now on, with products she’d be able to buy only at a Stark Megastore.

That’s why the man was a genius. And a bilionaire.

“Wel,” Brandon’s dad said. “Happy holidays to you all. Have a great performance. I have to be off. Can’t keep the investors waiting.”

He gave a big wave and turned to leave, Brandon following tight-facedly behind him with the bag.

I wondered what would happen if I cleared my throat and said, “Excuse me, Mr. Stark? What about the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery, and what you people do there? I mean, the whole-body transplant thing. Do you have any comment on that?”

The truth was, probably nothing would happen. Robert Stark would just blink at me with those blank eyes of his and say he didn’t know what I was talking about. And later, I’d get sent back to the institute and get another lecture by Dr. Higgins. Or maybe they’d send Dr. Holcombe this time, or, if they really wanted to scare me, some of Stark’s lawyers to threaten my family.
I wasn’t supposed to talk about what had happened to me, of course.

But no one had ever said I couldn’t talk about…

“Excuse me,” I said. “Mr. Stark?”

Robert Stark turned in the doorway and looked back, still smiling pleasantly from his interlude with my sister.

“Yes, Nikki?” he asked.

“I was just wondering,” I said. My heart was in my throat, but I didn’t care. I knew I had to

keep going. I couldn’t stop thinking about Steven’s face down in that basement, and knew I

had to do something.

And this was my opportunity. Maybe my only opportunity.

“Do you know where my mother is?”

There were a few seconds of silence after I asked this, as my words sank in. Then everyone

began buzzing among themselves. Her mother? Did she just say her mother?

“Pardon me?” Robert Stark said, his dark eyebrows raised.

“My mother,” I said. I was aware that the reporters were scribbling my words down

frantically, some of them holding minirecorders in my direction. I tried to

enunciate more clearly. “She’s missing. I was wondering if you might have any idea where she was?”

“How would I know where your mother is, sweetheart?” Robert Stark was grinning as if I’d
said something hilarious.

“Wel,” I said, “because she disappeared right after my accident.” I put special stress on the word accident. A stress only he and I—and Frida, of course, who was staring at me in astonishment—would understand. “And no one has seen or heard from her ever since. I was hoping maybe you might be able to shed some light on where she could have gone.”

“No,” Robert Stark said, shaking his head. His smile had disappeared. “Sorry, kid. I can’t help you there. Can’t help you there at al.”

He couldn’t seem to get out of there fast enough after that. Brandon folowed him, looking back at me curiously.

After Robert Stark was gone, the level of tension in the room went down a milionfold. At least to me. Which was weird because the reporters, instead of folowing him, stuck around. They shoved microphones and cameras in my face and asked, “Nikki Howard, is it true your mother is missing? Would you care to elaborate?”

It was weird but…it turned out I did care to elaborate…at least as much as I could without giving away the whole-body transplant angle of the story, which realy didn’t have anything to do with Nikki’s mother—at least so far as I could prove. Soon I had the
reporters’ names and affiliate stations and had given them exclusive interviews (Gabriel had handed me his tuxedo jacket to wear over my bra before doing so, which I considered decent of him), and had promised to have Steven e-mail a photo of his mom for the reporters to air on their shows.

It turned out, Nikki Howard having a missing mom was big news.

Realy big news.

This was something I should have thought of before. I mean, being a supermodel wasn’t all just strut ting around in ten-million-dolar bras. People were interested in you. And if your mom went missing—especialy around the holidays—that was front-page stuff.

Or at least it could be, if I worked it right. I was thinking this was something I needed to get my publicist on…

“Why didn’t you tel me about your missing mom, Nikki?” Frida asked in a tight little voice, after the last of the reporters had left the dressing room with her big scoop. “I thought we were close enough that you could tel me anything.”

What was she even talking about? Of course I couldn’t tel Frida anything. She was too young.

And it was too dangerous.

The truth was, I’d forgotten Frida was even there. Which was probably why she was glaring at me now, her eyes filed with tears.
“Don’t feel bad,” Gabriel said lightly to Frida. “I had dinner with her last night, and she didn’t say a word to me about it, either.”

“Last night?” Frida gasped. “You guys had dinner together last night?” She couldn’t have sounded more wounded if one of her Google searches had turned up images of Gabriel and me actually making out.

Great. Just great.

“Yeah,” I said quickly. “We had dinner. Because we’re in this show together, and we grabbed something after rehearsal. As friends.”

It was too late, though. There were even more hot tears in her eyes. “I saw the photos of you two by the town car on TMZ,” she said. Oh, no. “But I didn’t think…I mean, you like him?”

she demanded. “He’s your boyfriend now? What about Christopher?”

“Of course he’s not my boyfriend,” I said. How could this be happening? “Frida, stop—”

“What’s going on?” Gabriel asked, looking bewildered. “Who’s Christopher?”

“No one,” I said. “Gabriel, would you mind leaving us alone for a moment?”

“Of course,” Gabriel said, backing from the room, a wary eye on Frida, who looked like she might go supernova any minute. “I’ll just see you onstage, all right, Nikki?”

“That’d be good,” I said to him. As soon as he was gone, I whirled toward Frida, who was
glaring at me like I’d just written “You Suck” on her wall on Facebook, and said, “Frida, get

over it. He’s way too old for you. And there’s nothing going on between us, anyway. We just

work together.”

The truth was, I was kind of glad she was distracted from asking me what I’d been doing in

Brooklyn. Better that she be mad at me for going out with Gabriel Luna—however innocently

—than be demanding to know more about what I’d been doing all morning with Christopher.

Except that it turns out that wasn’t why she was mad. Or not entirely.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

I blinked down at her. “What do you mean, who am I? You know who I am.”

“No, I don’t,” Frida shot back. “You’re doing all this stuff to find someone else’s mom, and

meanwhile, you don’t even care about your real family anymore.”

“Frida,” I said in a tight voice. “You know that isn’t true.”

“Yes, it is,” Frida said. “We changed all our plans for you. I’m not going to cheerleading camp because of you. And you don’t even care. You’re spending all your time worrying about

Nikki’s family. Because you’re turning into Nikki!”

I felt something inside of me go cold. “You know that isn’t true,” I said through lips as numb as if they had been smeared with plumper.

“You’re the worst sister,” Frida snapped. “You don’t even care about me anymore! Just your
new family!

I had to admit, that hurt. Everything I’d done, I’d done to protect her. Wel, okay, maybe not the part where I’d accidentally made out with Gabriel Luna. I’d only done that because I’d been so hurt and lonely about Christopher.

But the fact that I had gone through with this whole model thing so Mom and Dad wouldn’t be in violation of the contracts they’d signed? I’d done that for Frida. How would she enjoy living in bankruptcy, with no Wi-Fi or Juicy Couture?

And she had the nerve to say I was a bad sister?

“Go get my bag,” I said in a cold voice. “Take money out of it, get a cab, and go home.”

“Gladly,” Frida said, just as coldly. “I can’t believe we decided to stay here for Christmas for you. I wish we were going to Florida after all!”

And with that, she took her new computer and a wad of cash from my wallet, and left the Stark Sound Studios.

She was crying as she did it, but I didn’t care.

Or I told myself I didn’t. She was just a kid, anyway. A jealous kid. What did she know about anything? She was just mad about the Gabriel thing, and the fact that I wouldn’t let her come to Lulu’s party. She’d get over it. She’d have to. We were sisters. We fought all the time. We always got over it.
I wasn’t turning into Nikki Howard. Sure, on the outside I looked like her. But on the inside, I was still me.

Wasn’t I? I couldn’t wait to get home and tear into my new Stark Quark so I could play

Realms. Right?

Except…

Except it wasn’t going to be that much fun without Christopher to play against.

Frida left just as one of the costume assistants came in with my wings, fastened them on, and escorted me down the long corridors to the backstage area. The rest of the girls were there,

mililing around. Keley waved when she saw me and hurried over.

“Oh, my God,” she said. Even though she was shouting, it was kind of hard to hear her with all

the buzzing from the Stark investors. “Can you believe this? They get their own private

performance? Just because they’ve got stock in the company or something? This is ridiculous.

Someone should complain.”

“Seriously,” I said. Except that I didn’t mean it. The truth was, there was no instrument known to man small enough to measure how little I cared.

Maybe Frida was right. Maybe I was turning into Nikki. Maybe this was what happened to

stunningly beautiful women. They just got to a point where they were so jaded about

everything, nothing mattered anymore. Their hearts turned hard as stone. Mine
certainly felt

like it. Or as heavy as stone, anyway.

Up until Alessandro hissed, “Ladies! We’re on!” and we were lining up to begin, the techno

music thumping so hard it seemed to have reached inside my heart and seized it and taken hold

—bump-bump-bump—and Veronica turned around suddenly and pinched me. Hard.

“Ow!” I shrieked, rubbing my arm. Sorry, but no one whose heart was made of stone could

be as sensitive to pain as I was. “What did you do that for?”

“You know.” Her gaze blazed like twin lightning bolts. “Why won’t you quit e-mailing Justin?

He doesn’t like you like that anymore. He’s mine.”

“E-mail him?” I glared back at her. I had to shout to make sure she could hear me over the

music. “I didn’t e-mail anyone!”

“You’re a liar.” Veronica shook her head, her silky blond hair shimmering in the stage lights.

“He showed me the things you wrote. You’re pathetic. You miss him? He’s mine now.”

“I swear,” I said. “I am not e-mailing your boyfriend. It’s someone else—”

“How can you stand there, lying to my face?” Veronica wanted to know. “Justin told me he

broke it off and has been trying to ditch you, but you won’t let it go.”
I glared at her angrily. “I told you. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t been e-mailing Justin. It’s some other girl using my name. Which isn’t my problem. Now, you better pay attention to what you’re doing or you’re going to be late onstage. And don’t pull that feather thing again or this time I’ll speak to Mr. Stark about it, and he’ll boot you out of here.

That I’ll guarantee.”

Something very much like fear flickered across Veronica’s face, and I realized I’d finally gotten the upper hand in our relationship. It was sad that I’d had to invoke the name of Brandon’s dad to do it, but what choice did I have, really? The girl was trying to kill me, and for something I didn’t even do. Some wacko was trying to steal her boyfriend, and was using my name to do it. How was that my fault?

Looking scared—until her stage face fell into place like a mask—Veronica sailed out onto the runway. I stood there for a few seconds, waiting for my cue—the “Nikki” song—and wondering how everything had gotten so complicated. My life before the accident hadn’t been so great, it was true…I’d been in love with a guy who hadn’t known I was alive. Now that guy had finally realized he loved me back. The only problem was, he thought I was dead, but I
couldn’t tel him I wasn’t. And he wouldn’t like the me I was now, anyway, because I represented pretty much everything he hated.

Meanwhile, so did a bunch of other people. Hate me, I mean.

It was hard being a teenage supermodel in the twenty-first century.

Then I heard it.

“The thing of it is, girl…in spite of it al…I realy do think…I love you.”

Except, of course, once again, it was the wrong guy saying it.

And as I moved out onto the stage, carefully putting one six-inch heel in front of the other and giving my al to my sassy catwalk strut, a knowing, catlike smile plastered across my face as the Stark investors cheered—I knew my heart hadn’t actualy been turned to stone.

Because it hurt.

It hurt a lot.
NINETEEN

STEVEN WASN’T IN THE MOOD FOR A party.

Neither was I, actually. I mean, Steven hadn’t spent the night before at the Stark Angel dress

rehearsal and investor after party, signing autographs and posing for photos with Stark

Enterprises executives, pretending to be so thrilled to be there.

Nor had he woken up the next day and dragged himself to school for his remaining finals, or

slunk around to the teachers whose exams he’d missed the day before, begging them to let him

reschedule.

I was the only one who appeared to care about having missed any exams. Christopher didn’t

even bother to show up at school the next day. I had no idea where he was. Probably still with

Felix in the basement, hatching their evil revenge plot against Stark.

Which didn’t appear to be working, because as far as I could tell, Stark Enterprises showed

every sign of still going strong.

Frida, whom I passed in the hallway, stuck up her nose at me and moved right along. So I had

no idea if her teachers allowed her to retake the finals she’d missed when she followed me out
to Brooklyn. Mine weren’t so keen on the idea. I got a lot of, “Miss Howard, do you realize

how much of this semester you’ve missed already? We here at Tribeca Alternative are wiling
to be flexible with students who have special schedules, but you’re going to have to make up
your mind. Do you want a modeling career, or do you want an education?”

Um…how about both?

But I understood. I took my F’s on the finals whose teachers were totally unwilling to
compromise and let me do extra work to make up for missing the final exam or project.

Such as Public Speaking. Wel, Mr. Greer always did think a bit too highly of himself, for a
guy who slept through class every day.

In some cases, the F wouldn’t affect my total grade in the class too badly. I’d stil end up
making a C or a B. But in others…

Wel, let’s just say it was a good thing I had my modeling career to fal back on if I didn’t
make it into college.

I knew not everybody was going to think this was such a good thing. My parents, for instance,
weren’t going to be so thriled when they heard about it…if I ever told them, that is. They had no way to find out about Nikki Howard’s grades, not being related to her—nor would the
school have notified them that she’d skipped school yesterday.

Frida, however, was another matter. She’d gotten into some pretty big trouble for leaving

school and missing her exams. TAHS had notified Mom about both, as I found out when I’d

called Mom and Dad to check in—stung by Frida’s rebuke that I cared more about my “new

family” than I did about my old one.

Mom had been frantic about Frida’s skipping…until I told her she’d been with me at the Stark

Angel fashion show rehearsal.

“What?” Mom sounded stunned. “With you?”

“She was just worried about me,” I said. “We had a little fight. She saw me leaving school,

and she didn’t know why, and so she followed me. I was going to a rehearsal at the Stark

studios. She was with me the whole time.” This part, at least, wasn’t technically a lie.

“So you skipped school, too,” Mom said. Now she sounded more bitter than stunned.

“It was work, Mom,” I said. Technically, this wasn’t a lie, either. “Don’t be too hard on Frida.

She really thought she was doing the right thing.”

Mom sighed. “You’re both getting coal in your stocking this year,” she said. She didn’t sound

like she was joking, either.
So Frida hadn’t told Mom where she’d been—chasing me to Brooklyn. What was Frida up
to? Why hadn’t she told Mom and Dad where she’d been? What was going on with her? Why
was she so mad at me? Surely she couldn’t really believe I was turning into my donor body,
forgetting my real family in place of Nikki’s. Not for real. It was true sometimes—especially
when a guy was kissing me—I felt as if I were losing control over Nikki.

But forsake Frida and Mom and Dad for Nikki’s family? No. It was just that they needed me
right now. And I was in a position where I could help them.

Besides, I owed them. Didn’t I? Who else was going to help them if I didn’t?

When I got home from school that day, I found Steven—still not in the mood for a party—
looking pleased with himself.

“Come with me,” he said, and guided me toward the stereo cabinet.

“What?” I asked, unwinding my scarf as Cosabela jumped excitedly against my legs. “You
didn’t get us a present, did you? You didn’t have to…” My voice trailed off as I saw what

Steven slid back the stereo cabinet doors to show me. It sat next to our CD player, a black

box with a lot of knobs on it.

“Oh,” I said. “That’s so nice. But I think we already have one.” I didn’t know what it was. We already had one of everything. “I’m sure yours is better,” I said,
to make him not feel bad.

“You don’t have one of these,” Steven assured me, with a chuckle. “It’s an acoustic noise generator. And don’t ask where I got it, because you’re better off not knowing. It works by injecting noise on all the frequencies on which you might be bugged. In your case —” He pointed upward.

I cocked my head. “But…I can’t hear anything.”

“Right,” Steven said. “That’s the point. You’re not supposed to know it’s here. And neither will they. All they’re going to know is that they can’t hear you anymore. They’ll probably send someone in to try to find out why. But they won’t be able to figure it out. They’ll never have seen one of those before. It’s for military use only.”

I stared at him. “Which is why I’m not supposed to ask where you got it,” I said. “Right?”

“Right,” he said. “Or ask where I got this.” He handed me a small black handheld device, not much bigger than my bug detector.

“It’s a portable audio jammer,” he said, in response to my inquisitive look. “It only operates on two frequencies, but it will stop any surveillance microphones operating within a distance of a hundred and fifty feet of you from picking up normal conversation. And soundlessly.”
I looked down at the sleek black device in my hand. I was touched.

“This is so nice of you, Steven,” I said, feeling my eyes grow moist. I’d been so paranoid for so long about Stark overhearing my every word. And now, suddenly, I didn’t have to be. And it had all happened so fast. “But I…I didn’t get you anything.”

“What?” Steven looked incredulous. “Yes, you did. This was the least I could do.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t believe I was getting teary-eyed. Then again, I always had been a giant geek. I guess this was proof that what Frida had accused me of wasn’t true—I wasn’t turning into Nikki Howard after all. I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t have been impressed by gifts of an acoustic noise generator and an audio jammer. “What do you mean?”

“The TV stations that ran interviews with you say they’ve had hundreds of cals,” Steven said.

“All from people who think they’ve seen Mom.”

“Are any of them credible sightings?” Lulu, using some of her Law and Order jargon, came into the loft suddenly. She was helping Katerina with the caterers, who’d begun arriving in advance of her party.

“No.” Steven closed the stereo cabinet hastily. “Not yet. But I have a feeling we’re getting close.”

“Fantastic!” Lulu smiled brilliantly at him, then pointed an imperious finger at a
guy carrying a carved-out pumpkin in which some kind of liquid was going to be poured. “No! Katerina,

where does that go?”

“Here!” Katerina took over, looking physically ready to move the guy holding the pumpkin, if

not the gourd itself.

“So it’s okay with you,” I asked, looking nervously at Nikki’s brother, “that I did all those

interviews?”

“Okay with me?” Steven shook his head. “We should have thought of it sooner. But is it going
to get you in trouble with—?”

He raised his gaze to the ceiling where the performer from Cirque du Soleil, wearing very little except a nude-colored bra and a pair of panties and a long red scarf, was testing out a newly

installed trapeze with her weight. Not far from the trapeze were the round holes I’d noticed in the ceiling a few weeks earlier. Steven wasn’t avoiding the word Stark for fear of being

overheard by my employer…not anymore, thanks to his gifts. He just didn’t want to bring it up

in front of Lulu while she was in such a party mood.

“I don’t know,” I said with a shrug. “I guess we’ll see.”

“I can’t believe all the fuss she’s going to for this,” Steven said, looking at Lulu as she flitted from one table to another, making last-minute adjustments. She had already changed into her

party finery, a poofy-skirted black cocktail gown. She looked like one of her
favorite movie
characters, Holy Golightly, from the movie Breakfast at Tiffany’s. All she needed was a long cigarette holder.

“It’s important to her,” I explained. “She doesn’t have any family. Her friends are her family.” I looked at him. “You’re part of that family, too, now.”

“I am?” He looked a bit startled. I was pretty sure he didn’t fully comprehend what I meant—

at least so far as Lulu having an enormous crush on him went. I highly doubted it had occurred to Steven Howard that Lulu Colins, of all people, thought he was hot. He just didn’t have a

high enough opinion of himself. Look at the struggle the two of them had had over his outfit for the party. He’d wanted to wear his normal clothes—T-shirt and jeans—and Lulu had wanted him to wear an ensemble she’d put together for him at Barneys. Lulu had won, in the end, by pouting.

But Steven looked as uncomfortable as a jock at a Comic-Con. Not that he looked bad—

exactly the opposite. I just wasn’t used to seeing him resemble such a typical New Yorker, in a striped button-down shirt with dark-rinse jeans and a fitted jacket with frayed stitching that I knew had to have cost at least a thousand dollars.

I doubted Steven knew that, however.

“Nikki, people are coming soon,” Lulu cried when she saw me sitting on the couch, petting
Cosy and talking to Steven. “Are you going to change or what? I mean, you’re not wearing that, are you?”

I was stil in my school clothes, having been too exhausted to slip into something else.

“I’m changing,” I said. “I’m changing.” I slunk off to my bedroom to find something to wear,

relieved to be out of the way of Katerina and the party caterers. Cosabela looked relieved,

too, and hopped into her little basket to curl up and go to sleep.

In Nikki’s closet was an endless supply of couture, most of it stil with the price tags attached.

I never had to go shopping, because stylists just gave Nikki things to wear right off the racks from the shoots I went to. I found a slinky black evening gown, made of some kind of sparkly material, that tied like a halter around the neck. It was cold outside, but inside the loft it was hot because Lulu had a blaze going ful blast in the fireplace. She’d turn the air-conditioning on and open every window to combat the body heat from al the guests later…We’d had a few gatherings in the past. I took off my clothes and slithered into the dress, which was the kind you couldn’t wear with underwear or the lines would show, then spent a half hour messing around with my makeup. I was never the type to care about makeup before, but it was very soothing if, for instance, you were upset about a guy—say, a guy like Christopher—to screw around in the mirror, trying to give yourself a smoky eye, while waiting for him to cal, and
teling yourself it would be a realy, realy bad idea to cal him.

I mean, after al, Christopher prefers a dead girl. What did I want to hang out with a guy like that for, anyway? Right?

I suppose I had zero chance of that relationship ever working out…which was just as wel, I

guess. No guy needed to tangle with someone as messed up as me. Christopher was better off

without me. Maybe I should just step aside and let McKayla Donofrio have him, that lactose-

intolerant, National Merit Scholarship-winning, Business Club-founding, tortoiseshel-

headband-wearing little cow.

My eyes ended up looking more haunted than smoky. I could see I’d put on too much liner,

and had to start over. By the time I came out of my bedroom, it was late, and the first guests

—the early ones, Lulu had assured me, were always wannabes and losers—had already

arrived. I used the opportunity to grab some food—no need to worry about getting it while it

was stil hot, since Katerina, in the kitchen, was supervising the caterers to make sure

everything stayed exactly the temperature at which it was supposed to be served al night—so

I wouldn’t faint with hunger later on when it al ran out.

Meanwhile, DJ Drama had arrived and was setting up. I went over to chat with
him. He seemed shy. Or maybe he was just uninterested in anything a seventeen-year-old girl stuffing her face with sushi had to say. Above our heads, while we chatted, the Cirque du Soleil performer was doing unbelievable contortions, a detached look on her face. I wondered what it would be like to be her. Better, I figured, than it was to be me. The loft kept filing up with more and more people, some of whom I recognized from the pages of Lulu’s copies of Vogue and Frida’s copies of Us Weekly and some of whom I’d never seen before. DJ Drama got the music pulsing and soon was too busy to speak to me—but that was okay, because Nikki’s friends had started crowding around me, telling me how great I looked and leading me toward the bar, where they’d all begun ordering some of the exotic drinks the astrologist bartenders were mixing.

I couldn’t help it. I started having fun. Okay, my life was in shambles. The guy I loved didn’t love me back. The mother of the body my brain had been transplanted into was missing. And I’d flunked half my finals because I’d missed them.

But it was hard not to have a good time when there was so much good music, good food, and so many happy people around.
Even Steven, I saw, wasn’t having a bad time. I spotted him dancing with Lulu—if you could

call what he was doing dancing. Mainly, he was standing still while Lulu cavorted all around

him like a crazy wild woman.

That’s when he happened to catch my eye. He saw me staring. And he looked toward the

ceiling. Not like he was glancing at the Cirque du Soleil performer. But like he was saying, Can you believe this? But also, he was smiling. So his glance toward the ceiling was sort of saying, I know, right? This is crazy…but it’s kind of fun, too.

And that’s when I realized maybe things weren’t quite that bad. At least I had a connection

with someone who thought about things the same way I did.

It was just surprising that it was Nikki’s brother, Steven.

Maybe, I thought to myself, Frida was right. Just a little bit. Not the part where she’d accused me of turning into Nikki Howard, but the part where she’d implied I’d found a new family.

Maybe, like Lulu, I was making a new family…one that included my old family.

But that wasn’t as surprising as what happened next: The crowd parted a little, and I saw

something I never in a million years expected to see.

And that was a member of my old family—my sister, Frida—dancing with Brandon Stark.

I had no idea what she was doing there. Clearly, she’d invited herself, since I certainly hadn’t given her the okay to be there.
Worse, she was wearing a tiny dress—no bigger than two handkerchiefs sewn together (I might be exaggerating, but not really)—and gyrating her hips like she thought she was Miley Cyrus or someone. That was not cool. It was so not cool that I was stalking over to give her a piece of my mind when I heard a familiar voice say, “Nikki,” and I turned around. There wasn’t a person in the world who could have distracted me, at that moment, from killing my sister. Not a single person. Except the second-to-last person I’d expected to see at that party, after my little sister:

Christopher.

What was he doing here? I had never invited him. How could I, now that he’d gone to the dark side?

And I had already given him everything he had asked for. What more could he possibly want from me?

Then I glanced into his face, and my shock gave way to concern…Christopher looked white as a sheet. What was the matter?

Then it hit me: Oh, God. Felix had been arrested. I knew it. Just knew it. They’d overheard us in Christopher’s apartment. Of course they had. I hadn’t had the audio jammer then.

And they’d be coming for Christopher next. He was on the run. And he’d come
to me for

help.

And in that minute I knew... as much as I’d told myself I didn’t care about Christopher

anymore, as much as I told myself McKayla Donofrio could have him, I’d been lying to

myself. I loved him. I always would. I’d do whatever I had to do to hide him from the cops.

Even if he never, ever gave me the time of day.

Because that’s what you did for people you loved. Even people who didn’t love you back.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Christopher asked me. He had to raise his voice almost to a

shout to be heard above the pounding music.

“What’s going on?” I asked him, fear clutching my throat. It was a different kind of fear than I’d felt for Frida when I’d seen her in her handkerchief dress, dancing with Brandon. That had been more like annoyance, actually. I knew she couldn’t really get in trouble when Lauren

Conrad was dancing in front of a camera crew right beside her. “Is—”

Christopher seemed to have read my thoughts. He shook his head.

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “Well, I mean, relatively. I’m probably going to flunk out of

school. But other than that. And I’m sorry to crash your party like this. I just really need to talk to you. Look, can we go somewhere a little quieter? Where’s your room?”

“It’s over there,” I said, pointing.
“Good.” Christopher reached out and wrapped his hand around my wrist. The next thing I knew, he was puling me through the crowded loft toward the door to my room. He didn’t seem to care how many people he bumped into along the way—caterers serving drinks, models from the Stark Angel fashion show whose numbers Brandon had evidently gotten and summoned to come along, fashionistas, Karl the doorman, improbably dancing with Katerina, both of them having had too much to drink. He evidently just wanted to get where it was quieter, and get there as soon as he possibly could.

And when we were in my empty bedroom, he dropped my hand and turned to face me. He didn’t even bother turning on a light, just settled for the glow from the city that shone in from the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I stood there looking at him, a little out of breath from how quickly he’d puled me. It was a lot quieter in my room. The music was stil thumping unbelievably loudly out in the loft, but at least you could hear yourself think. The building, having once been a police precinct station, had decent enough soundproofing from room to room. I guess the old-timey cop higher-ups hadn’t wanted to be able to hear the prisoners scream as they were being tortured back in their prison cels.

“So what’s so important,” I asked him, “that you couldn’t tell me out there?”
And the next thing I knew, without uttering a single word, he was reaching up, cupping both
my cheeks with his hands, and tilting my face until it was just inches from his.

And then he was kissing me.

Christopher Maloney was kissing me.

It wasn’t a possessive kiss or a greedy kiss. He didn’t smash his lips up against
mine the way some guys—okay, Brandon—did when they got a chance to kiss Nikki Howard, like they
wanted to own her or drive themselves up against her or whatever.

It was a sweet kiss. It was almost…well, if I didn’t know better, I’d have said it was a loving kiss.

But Christopher didn’t love Nikki Howard. Christopher loved Em Watts.

Stil, I felt his kiss from my lips all the way down to my painfully throbbing—in
my too tight

Jimmy Choo shoes—toes. My lips were tingling as if they’d been stung by a thousand tiny

bees. Or been slathered in a ton of Lip Venom.

My God, was all I could think. Christopher was kissing me. Christopher Maloney was kissing

me.

And the thing was, even though people always say dreams never stand up to the reality, this
totally did. Christopher kissing me felt exactly as I’d always imagined it would… as warm and

as right and as electric as I’d dreamed—when I’d been idiotic enough to dream of Christopher
Maloney kissing me, before the accident, before I’d given up al my dreams. Because after the

accident, of course, there’d been no point in dreaming…None of those dreams had a chance

of ever coming true.

But now…now. The dream I’d fantasized about most often of al as I’d sat in Public Speaking

was coming true right in front of me. Not only was Christopher kissing me, but —because my

legs appeared to have given out from the shock of it al—he was lifting me up…no, realy, he

had scooped an arm up under my collapsing knees and was lifting me up—and carrying me
toward the bed.

Wait—was this realy happening?

Except that it had to be. Because I could feel the metal rivets from his leather jacket biting into my skin through the thin material of my dress. Surely I couldn’t be dreaming that.

And I could feel the soft poofiness of my down comforter behind my back as he laid me gently
down on top of it.

And then I could feel the hardness of his body as he, in turn, lay down on top of me. Surely al these things had to be happening. I couldn’t be imagining them, or the steady thump-thump-thump of the music from the next room, which seemed to be going exactly in time with the

rapid thump-thump-thump of my heart…
Or the way his lips, so close to mine, murmured the word Em before he kissed me again, this

kiss so long and so hungry that I really couldn’t have described it as sweet. Not this time. Not when every inch of skin on my body was so tingly and aware of every place it was in contact

with his...not when suddenly I realized he was lying on top of me, with one leg insinuated

between mine.

Not when all that was separating us was a few scraps of material and some leather.

And that was when it hit me, the word he’d said, that single syllable finally trickling down

through my kiss-addled brain.

“What did you call me?” I asked, wrenching my lips away from his.

“I know,” he said. Since I’d pulled my head away, he couldn’t reach my mouth. So he settled

for kissing my neck. Needless to say, this was hugely distracting. It also felt really, really good.

Better, even, than having my neck massaged.

His voice, when he spoke again, was a deep-throated growl, it was so rough with emotion. “I

know it’s you, Em.”

“You what?” I was positive I was in some kind of dream now, and that I was going to wake

up any minute, like I always did. Maybe this time I’d be at the bottom of the ocean in St. John.
Maybe I’d never really left there after all, and everything that had happened after that was just one long, McKayla Donofrio-filed nightmare.

“Your file,” Christopher murmured, against my neck. “I read it. The Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery didn’t do its due diligence when selecting an offshore IT consultancy.”

Okay. That didn’t sound like part of a dream…or something I’d imagine.

“What?” I said intelligently.

“Stark cut corners,” Christopher said. His lips were still on my throat. “Not a wise move when it comes to your network.”

Wait a minute.

“I’m surprised no one’s found out about those whole-body transplants they’ve been doing before now.” Christopher’s voice was still a low, gravely rasp. “It’s really just a matter of time before the press discovers what they’ve been up to.”

Wait. Christopher knew? He knew?

“It’s not…I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. Even as I was saying it, I thought, confusedly, No, wait…the acoustic noise generator. Stark can’t overhear me anymore. I can tel him. I can tel him the truth now.

But old habits die hard.

“Em.” Christopher’s lips traveled up my neck to my mouth again. “It’s all right. I know. I
know you couldn’t tel me. I know you tried. But I’m here now. Everything’s going to be al
right. You know I always loved you.”

It was fantastic, what his mouth was doing to me. The things he was saying were even more
amazing. It was everything I had ever wanted. It was al just incredible.

“You always loved me?” I echoed.

“Of course I did.” Christopher looked down at me. His expression, which moments before
had been supremely confident, now seemed confused. “You know that. I mean, you saw what
a mess I was after your funeral. Em, when you died…it nearly tore me apart. When I found
out you were alive, I can’t even describe to you—”

I didn’t know why I couldn’t just lie there and enjoy what was happening to me. I didn’t know
why I couldn’t just accept what he was saying and forget that he’d never said he loved me
back when I had that snaggletooth and didn’t look like the goddess that I did now. I mean, I
was stil the same person on the inside then that I was now. So what did it matter?

Except…

It mattered.

I pushed him away from me. He moved, seemingly dazed by what I was doing, then watched
as I wriggled out from beneath him, roled off the bed—careful not to step on Cosabela,

who’d come trotting over to see what was going on—then went to one of the windows and

wedged it open, letting in the sound of the traffic below, as well as a blast of fresh winter air.

I knew there was no danger of us being overheard by Stark. Not anymore. I just needed some

air to help me think.

“So if you loved me so much,” I turned around to demand, “why didn’t you ever try to kiss me

when I was in my old body?”

“Oh, my God,” Christopher said, in a different voice, more like his normal one, no longer deep and gravelly, blinking at me from the bed. Even he couldn’t believe what was happening. “Are

you seriously going there? Now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I am. I mean, you never even noticed I existed until I died. Except as

someone to play Journeyquest with. You never noticed me as a girl. I don’t think it’s

unreasonable that I ask for some kind of explanation for that. And just what do you mean

Everything’s going to be alright? How is everything going to be alright? You’re going to

sweep in and take care of everything because you’re some big man and I’m just a delicate little girl and I can’t handle the situation? I can assure you, Christopher, I’m handling the situation.”
“Oh, yeah,” Christopher said, sitting up. “First you get your head cracked open with a plasma screen TV. Then you get your brain transplanted into a supermodel’s body. You’ve been doing a great job so far, Em.”

As great as it felt to hear him calling me Em again—as transporting an experience as that was—I wanted to smack him across the head for his sarcasm.

“Oh,” I said. “You’re one to talk, with your stupid idea to hack Stark Enterprises. Like that’s going to work.”

“As a matter of fact, it is working. I found out the truth about you, didn’t I? And at least I had an idea,” Christopher said. “What’s your plan? Throw a party and invite Lauren Conrad and DJ Drama?”

I crossed back over to the bed until I was standing in front of him. “That wasn’t my idea. And I’ve been slightly preoccupied, trying to find Nikki Howard’s missing mom.”

“Did it ever occur to you,” Christopher asked, ignoring me, “that those two things might be connected?”

I threw him a startled look.

“What are you talking about?”

“Nikki’s mom disappearing,” Christopher said, “and what happened to you.”

I stared at him. This was something I, too, had considered. But I’d never thought anyone but me would take the notion seriously. Wel, and Steven.
“I’m sorry,” I said. “But I think you had one too many lycheetinis.”

“I didn’t have any,” Christopher said, looking devious, the way he used to when we were younger and we’d try to pool our money and buy games marked ADULT ONLY from Kim’s Video down on St. Mark’s Place. “And maybe Nikki’s mom found out something she wasn’t supposed to know. Have you ever considered the fact that maybe Nikki did, too?”

“Nikki?” I tilted my head to look at him in the dim half-light that was streaming in through the massive windows. “You think Nikki—what are you talking about, Christopher?”

“I’m saying there are no accidents, Em.” His blue eyes searched my face intently. “Does anyone really know what happened to Nikki that day? She went down and never got back up again. Stark says it was an aneurysm…but how do we know? Felix and I checked everywhere, but we couldn’t find a medical file on her…only the one for you.”

I opened my mouth. It seemed so strange to be having this conversation in my room with Christopher, of all people. I’d missed him so much, and now, here he was, and finally, finally what I’d never thought could happen was happening…

…and we were having a fight.

“Of course, we don’t know the truth about what happened to Nikki that day,”
Christopher went on, before I had a chance to speak. “Maybe we never wil. We have to accept Stark’s word for it.”

I shook my head. “What are you saying? That she didn’t have an aneurysm? Christopher, that’s insane.”

Except that Steven had said the exact same thing.

Christopher shrugged. “There are no accidents. Nikki was the Face of Stark. They invested milions in her. She was too important for them to lose. As you know only too wel. Especially with them doing this massive rolout of PCs with the new software and new version of Journeyquest. But they didn’t hire her for her brains, did they?”

I bristled. “Modeling isn’t as easy as everyone thinks,” I snapped. “It’s really hard work. You try pretending you’re comfortable in a pair of skintight leather pants under a bunch of hot lights for hours on end—”

“Look, Stark Enterprises…that whole organization is out of control.” Christopher’s gaze on me was unsympathetic. I guess anyone’s would be. Getting paid thousands of dolars to stand in a pair of leather pants under some hot lights for a few hours wasn’t that big a sacrifice. You do tend to lose your perspective pretty quickly after a while. “… unsecured wireless system, the whole network totally misconfigured. It just makes you wonder.”
I thought about the computer I’d found in Nikki’s bedroom when I’d first arrived. It had been infected with spyware. So, when I’d checked it, had Lulu’s. I hadn’t unpacked the new PC that Robert Stark had just given me from its box, but who knew what might be wrong with it.

“You don’t think…” I could barely breathe.

“I don’t know what to think,” Christopher said. “Except that there’s something going on.

Something they don’t want anyone to know. Something I think Nikki—and now maybe her mom—found out about. And Stark tried to shut both of them up. And you were in the right place at the wrong time.”

“Wait a minute.” I felt cold, and not just because the wind was blowing in from the open window. “You think Stark killed Nikki? Because she knew something she wasn’t supposed to?”

“They didn’t kill her, did they?” Christopher smiled at me grimly. “Because she’s sitting right in front of me.”

I shivered. “You know what I mean.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “And in answer to your question, I think it’s possible…even likely, that they had her brain conveniently removed.”

“My God,” I breathed.
It was so weird to be talking to Christopher again. Not that I hadn’t talked to him lately. I had, obviously. But he hadn’t known it was me. Now he did. He’d even touched me, knowing it was me. And he wanted to touch me again, I could tel, from the way his hand kept lifting and then at the last minute he’d sweep his fingers through his hair or mess with the comforter on my bed instead.

I knew how he felt. But I wasn’t going to go rushing into anything. I had too many questions, the first of which he stil hadn’t answered.

“But you think Nikki’s mom is alive,” I said. “That’s what Felix told Steven.”

“There’s no reason to think she’s dead,” Christopher said.

“So where is she?” I asked.

“Out there,” he said, nodding toward the bright city lights shining beyond my open window.

“No one can just disappear forever. It’s realy hard. Even when they give people in witness protection programs new identities, they feel compeled to reach out to friends they knew before, at the risk of their own lives. It’s force of habit. Everyone messes up eventualy. You did it, with the dinosaur stickers. I was just too stupid to get it.”

I felt myself blushing. I stil couldn’t believe I’d done that.

And now his words triggered a memory deep in the back of my brain. It’s force of habit.

Everyone messes up eventualy.

Only what? What was I thinking of?
“The thing is,” Christopher said, reaching out to take my hand. “You’re right. I was a jerk before. A jerk not to see what a great thing we had. I guess I just didn’t know it until you were gone. And then…seriously, Em, part of me died, too. All I could think about after that was getting revenge on Stark—”

“But now that you know the truth,” I said, puling my hand gently from his, “you see that you can’t. You can’t do anything to them, Christopher. Because they’ve got my family in a stranglehold. And if what happened gets made public, Stark will take it out on my parents.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Christopher said. He stood up and put both hands on my bare shoulders.

“I told you. I’ll take care of everything.”

I wanted so badly to believe him. It would have been bliss to have allowed myself to, to relax and let him take care of everything. As he puled me toward him and laid the gentlest kiss on my forehead, I inhaled the scent of his leather jacket, felt the heat radiating from his strong body. It felt so nice, just for that minute or two, to have his arms around me, and to feel his heart beating against mine. For the first time in what seemed like the longest time, I knew I was protected and warm and not—well, alone.

Then a cold wind swept in from the open window, sending shivers up and down my spine.

A second later, the door to my room burst open, and a very male, very surprised voice asked,
“Nikki?”

And I turned my head and saw Brandon standing there, staring at us in the half-light.
TWENTY

“BRANDON,” I CRIED, LEAPING AWAY from Christopher as if his embrace had

scorched me.

Don’t ask me what instinct made me do this. But something told me being seen in the arms of

another man would not sit well with Nikki’s ex.

I needn’t have worried, however. Brandon was wasted. He stood, wavering a little, in the

doorway, squinting into my darkened room as if he couldn’t see very well. I was more glad

than ever that Christopher and I hadn’t turned on the lights.

“Uh,” Brandon said, “Nikki? Yeah, you better come.”

“Why?” I asked, adjusting my halter top where I thought it might have slipped a little for

reasons best left unmentioned.

“Some girl said to get you.” Brandon was squinting at Christopher now, trying to see if he

recognized him in the halflight from the window. Since Christopher had never graced the pages

of TMZ.com, Brandon surely couldn’t place him. “Some girl named Frida? She’s sick or

something.”

I was out of the room like a shot.
“Where?” I demanded in a tight voice. “Where is she?”

But Brandon just shrugged. He was so out of it. He had no idea where he was.

Out in the main part of the loft, the party was in full tilt—it was everything Lulu could have hoped for. There were so many gyrating bodies dancing—and sweating—in time to the music,

you could hardly see from one end of the room to the other. Overhead, the girl on the trapeze

had ditched her long red scarf and was performing almost fully naked. The music was so loud

it seemed to pulse through my chest. I wondered if the other tenants in the building would call the cops—then realized Lulu had foreseen this problem by inviting the other tenants…I could

have sworn I saw the guy who lived on the floor above us dancing with someone who looked

a lot like Perez Hilton. Lulu, obviously, was a genius. It wouldn’t surprise me if the cops

themselves turned out to be here somewhere, dancing.

But I couldn’t find Frida. Looking for her in that packed room of sweaty bodies was a

nightmare. I had to shove past Moschino-clad guest after Moschino-clad guest, murmuring,

“Excuse me,” again and again. And, of course, half of them—the male half—one after another,

would reach out to grab my arm, crying, “Nikki! Stay and dance! Come on, don’t be a drag!”

“I can’t,” I’d say regretfully. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Me, I hope.” Some of the guys would leer.

“Oh, ha-ha,” I’d say. “Sorry. But I’ll be back in a minute.”

“You better!”

It wasn’t pretty.

The truth was, I felt guilty. I never should have let Frida out of my sight in the first place. If it had been anyone but Christopher, I never would have. Of course, I’d explicitly forbidden Frida to attend this party. Then again…I should have known she’d show up, anyway. Frida’d always done precisely what I—or Mom and Dad—had asked her not to. Didn’t al little

sisters, intent on proving they were just as “good” as their big sisters? It was no surprise she was in trouble somewhere.

And when I found her, I knew what her excuse was going to be, too: “But you’re here, Em.

Why can’t I be? Just because you’re older…It’s not fair!”

I stumbled across Lulu before I found Frida. Lulu was dancing with Steven, and she looked as

if she was having the time of her life. Steven didn’t look as if he was having a half bad time, either. But Lulu’s face was the one transported with joy. It brightened even more when she

saw me, her dark eyes, rimmed with mascara that had gotten smudgy with perspiration,

widening to their limits as she let go of Steven and hurried over to grasp my arm, standing up on tiptoes to whisper in my ear, “Oh, Nikki! Can you believe it?
Everyone showed up!

Everyone! This is the best party ever! And can you believe it? Steven…your brother? He’s a Libra!”

I blinked down at her. “That’s…that’s amazing,” I said.

“No, you don’t understand,” she said, shaking me a little. “My astrologer. She said I’m supposed to end up with a Libra!”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s great. Have you seen Frida?”

Lulu’s smile immediately vanished. “Frida’s here? I thought you told her she couldn’t come.”

Her gaze flicked to someone behind me. “Oh, hi, Christopher.”

I turned my head. He’d followed me, of course. All those guys I’d thought I’d managed to put off with my bold assertiveness had actually been put off by a supervillain’s menacing glare.

Great.

“Hey,” he said. Then he pointed. “Isn’t that her over there, with that Gabriel Luna guy?”

I turned my head and saw Frida—or someone who looked like Frida, in her handkerchief dress—leaning perilously close to the open windows, with Gabriel Luna’s arms around her shoulders. What was he doing? Knowing the depths of Frida’s crush on him, whatever it was,
I instantly assumed it was something inappropriate.

“Hold on,” I said, and stalked toward the two of them, ready to shove Gabriel out the window, if necessary, that’s how huge my murderous rage toward him was for taking advantage of my little sister.

But when I got closer, I saw what was actually happening. Frida was retching out the window,

which was tilted open, into the flower box—mercifully empty this time of year—and Gabriel was holding on to her as convulsive spasms clutched her body. He looked up as I approached

and said, raising his voice to be heard above the pounding music, “She’s a bit young to handle an open bar, I think.”

Frida reached up with a trembling fist to wipe her mouth. I saw a caterer walking by with a tray of canapés, and so I grabbed a handful of napkins from it and passed her those instead.

Frida accepted them gratefully.

“He said it was fruit punch,” she said weakly as she sat back on her heels and looked up at us with big, mournful eyes.

“Who said it was fruit punch?” I asked her, picking up some of the extra napkins from the pile and dabbing at her face where she’d missed.

“He did.” She pointed an indignant finger at a group of people dancing nearby. “Justin Bay.”

I turned my head and looked where she was pointing. Sure enough, Justin Bay,
star of the

movie version of Journeyquest (which sucked), stood nearby, swiveling his hips against some

slinky-looking model types (not his girlfriend, Veronica), all of whom were wearing even less clothing than Frida, and even higher heels.

Lulu, who’d walked up behind me, followed the direction of my gaze and gasped.

“Who invited him?” she demanded, looking furious.

“Half the people here,” Steven said, “had invitations they printed off the Internet, according to the bouncers at the door. They did their best to screen, but after a while, it was too hard to tell the fakes from the real invites. There’s paparazzi all up and down the street as well,” Steven went on. “Your party may go down in the history books…not the least for violating every fire code in Manhattan.”

“It wasn’t really fruit punch,” Frida said sadly. “Was it?”

I couldn’t look away from Justin. There was just something about him—not the skintight black silk shirt he was wearing, or the multiple gold chains—that made it impossible for me to think about anything else.

No one can just disappear forever…Even when they give people in witness protection programs new identities, they feel compelled to reach out to friends they knew before, at the risk of their own lives. It’s force of habit. Everyone messes up eventually. You did it, with the dinosaur stickers. I was just too stupid get it.
Oh, my God. Of course.

It didn’t seem possible. It was ridiculous. It was beyond insane.

But then, didn’t that apply to everything that had happened to me so far?

I elbowed my way to where Justin was dancing and laid a hand on his arm. He opened his eyes to snakelike half slits and then slowed down his gyrating when he recognized me.

“Oh,” he said, with a lazy smile. “Hey there, Nik.”

“Justin,” I said, without smiling. “I need to see your cel phone.”

“Now, that’s a new one.” He looked over his shoulder at the models he was semi-humping and started to laugh. They were all as wasted as he was and started laughing, too, none of them without pausing in their dancing. “I’ve heard some crazy come-ons in my day, but I need to see your cel phone has to take the cake.”

In a flash, Christopher was at my left shoulder. “Show it to her.”

“Now.” And Gabriel was at my right.

Justin, realizing something serious might be going on, finally stopped dancing. His eyes widened to normal size.

“Whoa,” he said. “What’s with the third degree? I’m just dancing.”

“You’ll be lying in a pool of your own blood if you don’t hand your cel phone over to my sister,” Steven advised him.
Neither Christopher nor Gabriel nor Steven could have had any idea why I was so anxious to see Justin Bay’s cell phone. But the fact that they were willing to wipe the floor with him merely on my say-so was warming my heart. It really was.

“Fine.” Justin reached into a pocket of his tight striped suit pants and pulled out a silver flip phone, which he tossed in my direction. “I don’t know what you want it for, anyway. You e-mail me enough as it is.”

I nodded, feeling triumphant. “That’s what I thought,” I said, scrolling through Justin’s messages.

“You still e-mail him?” Lulu stared at me. “Oh, my God, I thought you gave up on that loser, like, months ago.”

“Hardly,” Justin said, with a sneer. “She’s still begging for it. Bad.”

Christopher stepped forward and, in a smooth motion, wrapped Justin in a headlock. It was a startling development that caused Frida’s jaw to drop. I have to admit, I was shocked myself.

Christopher had never been the most physical of guys back in his pre-supervilain days.

But now I suppose he had the forces of evil propelling him.

“Jesus,” Justin croaked. The models he’d been dancing with, so skinny they looked like pieces of Slim Jim, pranced backward a little, eager to get out of the danger zone in case there was
bloodshed. They didn’t want their Dolce&Gabbana outfits messed up. “Let go of me, man!

Do you know who my father is?”

“Apologize,” Christopher said. He’d evidently squeezed, since Justin began making choking noises.

“Sorry,” Justin said, gagging. “Don’t bruise the face, man. I’m starting an Ang Lee film after the New Year.”

I scroled until I found a message with NikkiH as the sender, then read the extremely flowery text I found there.

It didn’t make any sense.

But then, neither had the dinosaur stickers.

“Can Felix trace an e-mail?” I asked Christopher.

“Of course,” Christopher said.

“Tell me where to send this so he can figure out where it came from.”

Christopher did. I pressed FORWARD and sent the message from NikkiH to Felix, with a note asking him to trace its origin.

“Oh,” I said, looking up when I was done. “You can let go of him now.”

Christopher released Justin, who staggered around a bit, holding on to his neck.

“Christ,” he said. “Have you lost your mind? What was that all about?”

“I don’t know.” Gabriel seemed quite calm. “But this is for lying to the little girl about the punch.”
And he slammed his fist into Justin’s stomach—really hard, judging by the way Justin doubled

over, then collapsed onto the floor, gasping like a goldfish that had leapt from its bowl.

Steven, standing beside Lulu, glanced from Justin to Gabriel to Christopher and then back

again. Then he said, with a grin, “You know, I had my doubts at first. But this is turning out to be a really great party.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Frida said, looking upset as she stared down at Justin, who

was beginning to recover himself—with the help of the models who’d come tottering over to

his rescue. “What’s going on? Why did you need to look at Justin Bay’s cell phone? What is

Christopher even doing here?”

“That’s a very good question for you,” I said, eyeing her severely. “And what have you got

on? Where did you get a dress like that? If it can even be called a dress.”

“I came to support Lulu,” Frida said, pouting. “I know how much this party means to her. I

didn’t want to let her down—”

Lulu looked touched. “Aw,” she said. “Isn’t that sweet? Really, Nikki, you can’t be mad at

her for that.”

“Yeah, I can,” I said. “I told her she wasn’t invited, and you were there when I did it,
remember, Lulu? I don’t think there’s anything sweet about it.”

“I think you’re being a bit harsh,” Gabriel said. To my utter astonishment, he plucked off his jacket—an ultra expensive one with frayed edges, just like Steven’s—and laid it over Frida’s bare shoulders, since she was shivering a little from the breeze that was seeping in through the open window she was still standing in front of. “She’s learned her lesson, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Frida said, clutching the collar of the jacket closed and gazing up at Gabriel with what looked, literally, like stars in her eyes. But then I realized they were reflections of the special party halogens Lulu had installed. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

Lulu elbowed me, giggling, but I didn’t see what was so funny, really. My little sister was crushing on Gabriel Luna—something she’d been doing for months now—and it was inappropriate. He was too old for her, and he was only encouraging her with this behavior,

knocking out cretins like Justin Bay.

And, okay, yeah, that had been pretty badass. But helo. That didn’t mean Gabriel could just go around giving his coat to my sister. My little sister, who wasn’t even supposed to be there, let alone dating at her age.

“This is probably Felix,” Christopher said, and reached into the pocket of his leather jacket for his cell phone, which had just let off a dragon battle cry. When he glanced at the screen, he nodded and picked up. “What have you got?” he asked.

He nodded a few more times. Then he looked at me. His blue-eyed gaze was like a laser
pointer, it was so sharp. I could feel it all up and down my spine.

And not in a good way.

I couldn’t read the thoughts behind the gaze. But I sensed trouble.

Christopher pressed END and put away the phone. Then, that impenetrable gaze still on me,

he asked, “Can I have a word with you—in private?”

This time, however, Steven put his foot down.

“No,” he said. He didn’t say it angrily. He said it quite calmly, as a matter of fact.

But that “No” came out as forcefully as a king’s.

“Anything you have to say to her involving all of this, you can say to me,” Steven said. “I’m her brother, remember?”

Christopher blinked at him. I don’t know what went through his mind at that moment

—“You’re not really her brother”? which we all knew was true (well, maybe not Gabriel).

Even Steven.

And yet, in those few seconds, it seemed more true than if Steven had been my real brother.

Christopher certainly didn’t seem to question it.

“Right,” he said to Steven. “Well, here’s what Felix found out. He traced the e-mail to a

computer with an IP address in Westchester.”

I gaped at him. “Westchester? That’s just, like, twenty miles from here.”

“Right. And it belongs to a doctor. His name is Jonathan Fong.”
Lulu made a face. “Why would a doctor be sending e-mails to Justin Bay, pretending to be

Nikki Howard? What kind of sick perv is he, anyway?”

“That’s not the real question,” Christopher said. “The real question is, who does Dr. Jonathan Fong work for?”

I stared at him. Even though the party was still in full swing behind us, and it was boiling hot in the apartment except for the few places where the windows were open, I felt cold as ice all of

a sudden.

“No,” was all I said.

TWENTY-ONE

THE SAD PART OF IT WAS, IN THE END, five of us—not counting Cosabela—ended

up going to Westchester. And one of us was unconscious.

It wasn’t nice or fair to use Brandon Stark that way. But we needed his limo. How else were

we going to get to Dr. Fong’s house? No taxi would take us someplace so far away, and the

trains had stopped running until morning. Christopher said his aunt Jackie would probably let

us borrow her minivan, but that meant schlepping all the way out to Brooklyn to pick it up first, not to mention explaining why we needed it.

Whereas there was Brandon, passed out on my couch from too many lycheetinis.

At least we took him with us. Even if we did tell Tom, his driver, to run inside to get some

Pepto for him at the deli—then, while he was gone, Steven slipped behind the
wheel and
drove off with us all inside.

The hard part to explain—at least to Gabriel—was why he couldn’t come along. He had no
idea where we were going (except to Westchester), or why. But he wanted to come with us.

When I thanked him for his help with Frida and said, “Well, we have to go on an important
errand now. I guess we’ll see you later,” he’d said, “That’s nice. I’ll help you,” and held all
doors as Christopher and Steven dragged a semiconscious Brandon through them.

And because he wouldn’t leave, of course neither would Frida. Finally, I took him by the arm
and whispered, “Please, will you do me a huge favor and take her home? She’s too young to
be out this late, and I’m afraid something will happen to her if I try to send her home alone.

You saw what happened at the party. Will you see that she gets home to her parents safely?

It’s only a few blocks away.”

Gabriel agreed—but only when I said we’d wait for him. And, of course, when Frida found
out she’d be riding—alone—in a cab with Gabriel Luna, she was more than willing to go with
him. She whispered to me as we hugged good-bye, “I’m sorry I said such bitchy
things to you
the other day. I didn’t mean any of them. You’re an awesome big sister, actualy. And thanks
for these.” She pointed to her earlobes, into which, I saw, she’d slipped the diamond studs I’d gotten for her.
“You were supposed to wait to open those on Christmas morning,” I said, feeling dismayed.
“Now what will you have to look forward to?”
“Seeing you,” she said, and kissed me good-bye, then took Gabriel’s arm and disappeared
with him down Centre Street.
But of course we had no intention of waiting for Gabriel to come back. Steven puled out and
started toward the highway at once, anxious to get to Dr. Fong’s as soon as possible. Not that he—or any of us—had any idea what to expect when we got there. Out of all of them, I think
I was the only one who kept thinking dinosaur stickers. Those e-mails stil didn’t make
sense…
…but neither had those dinosaur stickers I’d given to Christopher—at least, not to him at the
time. Seen out of context, they had to have been totaly random, like those e-mails Justin kept getting, alegedly from me.
Christopher’s words kept reverberating through my head, “No one can just disappear
forever…They feel compeled to reach out to friends they knew before…It’s
force of habit.

Everyone messes up eventually.”

But who was messing up with those text messages? Maybe it was only a mean-spirited prank

(except how could some random kid have gotten Justin Bay’s private number?). Maybe it was nothing. Maybe this whole thing was just a wild goose chase.

But maybe it wasn’t.

The problem was, once we left Manhattan and got to Westchester, Christopher wouldn’t let

Steven use the limo’s GPS to find the address we were looking for.

“Are you kidding?” he said. “Stark will point every satellite they’ve got right at us. The cops’ll pull us over in five seconds.”

Lulu looked excited, hearing that. “Are we actually doing something against the law?” she wanted to know.

Christopher gave her a sarcastic look. “We just stole a limo,” he said.

“Wel,” I said. “Technically, we only borrowed it.” I glanced at the sleeping Brandon,

stretched out on the side seat, dozing like an angel in a tux. He was wearing his red velvet Santa hat. “The owner’s still inside, right?”

“Here,” Christopher said, pulling up a map on his iPhone and showing the screen to Steven.

“You’ve got another two miles to go on his road.”
“Thanks,” Steven said from the driver’s seat. The winding countryish road we were on, dotted with large mansiony house after large mansiony house, seemed virtually deserted this time of night. Snow came down in light fluffy flakes, not enough to stick yet, but enough to be beautiful. I was stil glad I’d thought to kick off my stiletto sandals for a pair of Marc Jacobs boots. Steven had the heat up in the limo, but even so, my leather jacket didn’t seem like it would provide much warmth when I got out of the car. Maybe that’s because I stil had on my halter top evening gown. At least I had Cosabela draped across my thighs for warmth.

“I stil don’t get where we’re going,” Lulu said from where she sat next to Steven. Lulu was wearing Tom’s chauffeur cap, which he’d left in the car. It went very rakishly with her bleached blond pageboy, with which she often wore extensions…though not tonight. “But I guess that’s the adventure of it! It’s like a scavenger hunt! Isn’t Nikki fantastic? She always knows the best way to make a party fun!”

I couldn’t tel if Lulu was just trying to make herself feel better, or if she realy didn’t understand that something serious was going on. She stil seemed to be on cloud nine about her discovery that she and Steven were astrologicaly compatible, according to her astrologist.
And then Christopher said, “It should be the next driveway.”

Steven turned down a long driveway wailed on either side by low round stones piled one on top of the other, with a sloping yard and nice trees, bare-branched this time of year. The sky was just starting to turn pinky red over in the east, and because the snow clouds were hanging so low, the lights from the city reflected up against them, so it wasn’t hard to see the house, even though it was so late. It was an old-fashioned redbrick colonial, with black shutters and a single electric imitation candle in each window.

I remembered reading somewhere that women put those candles in their windows during wartime, to guide loved ones home. Now people had started doing it during the holiday season as well. Who was Dr. Fong guiding home? I wondered.

Steven puled al the way down the driveway until it made a circular loop in front of the entrance to the house. Then he stopped the car and turned off the engine.

“Well,” Lulu asked, turning around to peer at us from the front seat, the chauffeur’s cap jauntily askew. “What now?”

I looked up at the house through the tinted windows of the limo. It wasn’t an intimidatingly huge mansion like some of the other houses we’d driven past, but it wasn’t small, either. It looked almost aggressively normal—the kind of house you’d drive by and never think twice about, never wonder who lived there, never think to yourself, Gee, that’s the
kind of house I’d like to have someday. It was just…there.

It was silent in the car, except for Brandon’s gentle snoring.

I lifted Cosabela, who was still passed out across my lap, and crawled across Christopher’s legs for the car door.

“What—” Christopher sounded alarmed. “Wait for me.”

“And me,” Steven said, getting out.

“Me, too,” Lulu said.

Soon I was leading a little parade up to Dr. Fong’s front door—everyone from inside the limo but Brandon, who hadn’t stirred. It was incredibly cold out—so cold my nostrils felt as if they would freeze together if I inhaled too deeply. The air smelled pleasantly of wood smoke. It was silent—absolutely still—in Dr. Fong’s neighborhood except for the sound our footsteps made as we walked up the icy pathway to his front door.

Once there, I lifted the heavy brass knocker and let it fall two or three times. The sound it made seemed so loud in the predawn stillness, I was afraid it might wake some of his neighbors.

After a minute, when there was no reaction, Lulu said, “N-no one is home.” Her teeth were chattering from the cold. “Let’s g-go back to the car. At least it’s warm there.”

I ignored her. Instead, I reached up and lifted the knocker and let it fall again.
This time, a light turned on above our heads. I heard footsteps inside the house. Then the door opened to reveal a middle-aged man in a bathrobe, peering out at us sleepily. When he saw my face, his eyes widened perceptibly.

“Hi,” I said.

Dr. Fong started to shake his head. “No,” he said. That’s al. Just a single word.

But there was a world of fear in it.

And he started to close the door.

But Steven was too quick for him. He inserted his foot between the door and the jamb so it was impossible for Dr. Fong to close it.

Then he said, “We’ve come a long way. We just want to come inside for a little while and have a word with you.”

“No,” Dr. Fong said again. He stil looked terrified. “I think you must have the wrong house. I don’t know you—”

“Uh,” Christopher said, moving to stand behind Steven. “Actualy, I think you know Nikki Howard—or should I say Em Watts—pretty wel. Or aren’t you one of the surgeons who worked on her brain transplant at the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery a few months ago? See, I read her medical file, and I know al about it. So, unless you want me to release that file to the press, you’d better let us in.”
Dr. Fong, looking like someone was holding a knife to his throat—which, I guess in a way, we were—thought about it a minute, then finally took a step back and let us in. We filed into a foyer that was decorated in New England chic, dark polished wood and portraits of duck-hunting dogs. Cosabela sniffed around politely but curiously.

“This isn’t a game, you know,” Dr. Fong said resentfully when we were all inside and he’d shut the door behind us. “They’ll kill you if they find out you know. They’ve killed before. How do you think I got into this mess?”

Hearing those words coming from such a mild-looking doctor, standing in a red plaid bathrobe in the dark stillness of his old-fashioned hallway, chilled me in a way the cold outside never could have.

If it chilled me, it had an even more startling effect on Lulu, who really had no idea what she’d been getting herself into, climbing into Brandon Stark’s limo back on Centre Street in Manhattan. She grew very still—and very somber. Hearing you might be killed definitely destroyed whatever kind of party mood you might have been in. I could attest to that.

“Why don’t we sit down so you can tell us about it?” Steven suggested, in the same calm voice
he’d used before. Apparently, he was used to dealing with hysterical brain surgeons.

Dr. Fong did as he asked, but it was obvious it was only because he was cornered, not because he wanted to. He padded in his slippers into the living room, a square room decorated, again, with New England scarcity, where apparently a fire had been burning earlier in the evening. It had gone out, but the smell of burning wood lingered pleasantly in the air. He turned on a single lamp on a table by the window, but only after he’d made sure to close every set of curtains in the room, glancing out each window in a paranoid manner to make sure there were no other cars on the road but ours.

“You’re sure you weren’t followed?” he demanded.

Christopher and I exchanged glances. I had actually been paying attention to this, psycho as this made me seem.

“Yes,” I said. “And no, we weren’t.”

“You couldn’t have picked a less obtrusive vehicle?” Dr. Fong demanded. “You think a stretch limo won’t be noticed around here?”

“We didn’t have a choice,” I said, taken aback.

Dr. Fong looked around—at Lulu, still in her chauffeur cap and poofy-skirted party dress, perched on the edge of a Chippendale chair; Steven standing tense and at attention by the
foyer door, as if expecting Stark to burst in at any moment; and Christopher and I standing by the dead hearth, Cosabela sitting at our feet, staring at Dr. Fong, who looked totally confused in his pajamas and robe, with his black hair sticking up a little in the middle. It was clear from his expression he wasn’t very impressed by what he saw.

“Is there,” I asked, because the thought had just occurred to me, “a Mrs. Fong?”

Dr. Fong looked scornful. “No,” he said. “No, my mother doesn’t live with me.”

I’d meant did he have a wife, but I guess that answered my question, anyway.

“Why,” Christopher demanded, cutting straight to the chase, “is an ex-boyfriend of Nikki Howard’s getting e-mails from someone using a computer in this house?”

Dr. Fong suddenly buried his face in his hands. Then he turned and marched over to a small secretary, opened it, took out a cut crystal decanter of whisky, and, with shaking fingers,

poured himself a glass.

Then he downed the entire contents of the glass in one go. And poured himself another.

This one he carried over to the couch, onto which he sank down next to Cosabela, who’d

helped herself to the comfiest seat in the house. When he turned to face us, I was shocked to

see he’d gone white as the sails on the picture of the ship hanging on the wall above his head.

“What else knows about this?” he asked.

“No one,” I said, glancing over at Steven. “I mean, except everyone in this room.
And the person who traced the e-mail to here.”

“Will he tell anyone?” Dr. Fong asked, raising the glass to his lips with trembling fingers.

“No,” I said. I crossed the room to sink into an armchair across from the couch where Dr. Fong was sitting. “Dr. Fong. What is going on?”

Dr. Fong didn’t say anything for a moment. He just stared into the amber depths of his drink.

When he finally did speak, it was to ask, “Do you know what the Hippocratic oath is?”

Lulu looked blank. Steven still looked like he wanted someone to come bursting in through the door so he could karate chop them or something.

Christopher said finally, “Yeah. It’s something all doctors have to swear before they can begin practicing medicine.”

“First,” I said, “do no harm.”

“That’s right,” Dr. Fong said. “At the Stark Institute, that’s what we tell ourselves we’re doing.

No harm. We’re transplanting brains from horribly deformed bodies that otherwise wouldn’t survive into healthy bodies belonging to brain-dead donors so that our patients have another chance at life. That’s what happened to you.” He looked up at me. “I’ve been working at the
Stark Institute for ten years, and I’ve never for a moment questioned the morality of what we do there. Until the day of your accident.”

His gaze flitted around the room, looking from Steven to Christopher to me.

“What happened that day?” I asked, my voice rough. I coughed to clear it.

“I was only assisting,” Dr. Fong said, his gaze looking far away. “Dr. Holcombe was in charge of your case. Nikki Howard was far too important to be handled by anyone but him.

Normally, I run the teaching wing of the institute—”

“Teaching wing?” I interrupted.

“Yes, of course,” Dr. Fong said. “The demand for transplants is so high that there’s a waiting list. But it’s several years long, and some patients can’t—or don’t want to—wait. So, for a fee, surgeons from around the world can come to the institute and we’ll train them to perform the surgery themselves. We allow them to practice on donor bodies—”

“Donor bodies?” I was horrified. Christopher threw me an annoyed look for interrupting again,

but I couldn’t help it. Donor bodies?

“Oh, we have quite a lot of them,” Dr. Fong explained. “All sorts of individuals who’ve been declared legally brain dead and who’ve donated their bodies to science. Sadly, there’s no shortage of individuals in vegetative states thanks to accidents and, quite often, drug and
alcohol overdoses. What we don’t have, of course, are viable brains to put in them, and that’s what patients like you provide—”

I held up a hand, too sickened to hear more. “Never mind,” I said. “Go on.”

“Well,” Dr. Fong said. “As I was saying, obviously Dr. Holcombe and Dr. Higgins were the

main surgeons on your case. But there was something…odd about your surgery. I was told by

Dr. Holcombe that Nikki Howard had had a family history of genetic brain defects and that

was what killed her.”

I saw Lulu look more confused than ever. When no one else, however, reacted to Dr. Fong’s

reference to the fact that I was dead, when there I was, clearly alive, she didn’t say anything.

“After he was done stitching you up, I did something I’d never do, under ordinary

circumstances,” Dr. Fong went on. “I went to examine the exhumed matter. I’ve always been

interested in brain anomalies, and I wanted to see what Nikki Howard’s was.”

Somewhere upstairs, I heard a door open and close, and then some thumping sounds.

Someone was walking around above our heads. Dr. Fong, however, didn’t appear to notice.

“But Nikki Howard hadn’t any brain anomaly. Hers was perfect. There was no defect. The

aneurysm Dr. Holcombe claimed she had suffered? The whole reason for her
death and this

emergency transplant in the first place? It hadn’t happened. She was completely healthy.”

I looked over at Christopher. He had said there were no accidents. Does anyone really know

what happened to Nikki that day? he’d asked. She went down and never got back up again.

Stark says it was an aneurysm…but how do we know?

And now we had our answer. It hadn’t been an accident. He looked back at me, smugly

satisfied that he’d been right.

“Then…what did they do to her?” I asked him. “To make her pass out like that?”

“We may never know,” Dr. Fong said. “Once the surgery was over, I wasn’t allowed near the

body—Nikki’s body—anymore. I was only supposed to handle the medical waste.”

Lulu inhaled, looking horrified. “Nikki’s…brain?”

He threw her an appraising look, as if she’d suddenly struck him as a lot more inteligent than he’d previously given her credit for.

“That’s right,” he said. “I was the one charged with disposing of it.”

“But,” Steven said, “you took an oath.”

“Do no harm,” I murmured.

“Why?” Steven asked. He looked as horrified as Lulu. “Why would anyone remove a

perfectly healthy brain from a girl’s body?”
“I think I can tel you why,” Christopher said.

But at that moment, there was thumping from the staircase—a familiar skittering sound that

caused Cosabela to perk up her ears alertly.

And the next thing I knew, she’d begun barking, and those barks were met by answering yips

as two miniature poodles exactly like her—except one was black, the other cocoa colored—

came bursting into the room. They rushed toward Cosy, who’d leapt down from the chair and

torn over to them, her tail whipping back and forth excitedly as she greeted what appeared to

be two long-lost friends.

“Harry! Winston!” An older woman in a terry cloth robe hurried into the room after the dogs,

clapping her hands. “Down! Down!”

Even though her hair was plastered to her head from sleep, and she didn’t have any makeup

on, I recognized her. Before Steven broke his stance by the doorway and cried in astonishment, “Mom?” I knew who she was.

Dee Dee Howard. Nikki Howard’s mom was living in Dr. Fong’s house.

The thing was, I’d sort of known it. From the moment I’d put two and two together and I’d

realized what those e-mail messages Veronica had told me about really meant. Why else
would she have left behind her business and everything else she knew, if it hadn’t been to be with something—or someone—she loved a billion times more?

“Steven!” she cried when she saw him. She reached out to him joyously. He was so much bigger than she was that he had to hunch down to let her take him into her arms. His expression was one of incredulity. “I didn’t know you were here!”

He seemed dazed. “Mom,” he said as she hugged him, “I’ve been looking for you. Everyone’s been worried sick—Leanne. Mary Beth. Didn’t you see the news reports on TV? We thought you’d been killed.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Howard said. “I’m so sorry, honey. Yes, we saw those. But we assumed it was Stark, trying to trick me. I never thought it was really you.” She glanced over at me. Then froze. “Oh. Oh, my,” she said as her eyes filled with tears. Her gaze swept over me with what appeared to be a mix of horror and fascination. “I…I don’t know what to say. You…you look just like…”

She couldn’t go on. She didn’t have to. I knew who she thought I looked just like.

The thing was, I knew I didn’t just look like that person. I was that person. I mean, in a way.
Christopher came over to me then, and laid a hand on my shoulder. It was a supportive gesture, and I couldn’t have been more grateful for it.

“This must be very hard for you,” Christopher said gently to Mrs. Howard.

“It’s…” Steven’s mother shook her head. Her Southern accent was much more pronounced than her son’s. But it was pleasant, like her slightly faded good looks. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to stare. You just look so much like her.”

Because I am her, I wanted to say. Or at least, I’m inhabiting her body.

“It’s all right,” I said instead. At my feet, Cosabela was still having a joyous reunion with her cousins—or brothers, for all I knew—Harry and Winston, happily cavorting on Dr. Fong’s rug. I decided to change the subject. “So you’ve been here the whole time?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Howard said. She had slipped her hand into Steven’s, and was happily holding his arm. “Dr. Fong called me and explained the situation. He told me how important it was not to leave a trail that Stark could trace. I came right away. I’m so sorry to have worried you, honey,” she said to Steven. “But I didn’t dare check in with Leanne, you know how she gossips. And Mary Beth’s just hopeless. But you’re here now, and that’s all that matters. Oh, I’ve got so many things to tell you! How are you? Oh, I’m so glad you’re home!”

Steven looked torn between wanting to laugh and to cry. I knew the feeling. Home. He was as far from home as he could be.
And yet, he was in her arms. So wasn’t he, in fact, home?

From the chair where Lulu had sunk down, I heard a sound. When I glanced over there, I saw

her twirling a curl of her blond pageboy nervously. When she saw that most everyone in the

room was looking at her, she jumped, and said, apologetically, “Sorry! I just…”

She looked

wan and delicate in the dim light of Dr. Fong’s living room. “I don’t get it. What are we doing here?”

“We’re here to find her,” I said, nodding toward Mrs. Howard. “But the real story is why

she’s here. Right, Doctor?”

Dr. Fong sighed. He didn’t want to talk about this. He didn’t want to talk about it at all.

“I needed her help. I took an oath,” he said wearily. “They told me to throw Nikki’s brain

away. But to do that when there was nothing wrong with it…that would have been murder. I

owe a lot to Stark Enterprises. But I’ll not be party to killing an innocent woman.”

“So if you didn’t dispose of Nikki’s brain,” Steven said, looking confused, “what did you do

with it?”

As if on cue, a side door opened, and a young woman I’d never seen before, of average

height and average weight, with auburn hair that was neither curly nor straight, came into the room wincing as if she’d just woken up, even though the lamplight
wasn’t particularly bright.

“God,” she was complaining. “Could you guys make any more noise? Some people don’t
 wake up at the crack of dawn and are stil trying to sleep, you know.”

Then she seemed to realize that there were more people in the room than just Dr. Fong and
 Mrs. Howard, and her eyes widened a bit.

It was only when her gaze fel upon me that she fully reacted, however. Color rushed into her
 ful, slightly cherubic face, and her eyes, which were green, flashed.

In a second flat, she’d lifted her hand and brought it ful across my face with as much force as she could.

That’s right. She’d slapped me.

“You bitch,” Nikki Howard said.

TWENTY-TWO

MRS. HOWARD AND STEVEN JUMPED IN to separate us before things got realy bad. I
 mean, Nikki tried to go to town on me—or I guess I should say, on her old body, as she

began hitting and pinching me, puling at my hair. Dr. Fong shouted at me that I couldn’t hit

Nikki back—after I tried to do so, entirely in self-defense—because her recovery hadn’t been

as speedy as mine, and she hadn’t bounced back as quickly from her surgery as I had from
mine. Nikki hadn’t had the incredible technology of the Stark Institute for Neurology and Neurosurgery to help her with her rehabilitation the way I had—only her mother’s tender care and whatever help Dr. Fong could give her when he got home from work. Apparently, Nikki wasn’t a hundred percent yet.

“But she’s still well enough to be e-mailing her ex-boyfriends,” I pointed out snarkily. I’m sorry, but that slap had hurt. And the subsequent pinches hadn’t felt too good, either.

Mrs. Howard threw Nikki an accusing look. She’d been pretty angry with her over the slap and subsequent attack on me, yelling, “Nicolette Elizabeth Howard! You quit hitting that girl right now, you hear me!” It was the first time anyone had ever called me by my full name.

Only she hadn’t been addressing me.

“Look at her, Mom,” Nikki had shouted in reply, as Mrs. Howard dragged her daughter from me. “Just look at her! That’s my dress! And my new Marc Jacobs boots! And look how she’s making up my eyes. They look awful!”

Mrs. Howard hadn’t been wiling to put up with any crap from her daughter, despite her delicate state of health. “Nikki, you apologize,” she said. “You know that’s no
way to behave.

Especially in someone else’s home.”

Nikki, looking truculent, jutted out her lower lip and sneered. “Sorry.”

That, apparently, was all the apology I was to get for my throbbing cheek.

Mrs. Howard, however, came over to me and put an arm around my shoulders and said, “I’m

so sorry, honey.” Honey. Just like she’d called Steven. Her arm felt soft and comforting. When

she looked down at me, I saw that there wasn’t any flicker in her gaze, unlike my own

mother’s. The look Mrs. Howard gave me was strong and steady and compassionate. “This

has been really hard on her. But I want to thank you. Thank you…for bringing me my son.”

And then she’d kissed me on the cheek Nikki had slapped.

And I knew it was just Nikki’s body reacting. But I felt comforted in a way I hadn’t really felt with my own mom in ages.

Which was weird, I know.

Now Nikki’s mother turned an outraged look on her daughter and said, “Nikki, what are you

doing, e-mailing people? I told you, you can surf the Web, but no e-mailing!”

Sitting on the couch where Steven had pinned her, scowling at all of us, Nikki pouted. “Wel,

what else am I supposed to do all day? You can only watch so many episodes of The Hils.
I’m so bored!”

“Of course you are, sweetie,” Lulu said, going to sit on the couch beside her and stroking her arm. She was trying to calm her old friend down—not that it seemed to be doing much good.

Nikki didn’t look any more thrilled to see Lulu than she did to see me. “I can’t believe they’ve been keeping you cooped up in here. But I’m sure they’ll let you out soon.”

“To do what?” Nikki demanded churlishly. “Work at the Gap? Look at me. I’m ugly and my

hair is stupid. What are you wearing, anyway? You look weird.”

Lulu touched her chauffeur’s cap. “I think it’s cute,” she said defensively. “I think you look cute. Red hair suits you. And there’s lots of things you can do. This man saved you from being dead. Aren’t you glad about not being dead?”

“No,” Nikki said. She turned her attention to Cosabela. “Cosy.” She snapped her fingers at

the dog, who was stil wrestling with the other dogs. “Cosy!” She leaned back, frustrated.

“God, this sucks. Even my own dog likes this one better.” She sneered at me. I was

apparently this one.

“Hon, I told you. We’ll get you a new dog,” Mrs. Howard said. She looked tired, and not just

because it was the crack of dawn. It seemed as if this was a conversation they’d had

numerous times before. “The important thing is that we don’t let Stark find out you’re stil alive.

You have to stop e-mailing people. Dr. Fong has gone to so much trouble for
“Yeah,” I said. I looked from Nikki to Dr. Fong. “How come I didn’t see you in the recovery ward at the institute when I was there?”

Dr. Fong seemed even more tired than Mrs. Howard. “In order to save Nikki’s life,” he explained, “I was forced to employ subterfuge. While you were having your surgery, I used her brain in one of our demonstration surgeries for some foreign surgeons, with the assistance of some of my colleagues. They didn’t, of course, know where the healthy brain we were using had come from. The donor body we used—the one Nikki has now—belonged to a young woman who had gone into a vegetative state due to a vehicular accident caused by a drunk driver. The donor, unfortunately, was the driver in question.”

Nikki rolled her eyes. “Right,” she said, when I glanced at her. “You get the supermodel’s body. I get the drunk driver’s body.”

“At least you’re alive, Nikki,” her big brother said.

Nikki made a face. “Oh, stay out of it, Steven.”

“Once the surgery was successfully completed,” Dr. Fong went on, “in order to keep Nikki from asking any questions that might arouse suspicion when she woke, it was necessary to have her transferred immediately, while she was still in her coma, from the
institute—I forged
documents stating she was being transferred to another hospital closer to the
brain transplant’s home. But really, I had her transported here, and bribed the
ambulance attendants to keep
quiet about it. Her mother was the one who did most of her nursing.”
“But I don’t get why Stark tried to kill her in the first place,” Christopher said.
“Yeah,” Nikki said, looking at Christopher appraisingly. She evidently liked
what she saw
since she flipped some of her red hair back flirtatiously. Well, what girl wouldn’t
like
Christopher? Especially one who’d been cooped up in the house as long as she
had. Although
if she made a move toward him, I’d be forced to break her nose. “Why would
Stark want to
kill me after everything I’ve done for them? I mean, just because I overheard
them talking
about that stupid game—”
Christopher’s interest sharpened. “What game?”
“Journeyquest,” I corrected her. “You mean the new version, Realms?”
“Right,” Nikki said. She dropped the flirtatiousness for a look of mystery. “I
mean, I might
have overheard something about that…Something Robert Stark wouldn’t want
getting out. At
least, that’s what he said when I brought it up.”
Christopher and I exchanged glances. Uh-oh.

Even Lulu knew enough to know this was bad. She took her hand away from Nikki’s arm.

“Nikki,” she said, with a gasp. “Did you tell Mr. Stark you knew this secret?”

“Sure,” Nikki said, shrugging. “I wanted to see how much it would be worth to him for me to keep quiet about it. And it turned out, it was worth quite a bit.” She laughed delightedly at the memory of it. Then her face darkened as she stared at me. “Except you’re the one enjoying the money now, aren’t you? What have you been spending it on? It better be good.”

“What money?” I asked, genuinely bewildered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

But I had a very bad feeling about it…a feeling that, I could tell, was shared by the rest of the room, if the uneasy expressions everyone was wearing were any indication.

“The money,” Nikki went on, “that Stark promised to pay me to keep my mouth shut about Stark Quark! I never got to see a dime of it. I had the accident right after that.”

Dr. Fong, who clearly hadn’t heard any of this before, sank his head into his hands and groaned.

I glanced at Christopher, who said, with a knowing smile, “Told you. There are no accidents.”

I swallowed. Hard. He had said that. But he didn’t have to look so smug about it. This was a
girl’s life we were talking about. A girl who used to walk around in the body I
was currently

inhabiting, living in the loft I currently lived in…a girl whose dog no longer
recognized her.

It was so sad. I wanted to cry just looking at her, sitting there on the couch, so
proud of

herself for something that had, in the end, ruined her life.

No, ended that life.

“Oh, Nikki,” Mrs. Howard said, with a groan, covering her mouth with both her
hands.

Her son, however, had a lot more to say about it than just his sister’s name.

“Has it occurred to you, Nikki,” Steven demanded sharply, “that Stark might just
have tried to have you killed instead of paying you? What you did was
blackmail.”

Nikki roled her eyes. “God, Steven, you were always so dramatic. It’s just a
stupid video

game.”

“It’s a bilion-dolar line of software,” Christopher corrected her. “And even if you
were the

Face of Stark, you were replaceable.” He nodded at me. “See? They replaced
you. With

her.”

Nikki stared at me. As she did so, her lower lip started to tremble, just a tiny bit.
It was al starting to sink in. Finaly.

“They chose the software over you,” Christopher went on brutaly. So brutaly, I
wanted to
shout at him to stop. Just stop. This was al too much. I was so tired. I wanted to crawl into
bed and go to sleep and make it go away. Except that I couldn’t, of course. “Or at least they
meant to. Dr. Fong saved your life.”

For the first time, Nikki began to look scared. She glanced at me, and then at Christopher.

Finaly, she looked at Lulu.

“You guys found me,” she said, “because of an e-mail? An e-mail I sent to Justin?”

“Yes, sweetie,” Lulu said gently, taking her hand. “Your mom is right. You have to be more
careful.”

“Yeah,” Christopher said. “And what we need to know is…have you sent any more e-mails to
anyone else? Because—in case you haven’t already guessed—your location can be traced
that way.”

Nikki chewed her lower lip. “Just a couple,” she said in a meek voice. She seemed realy
frightened now. “But not to anyone who matters.”

“Who, Nikki?” Mrs. Howard asked. She sounded as frightened as her daughter. “Just tel us
who.”

“Just to…to…Brandon Stark,” Nikki said.
My heart sank. Brandon. Of course. Of course she’d e-mail Brandon. They’d been a couple before the accident. Why, oh why, had we brought Brandon along? It had seemed so innocent at the time. He had been passed out—Brandon was almost always passed out. Except when he woke up and wandered around, begging me to get back together with him.

When I remembered this, my heart, which had been sinking, suddenly sped up. No wonder Brandon seemed to have such mixed-up ideas about me. He was getting e-mails from someone named NikkiH telling him how much she missed him. Then he was seeing me, in the flesh…and it didn’t help that sometimes I did flirt with him, a little…

Okay, a lot.

Great. And he was outside, in the limo. The last thing we needed was Brandon bursting in here, realizing Nikki Howard—the real Nikki Howard, the one his father thought he had had killed—was still alive.

“I’ll go check on him,” I said in a tight voice, since I knew I wasn’t the only one freaking out over the fact that we’d led the son of the man responsible for this entire mess to the very door.

I leapt up from the chair I’d been sitting in and hurried out of the room and stepped into the foyer. I was just reaching for the handle of the front door when something hard and rough
wrapped around my throat, and suddenly I found myself pressed against the wall, all the breath knocked out of me from the impact.

And looming in front of me was Brandon Stark, five o’clock shadow standing out sharply along his jaw. With his right arm, he was pushing me by the throat against one of Dr. Fong’s duck portraits.

“Don’t say a word,” Brandon hissed. “If you scream or make any noise at all, I swear I’ll tell my dad exactly where he can find the real Nikki Howard.”

TWENTY-THREE

I CLAMPED MY MOUTH SHUT. THE TRUTH was, I’d been about to let out a shriek to wake the dead.

Brandon’s warning caused me to think twice about that, though. Also the fact that he was pressing so hard on my throat, I couldn’t have made a sound if I’d tried. Besides, I wasn’t sure he actually wanted a reply.

“So,” he went on. “Brain transplant? That’s what happened to you? Not this amnesia bull you’ve been feeding me and everyone else?”

I remembered how, back in St. John, his fingers had strayed toward the scar on the back of
my head. That must have been the first clue that al was not as I kept assuring him it was.

I nodded mutely, wondering how I was going to get out of this. Christopher, I knew, could have no idea anything was wrong. None of them would. Not until I didn’t come back for a while. Would I be back? I wondered. This was a side of Brandon I’d never seen before. It was a side that scared me witless.

“Yeah. That actualy explains a lot,” he said. He moved one thumb down my jawline. Creepy was not a strong enough word to describe how it felt. I’d always thought Brandon was dumb.

But it turned out I’d been wrong, and that this whole time he’d been scheming but it had never entered my mind.

Until now.

“You changed,” he went on. “But I could never put my finger on how, exactly. Until today. I mean, obviously, there was the Stark is evil crap. But the old Nikki”—The old Nikki. I wondered how she’d feel about being caled that—“had been spewing crap about how she knew something about Stark Quark for ages. I just never listened. Now I know I should have.”

My heart thumped. Oh, God. We were so dead. Brandon was going to tel. He
was going to
tell his dad everything. There had to be a way out of this, there just had to be. What did
Brandon want? What could I give him, to shut him up about this?

“The problem is, she was an amateur,” Brandon went on. “You all are. You don’t know my
dad. He doesn’t care about anyone or anything…except Stark. The only way to hurt him is
through his company. Whatever she knows about Stark Quark, if it’s worth killing Nikki
Howard for—and then giving her a brain transplant to keep her image alive—it’s worth
knowing. Believe me. And I want in.”

I opened my mouth. I was in such shock, I didn’t remember to be quiet, like he’d asked. This
was the last thing I’d expected him to say—that he wanted in.

“But—” I croaked.

“No,” Brandon said, and laid a hand over my lips. “Shhh. I know that’s what she was doing—
blackmailing him. But obviously, she wasn’t going about it the right way. She didn’t know just how powerful the information she had was. I’m going to do it right. I’m going to get her to tell me what she knows—and she will, because she’s obviously still got the hots for me, since she
keeps e-mailing me. And then you’re going to get your personal geek squad back there to tell
me what the hell she’s talking about. And then they’ll figure out what we can do
with that

information to hurt my dad. And then I’m going to blackmail him myself.”

I looked up at him like he was crazy. Only the thing was, I didn’t really believe for a minute he was. Crazy, I mean. Not at all.

And that was the scary part.

“Why should I help you?” I demanded.

“Because,” he said very simply, “if you don’t, I’ll tell my dad where the real Nikki Howard is.

And I’ll tell him about the doctor, too.” He ran a strand of my long blond hair through his

fingers, as if testing its silkiness. “Okay? Now, you’re going to go in there and tell them that you found me awake and that you’ve told me the whole story, because I’m such a great guy,

and that I’m on your side.”

My jaw dropped. He smiled as he tugged on the curl of hair he held.

“And if you tell them that I’m making you do it, I’ll tell my father about the girl. And one last thing,” he said, moving his arm so it was no longer pressing against my neck but wrapped

around my shoulders. “No more messing around with that guy in there, that one I found you

with in your bedroom. You and I are together now. Understand?”

I felt myself turning bright red. So he had seen me with Christopher…

“I’m tired of this little cat and mouse game of yours, e-mailing me and then avoiding me,” he

went on.
“That wasn’t me e-mailing you,” I said, feeling sick to my stomach. Because it had been me
kissing him in St. John…oh, how I wished now I never had listened to Lulu. “It was Nikki.
The real Nikki.”

“Right,” Brandon said, looking bored with the conversation. “What’s your name again? Your
real name?”

“Em,” I said. My voice was rough from where he’d been pressing against my larynx with his
arm. “Emerson.”

“Okay,” Brandon said. “Emerson.” Then he laughed. “The truth is, I don’t really care what
your name is. You can be sweet when you want to. Unlike the old Nikki. Only you’re not
stupid, like she was. So remember what I said. You’re mine now.” He squeezed my
shoulders, hard. “No more of that other guy, the one in the leather jacket, who seems so into
you. Just me. Understand?”

I nodded. What choice did I have?

He lifted his arm, so I could move again, but kept one hand firmly wrapped around my arm.

But even though I could move physically, I felt paralyzed mentally and emotionally. What had
just happened? Was this really Brandon, the guy who had jumped into the water
in St. John to

save me from drowning? He’d put his arm around my neck there, too, but to tow me to the

boat to save me, not to press me to a wal and threaten me. How could he be so drastically

different than I’d remembered him? Was the Brandon who’d complained to me so often about

his distant father realy the same one who was now preparing to participate in blackmail—not
to mention forcing me to become his girlfriend against my wil?

I had thought Christopher had turned into a supervilain, but it turned out I didn’t even know

what a supervilain was. Brandon was the supervilain of al supervilains. He had embraced evil

in a way Christopher, I was quite certain, couldn’t even begin to contemplate.

Numb, I moved away from him, leaving the foyer and turning back toward the living room, just

as Christopher was turning to Mrs. Howard to say, his voice so even and measured it sent

chils up my spine, and not just because I’d basicaly been dealing with a human snake seconds

ago, “The fact is, it’s just not safe for you here anymore. You and Nikki have to go.”

“Not without me, they don’t,” Steven said.

Mrs. Howard sounded nervous. “Oh, Steven…But do you realy think—are we realy in that
much danger of being found out?”

I wanted to shout, You already have been! But I kept my mouth shut.

“If we could trace those e-mails, it’s pretty likely someone from Stark could, if they found out about them,” Christopher said. “It’s safer that all of you get out of here.”

“But where will you go?” It was Lulu who spoke up. “You can’t hide from Stark forever.

They’re everywhere.”

Yeah. She had no idea.

It was at that moment Brandon propelled me forward by the grip he was keeping on my arm. I stepped into the living room without glancing behind me to show I was being followed.

“Was Brandon still sleeping like a baby?” Lulu wanted to know.

“Um…” I said. “Not exactly.”

Which was when Brandon loped into the room behind me, causing everyone to freeze with alarm before they realized who it was.

“Relax,” Brandon said, with a big smile and a wide-open gesture with his hands.

“Nikki—or Em, as I guess her name is really—filed me in on the whole thing.”

I saw several people, including Christopher and Steven, throw me startled glances, filled with surprise, and even rebuke.

But what could I do? I knew both guys could have taken Brandon down
But short of killing him, how could they have kept him from telling his dad what he’d overheard once he’d recovered? He knew where Dr. Fong lived, and probably knew Christopher’s last name, too. I couldn’t let Brandon go to his father with what he knew. I couldn’t! He’d agreed to play along…as long as I met his conditions.

I just wished I’d never been stupid enough to have kissed him in the first place. Obviously, that had only been playing with fire. Why had I mistaken him for a mere drunken playboy for so long? I should have known that, like his father, there was a scheming businessman underneath that handsome façade who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted…which, in Brandon’s case, was revenge on Stark.

Not at all unlike Christopher. Only Brandon wanted revenge on one particular Stark, not the whole company.

“I don’t want any of you to worry about a thing,” Brandon said in a soothing tone. “I’ve got it all under control. First of all, as you know, I’m no friend of my father’s. Secondly, Nikki, Mrs. Howard, and Steven…I want you to know, I’ve got it all figured out. My limo outside can take you to a private plane that’s waiting on a tarmac at Teterboro. It can fly you all to my
summer house in South Carolina. You’ll be completely safe there.”

Nikki, who’d been sitting on the couch gaping up at Brandon like an angel had suddenly burst into the room, looked as if she’d become transported with joy. Her face beaming, she leapt up and threw her arms around him. “Oh, Brandon!” she cried. “I knew you’d come through for us! I knew it!”

Brandon gamely hugged her back. Behind him, Steven stared at me, as if to say, Who is this guy? What’s going on?

I gave him a queasy smile that I meant to be reassuring. But I’m not sure it did the trick.

“Wel, Mr. Stark,” Mrs. Howard said, glancing at me as uneasily as her son had. “That’s awfully…kind. But you’re sure your father won’t find out?”

“Robert?” Brandon laughed humorlessly. “No way. He’s too busy with the Stark Quark rollout to have the slightest idea what’s going on. Besides which, as I said, it’s my house. Dad doesn’t even know about it. You’ll love it. Six bedrooms, six baths, plenty of room for al of you, including the dogs.” He looked down at the poodles fondly. Any guy who liked dogs that much couldn’t be al bad, right? Okay, wrong. “And we’re in luck, since Em has agreed to come with us”—he wrapped an arm around my waist and drew me toward him,
anchoring me
to his side in a grip I could attest was much tighter than it appeared—“to spend
the holidays.”

I couldn’t even look at Christopher. I knew the hurt and disappointment I’d see
in his eyes

would be more than I could bear. My heart was breaking enough as it was.

“Well,” Brandon said to Nikki. “Go and get packed. We don’t have much time.
The plane is

fueling up now.” Nikki let out a squeal and darted from the room to go and get
her things.

“Mrs. Howard,” Brandon went on. “How about you, can you be ready soon?”

She looked like a woman in a daze. She’d been through a lot in the past few
months—she’d

been through a lot in the past few hours. But all she said was, “Yes. Yes, I think
so.”

She called to her dogs and started up the stairs. Steven was the first to turn
toward Brandon

after both women were gone.

“I’m sorry,” he began tersely. “But we’re just supposed to trust you? Your father
is Robert

Stark. It’s because of him we’re in this situation in the first place.”

“Oh, I totally get where you’re coming from,” Brandon said. “But remember, I
hate my

father.”

“It’s true,” Lulu said, speaking up from the couch with a squeak. “He does hate
his father. He says it all the time. Even when he’s not drunk.”
“And I can’t believe,” Brandon went on, not taking offense at Lulu’s remark, “that he would
do this. I’m happy to do whatever I can to try to help you and make things right. I’ve ordered a local cab for you, Lulu, and your friend”—he nodded at Christopher—“to take you back

into Manhattan. It should be here any minute. I’m really sorry for this whole mess. If there’s

anything else I can do…well, you only have to ask.”

“Mess?” Christopher stepped forward. I had to look at him now, even though I didn’t want to.

He wore an expression of murderous rage. And the same look of hurt I’d seen in his eyes from

before. “You’re calling this a mess? Your father had a girl murdered—or tried to—and

another girl’s brain transferred into her body, and you call that a mess?”

Brandon barely glanced at him. “Look, buddy,” he said, out of the corner of his mouth. “I’m
doing the best I can, all right? I’m trying to get them to safety, and keep the doctor from losing his job…and his life. One step at a time, okay? You try growing up with a guy like Robert

Stark as a father. It’s not easy.”

Christopher was breathing so hard, he was practically panting. He glanced over at me,

standing anchored to Brandon’s waist. “You’re not actually going with this clown, are you,

Em?”
“Um,” I said. This was something I didn’t really feel emotionally able to handle at the moment.

Besides, while my heart was busy breaking, my mind was busy racing. There might—might—

be a way out of this, if everyone just played along. Including Christopher. “Do we have to discuss this right now?”

“Yeah.” Christopher’s voice was as icy cold as the air outside. “Right now would be good, actualy.”

“I think you heard the lady.” Brandon’s voice was as cold as Christopher’s. “She said not now.”

Lulu, looking nervous, had stood up. “What about Steven’s and Nikki—I mean, Em’s—things?” she wanted to know. “They’re still at our place in Manhattan.”

“It’s all right,” Steven said. “I can buy new things.”

“I’ll send them,” Lulu said. The look she flung him was full of emotion, but Steven didn’t appear to notice. He was still regarding Brandon suspiciously. “I don’t mind.”

“They might trace the package,” Christopher said. He seemed as if he were in a bad mood.

And that was putting it mildly. “Em,” he went on. “I really need to talk to you.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for talking,” Brandon said, releasing me and going to one of the
windows and lifting the curtain to look out, “once we get the Howards to safety. What we
deally don’t want right now is my father or any of his people getting here before we get them
out.”

Lulu looked alarmed. “Could that happen? Do they know we’re here?”

“There’s a vehicle tracking system on all the Stark limos,” Brandon said casually.
“If my driver reported that the limo was stolen—and I imagine he probably did __”

Steven let out a swear word. I pressed both my hands to my face. I couldn’t believe none of
us had thought of that.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Brandon said, seeing our expressions. “I already called to let them know

I’m all right. But I’m sure if any of them were paying attention, they have to be wondering what I was doing at the home of a surgeon with the Stark Institute for Neurology and

Neurosurgery.”

Dr. Fong looked more miserable than ever, seeming to curl in on himself. I felt a pang for him.

He’d only, after all, been trying to do the right thing.

Hadn’t we all, though?

“Oh,” Brandon said, still peering out the window. “Here comes the cab.”

I saw Lulu turn and, as if she couldn’t hold it in any longer, throw herself against Steven,

wrapping her arms around his neck in as passionate an embrace as I’d ever
passionate the chauffeur’s cap got knocked clean off.

To say Steven looked surprised would have been an understatement. But not in a bad way.

His arms even went around her before he realized what he was doing. Then he broke the embrace with a firm “Now, Lulu,” looking both pleased and disturbed at the same time.

“I can’t help it,” I was close enough to hear Lulu whisper. “I’m going to miss you. Promise me you’ll call me somehow. Only if it’s safe, though.”

“I’ll try,” Steven replied. He reached down and wiped some of her tears away with his thumb.

“You take care of yourself. Don’t spend all your time practicing your coq au vin.”

Lulu laughed tearfully, and let him go.

A moment later, I turned and found her staring up at me, her eyes as big and tear-filed as I’d ever seen.

“Nikki,” she said. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine,” I lied.

“So…” She looked confused. “I guess it wasn’t a spirit transfer, after all?”

“No,” I said with a little laugh.

“But…you’re going with them? Why?” Lulu wanted to know. “What about Frida?”

“I can’t tell you why,” I said, my pulse pounding suddenly. I couldn’t tell her, of course, that a psychopathic billionaire’s son seemed to think he was in love with me and was blackmailing
me into doing it. “And you can’t tel Frida, okay? You know this can’t go any further than this room. This is serious. Lives are at stake. I’ll just tel Frida I went away for the holidays

with…” I glanced over at Brandon, who’d dropped the window curtain and was watching us,

a tiny smile on his lips. A chil went up and down my spine and it had nothing to do with the

fact that the fire in the room had gone out so long ago. “…my boyfriend.”

The tears in Lulu’s eyes spiled over. “Your boyfriend? But what about…” Her gaze strayed
toward Christopher.

I reached out and hugged her. Her body felt so slight. “I know,” I whispered miserably. Over

her shoulder, I looked at Christopher, whose expression was inscrutable.

“Take care of her,” I said to him, indicating Lulu.

To my relief, he nodded.

There was some clattering on the stairs, and suddenly the dogs appeared, followed by Nikki

and her mom, each holding an overnight bag.

“I think we’re ready,” Mrs. Howard announced. She had changed into street clothes and

applied some makeup, as wel as done something to her hair. She actualy looked much more

recognizably like the attractive woman in the photos Steven had e-mailed to al the news

shows. It was obvious from whom Nikki had inherited her good looks.
Nikki, on the other hand, was still applying her makeup. Her hair was a work in progress as well, half flat-ironed and half wavy. She seemed irritated at having been hurried along. She still wore the clothes she’d slept in.

“Great,” Brandon said, ignoring the yapping dogs at his feet and the mascara wand in Nikki’s hand. He strode to the front door and yanked it open, letting in a rush of bitterly cold air.

“Let’s go, then.”

I kept my head down, my hair tumbling over my face as much to protect it from the biting cold as to keep from having to see what was going on around me when I stepped through the newfalen snow, which was still falling steadily in the brightening morning light. I didn’t want to have to look at Christopher’s face… I didn’t want to have to answer his questions… not with the lies I’d have to tell because Brandon would be nearby, listening.

I especially didn’t want to have to say good-bye. Not when I’d finally managed to get him back after so long.

But it turned out I didn’t have a choice. Because just as I was about to follow Nikki into the limo, a hard hand closed around my arm, and Christopher’s voice—I’d recognize it anywhere—said, “Em.”

I closed my eyes before turning around. I closed my eyes and prayed for
strength. When I

opened them again, I saw Brandon standing on the other side of the limo, looking right at me.

He was smiling. He said, “I think your little friend wants to speak to you.”

I hated him then. I’d never hated anyone as much as I hated him in that moment. And I swore when this was all over—if it ever ended—I’d find some way to get back at him,

the same way he was trying to get back at his dad.

I turned my head, flipping my blond hair out of the way so I could see.

And there was Christopher, looking down at me, his breath coming out in white puffs in the

chily air. His cheeks were pink, like they always were when the temperature dipped below

freezing.

But his blue eyes were blazing.

“Oh, what are you doing?” he demanded. “Why are you going with them?”

“I have to,” I said, looking everywhere but into those burning eyes.

“Why?” Christopher asked. “They’ll be all right. Steven’s with them.”

“Because,” I said. I looked at some lavender clouds in the sky. Anywhere but Christopher’s

face. “Brandon asked me to.”

“Brandon asked you to?” Christopher’s voice rose incredulously. “Who the hell cares what

Brandon Stark wants?”
“Uh, I believe she might,” Brandon said, from across the top of the car. “Tell him, Em.”

“Tell me what?” Christopher asked.

“Tell him,” Brandon repeated. He drummed the top of the limo in time with the words. “About us.”

“Us,” Christopher repeated. I saw his head swivel toward me. Since I couldn’t look at his face, I only heard the disbelief in his voice. I didn’t see it in his expression. “There’s an us with you and Brandon? When did this happen?”

I knew what I had to do. Brandon had spelled it out back in Dr. Fong’s foyer simply enough for a child to understand. I had no choice. I had to do it, because the Howards were my family now and I had to protect them, same as I would my real parents. Family wasn’t just the people who’d raised you. Family wasn’t just people who had the same blood as you coursing through their veins.

Family was people who needed you. Family was people who had nothing when you had everything.

You had to do what was right by them. You had to, even if doing so broke your heart.

Besides, I could do this. I could find out what Nikki knew before Brandon did, and use that information against him to get out of this, turn this whole thing around, and get
Christopher

back. Somehow. Right?

But until then…I had to play the game.

“I’ve been going out with him for a while,” I told Christopher. Each word felt like a stab

wound. “I tried to tel you before.” I lifted my head and looked him in the eye. “I mean, if you had made a move back when I was alive, maybe things might have been different. But you

waited too long—you waited until I was someone else. Until I was with someone else.”

I wasn’t sure where al this was coming from. But it wasn’t feigned for Brandon’s benefit. It

was real emotion, and it was weling up from deep inside me. And it was accompanied by real

tears that were spiling out, hot and fast, as wel.

“What are you talking about?” Christopher asked, his voice cracking.

“Maybe if you had just liked me the way I was before,” I went on brutaly. “But you didn’t.

And now it’s too late.”

I could see that every word I’d said, which had felt to me like a knife wound, had hit him like a fist. The red had gone from his cheeks. He looked pale as the snow on the sloping yard al

around us.

“So,” I said. I don’t know why I kept going. Maybe because of that picture. That picture of

me he’d kept in his room. I just couldn’t get it out of my head. I couldn’t believe
he’d kept it, al this time. I couldn’t believe he’d loved me, al this time, the same way I’d loved him. And

now I had to make him stop loving me, because I didn’t want him to do anything stupid that

might get him hurt. “I’m with Brandon now. I…I love Brandon. And I’m going with him. So…

good-bye. Good-bye, Christopher.”

And I ducked into the limo before Christopher could say another word—and before I took

another look at his face—climbing inside to sit between Nikki and her mom. Mrs. Howard

looked over at me with some concern, as Cosabela leapt up onto my lap, and asked, “Honey,

are you al right?”

“I’m fine,” I said, wiping away my tears with the backs of my fists. “Sorry about that.”

“God,” Nikki said. She was stil working on her eyelashes with the mascara wand. “And

everyone said I was bad.”

This didn’t exactly make me want to cry any less hard. In the driver’s seat, I saw Steven

adjust the rearview mirror so he could see me in it. He looked at me…but he didn’t say

anything. Not a word. He just looked. It was as if, in that moment, we shared a secret.

Just what that secret was, I had no idea.
But I knew, in the battle that was coming, I had an ally in Steven Howard.

I guess I’d always known that, really. I just needed to figure out a way to let him know what

was happening…before it was too late.

“Al right,” Brandon said cheerfully, climbing into the limo behind me. “Are we all set?”

And without waiting for an answer, he closed the car door…and in that sound, I felt

as if I were

hearing the end of the world. Or at least the end of all my hopes and dreams. Not

that I’d had

that many, at least recently.

“God,” Nikki said with relish. “I’ve missed limos.”

“Stark Travel is the way to go,” Brandon said. And he reached into a side cooler and puled

out a bottle. “Champagne, anyone? Oh, sorry, not you, Steven. But we’ll fill you up when we

get there. Do you know how to get to Teterboro Airport? No, of course you don’t. Here, let

me tell you. Better not program it into the GPS; we’re trying to keep this whole trip on the

down-low…”

And he crawled up toward the front to talk to Steven about how to get where we were going.

While the limo slowly began moving down the driveway, I shifted in my seat to look back

through the tinted windows. I saw Dr. Fong turn away and close his front door,
his longjourney finally over.

I saw Lulu waiting by the taxi, the wind tugging at her poofy black skirt and making it swell out like a bel, or a big black cape.

And I saw Christopher, standing in the exact spot where I’d left him, staring after us—after me. He appeared smaler and smaler the farther we drove away.

I stared at him until finally I couldn’t see him anymore, because the tears coming from my eyes made it impossible to see anything at al.
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